

Saving Sam

Sam was skinny and slow, and on sale for \$1.

By Georgia Brown

Karen Boyce had never owned a horse. No extra time. No extra money for things like that. As a single mother of two boys, she knew little about equines.

That, of course, was before Karen and her boys met Sam, a skinny, grey gelding who had fallen on some hard times.

Feeding Stoney

A friendly brunette with a ready smile, Karen began her horse venture by occasionally feeding an Arabian dressage horse named Stoney who belonged to her neighbor, Macki, who is a nurse. Stoney's stable is located on a broad curve in the road that Karen travels on to get from Bradenton, Florida, to her home in east Manatee County. The stable is identified only by a sign reading "Pasture & Stalls, Self Care."

Seminole Senior Formula helped bring Sam back to health after his brush with death one year ago.

Each time she fed Stoney, Karen had to drive past a small paddock with sparse grass grazed by three horses. The horses were owned by a woman who was unable to feed them regularly. On her visits, Karen also noticed the grey gelding in the group was being bossed away from his feed by the other two more dominant mares. "He just kept getting skinnier and skinnier," she says of the gelding.

There were nights when Karen and Macki saw the two mares and thin, grey gelding standing in their small paddock, waiting for supper that never came. The owner of the property, Audrey, spoke with the owner of the three horses and discovered she was having serious family difficulties.

Not one to be judgmental, Karen was spurred into action. Right away, she volunteered to feed the horses for the woman. Because Sam was invariably bullied by the mares, he continued to receive less feed and was not picking up much weight. His ribs were visible and Karen felt that he still looked neglected. One day, she gently strapped a halter on the gelding and brought him out of the dusty paddock to let him eat by himself.

Sam ate very slowly, usually taking 40 minutes to finish.

"It was the most inexpensive feed you could buy, and I could tell Sam was having trouble chewing it," says Karen. "His mane was all tangled. I got a brush, and I admit I shed a tear the first time I brushed the mats out."

Next, she bought some anti-fungus medication and began treating his

back where he had lost most of his hair.

Unfortunately, Sam continued to decline while the other horses appeared slightly better, so Audrey contacted Sam's owner again, and she urged the owner to do something to improve the condition of the horses. At that time, Karen was feeding Sam twice a day, but his hips protruded and his head often drooped to the ground. He remained very thin and was so weak he dragged both hind feet when he walked, leaving long marks in the sand.

Official Involvement

Calls from concerned neighbors brought the Manatee County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals into the picture, and a county law enforcement officer stopped by to give a warning to the horses' owner.

"Sam was close to the grave," Macki remembers. "He was going to be looking at the grass from the other side soon."

The \$1 Horse

On August 22, 2003, arrangements were made to sell the horses, and Karen signed a contract to buy Sam for \$1, agreeing to also feed the mares until a buyer for them could be found.

Everyone at the barn pulled together to help Sam. Audrey assigned him to a stall with an adjoining paddock of his own. Karen's first stop was Hunsader Farms feed store in Myakka City. Barbara Grimes, an experienced horse woman who works at the store, recommended offering Sam Seminole Senior Formula three times a day, plus a little timothy and alfalfa hay for roughage. "I tell everyone with an older horse to use Seminole Senior Formula," Barbara says. "It's a complete feed and immediately starts putting the weight on."

When disaster struck one week later, it couldn't have been more unexpected. After carefully giving Sam his first bath, Karen put him in his stall until he was dry, then turned him out and left the barn for a quick trip into town. About 45 minutes later, Karen was driving home and immediately knew something was wrong as she rounded the curve in the road. There was another horse in Sam's stall and another one outside.

"My heart stopped," she says of that moment. When she pulled up to the barn and ran closer, she discovered a recently gelded stallion that had been let out in an adjoining paddock had broken through a wire fence and attacked Sam.

Sam was cowering in a corner of the paddock in obvious shock. "His eyes looked horrible. He was bleeding profusely from his mouth and was

shaking his head. He was covered in deep slashes, his lip was drooping and there was blood everywhere,” recalls Karen. She remembers little more about the scene, except that within minutes everyone at the barn rallied around her.

Audrey was alerted and called a veterinarian. She then took immediate action about the other horse, which was still aggressive.

“ I was so mad at that horse my adrenalin got up,” Audrey says. “I just grabbed him without thinking of the danger. I led him down to the last stall and locked him up. That’s where he stayed until his owner removed him from the property.”

After no luck getting fast treatment with the first veterinarian they called, Karen got in her car to find Macki, who was home asleep after working all night at her nursing job. She called her veterinarian, Dr. John Copeland, and then they returned to the barn together to begin assessing the scene.

Sam was covered in bite marks and gouges from hooves. He had skin hanging in several places, but fortunately the bleeding from his mouth had slowed by this time.

When Dr. Copeland arrived, he walked from his truck with everything he needed stuffed in his pockets. He quickly gave Sam a shot and painstakingly began putting the first of many stitches in his seriously torn lip. Macki held Sam’s head while Dr. Copeland worked.

“Afterwards, he seemed to cling like a hurt dog, standing close to me in the stall,” Karen remembers. “Macki has been a great mentor, providing a wealth of information for me through all this.”

From the beginning, Karen’s boys, Derek age 15, and Dylan age 11, went out to the farm with her to help with feeding and grooming. Karen fed three times a day when she could, and they could see him gaining weight after just a few weeks. While Sam was still in a weakened state, Dylan got him to exercise by leading him around the paddock.

“ I like to brush his mane and walk him around,” says Dylan. “You can take the lead off, and he’ll still follow you,” he adds, unsnapping the lead to prove it.

As I looked on, Sam stopped immediately when Dylan said “whoa,” and turned to look at him. When Dylan said, “Walk on,” he moved off, following him like a puppy.

Derek's special job has been caring for Sam's hooves. At first he had a hard time getting him to lift his legs. Gradually, Sam became easier to manage. "It's been a matter of trust, and it's taught him patience," Karen says.

If Sam does object to something, he usually backs up and raises his head, easily lifting the boys up in the air, but that behavior gradually disappeared.

Derek's confidence was obvious on my first visit to the barn. He plays a game that begins with shouts, mock chasing gestures and waving of arms. Derek runs alongside Sam, getting the grey gelding to trot as they play in the field. Sam responds by galloping along the fence line, cantering like he's a colt again.

One evening when I stopped by after feeding time, the other boarders were sitting on plastic chairs in the shade and speculating that Sam might be part Lipizzan by the smooth, heavy-bodied look he has regained.

Full Recovery

Today, Sam is a healthy, kind horse whose shiny coat is nearly white. His scars have faded and are unnoticed by most people. Karen's boys like to point out that the marks left by the stitches on his lip make him look like he is smiling. They are teaching him tricks, and he is thriving with all the attention they give him. When being groomed just outside his stall, he stands willingly even if he isn't tied, secure and content when surrounded by his family. This as good as it gets for an old horse.

Although the added financial costs of caring for Sam aren't easy for a single mother, Karen seems to take it in stride and obviously enjoys her supportive circle of friends at the barn. After talking to Derek and Dylan, you can see the family bond grew stronger after they brought Sam back from the edge of starvation and restored his health.

When I asked Dylan what has changed for the family since they adopted Sam, Dylan softly uttered one word, "Happiness."

Then he adds, "Do you know why he belongs in our family?"

I wasn't expecting the answer.

"He has brown eyes just like we do."