

Magical Albert

Will an injured mare and her premature foal beat the odds?

BY LIZ BROWN

Illusionist was prone to having big babies – her first two foals both weighed nearly 120 pounds, and the equine midwife had told her owners, Dave and Renata Lumsden, they “weren’t easy pulls.”

Her third foal, it appeared, would be no different. As expected, four weeks before her due date Illusionist (aka ‘Lusi’) looked huge.

One morning, about two weeks before Lusi was due, the equine midwife went to turn her out, but the mare wouldn’t move. She stood, with her butt pressed against the stall wall, refusing to step forward. The midwife looked her over and though Lusi didn’t give any visible signs of labour or distress, she knew something had to be wrong. Lusi was a tough mare – she’d had success as a Standardbred pacer, winning 43 races out of 140 starts and she didn’t show discomfort easily.

The midwife took her vitals and what she found worried her – Lusi’s pulse was in the high 60s, well beyond the normal range of 28-44. Her right flank area was also trembling. Immediately, the midwife called the veterinarian and Lusi’s owner, Dave.

After examining Lusi, the attending veterinarian was worried for the mare and her foal and recommended she immediately be sent to the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) hospital in Guelph, Ontario. There, she was examined by Dr. Luis Arroyo, who likened her belly to “seeing a new volcano being formed.” Dr. Arroyo suspected a ruptured prepubic tendon and knew his team had to act quickly if they were going to save the mare. But they held little hope for the foal if they did an emergency caesarean section.

“A decision had to be made because this was life-threatening for the mare,” said Dr. Arroyo. “Waiting [to do the c-section] increased the odds for the foal, but decreased them for Lusi,” said Renata. “The odds were thought to be 50 per cent for the mare and far less for the foal, at 5 per cent.”

Dave and Renata opted to do the emergency c-section to try to save their beloved mare.

A day later, Dr. Archer, the large animal surgeon at OVC, led the procedure. They had to put Lusi under general anesthesia and cut her open to deliver her foal. They called him Albert. “He was a big, beautiful foal,” said Dr. Arroyo. “He was very weak from the anesthetics, moving and gasping for air. It was a stressful waiting game, watching how he was going to respond.”

Both mare and foal had survived, but they weren’t quite out of the woods. The weeks that followed were difficult for Lusi, as she had large areas of tissue necrosis due to a herniated bowel, and had to wear an abdominal bandage as she healed.

As for Albert, a dedicated team of specialists in the ICU attended to him 24 hours a day for the first weeks of his life. Two weeks premature, Albert had a poor immune system and



DR. LUIS G. ARROYO PHOTO

Life got off to a rocky start for Albert, seen here with mom, Illusionist, shortly after his birth.

Today, Albert is a healthy three-year-old, set to start his own racing career.



RENATA LUMSDEN PHOTO

under-developed organs. He suffered a bladder infection that had started in his umbilical cord and his little lungs struggled to work on their own; he needed a ventilator to assist him with breathing.

But the pair slowly improved in parallel. Albert, who had to be separated from his mother as they both recovered, was bottle-fed and later drank milk from a bucket. Lusi steadily improved over two weeks. Finally, the vets determined the two should meet again. When the vets brought Albert outside Lusi’s stall and let her sniff him, it was clear she hadn’t forgotten her baby. While Lusi had no milk to offer Albert, the pair bonded and became inseparable, despite Albert’s tendency to chew Lusi’s bandages off her side as she healed.

After the near-death scare, Renata and Dave have retired Lusi from breeding. She’s now the matriarch of the farm, making sure horses and humans alike stay in line.

Meanwhile, Albert has been given the apt name ‘Magical Albert.’ He’s a big three-year-old headed into his first racing season.

“At the time, it was not always easy to stay focused on the modest gains in health for both animals as they struggled to heal. Three years later, all that worry has washed away,” said Renata.

Renata was so inspired by Lusi and Albert’s survival, she has written a book about their ordeal. *The Bounty of Illusionist* details their brush with death and recovery over 240 pages.

“Albert is a symbol of hope,” said Renata. “All animals deserve the chance to live and the patience to get there.” 🐾