

There is more pride and confidence in having climbed a big mountain than there is in just walking up a hill.

Toby the little puzzle.

Toby - Australian stock horse. 14.2hh 6 yrs old. Bay gelding. Very nicely put together, great conformation. Excellent movement. Huge heart, agile, game and very courageous.

I first met Toby and his mate Rory in the early to mid 2008. A few people warned me that in that first lesson, Rory wouldn't get on. I usually ask around the people who I think may have seen issues developing, but always this is tempered by my experience that often the situation is quite different from what people think or understand. Getting a complete picture can give clues to what may or may not be a problem. In this instance, none of it was of much use to the journey Toby was going to take me on.

Our first occasion went well. Despite other people's expectations, Rory fully participated and was comfortable riding gently by the end of the lesson. I had been told that Toby had been playing up and that Rory had become adept at stepping off. None of this behaviour was seen the first time we met. I always take things back to the beginning, as often it is one of the basics which has been skipped or gone wrong. By starting at the beginning with each new client, I know that the client understands how the process has come about and develops a better understanding of how our horses interact with us in our world. The first session ended with Rory happily walking and stopping Toby, and Toby being relaxed. I am not sure which time it was that the problems which had plagued Toby and Rory first appeared. Fairly early, I think the second or third session.

I remember it was when Rory asked Toby to step away from the yards and head out along the road. Only a few strides in, Toby put on his little show. Stop, prop, duck, rear and swing. Very practiced, Rory stepped off. And if anyone wants to comment that Rory shouldn't have stepped off, come and talk to me. Rory had plenty of experience in knowing that if he didn't leave voluntarily, Toby would get him off anyway, and Rory would get hurt. **FIRST RULE – KEEP SAFE!!!** Staying on no matter what is a philosophy for idiots. If you land up hurt in hospital, how are you going to be able to come back? If you need to get off, then **GET OFF!** Before the pain occurs. Eventually, just what Rory had been trying to ride through came to light, and Rory, my hat goes off to you. With 25 yrs more experience, I am not sure I could have stayed on everything Toby could have thrown at me. I hate falling off. A lot. It hurts when you hit the ground.

As usual, I asked questions what steps had been taken to ensure the horse was not in discomfort, but nothing had come to light. There were plenty of symptoms of unhappiness, stress, tension and aggression, but no clear source. Bridle – a bit tight about the ears, but nothing major. Never a problem putting the bridle on, but he would rip his head back to get it off in a hurry. Chiropractor had been, nothing identified. No pain along the back bone, just a “Don't touch me anywhere” attitude. Tail – Toby loathed you playing with it – very tense, but he was tense about his ears, his mouth,

his upper lip. He snarled about being saddled, he snarled at being asked to be away from other horses. He didn't like people. He was very very jumpy with ropes and the saddle blanket and rugs. At some stages, his tail was tucked between his legs so far, that it appeared well in front of his hind legs. And yet, he could be very soft and loving. His face is very expressive, especially his eyes.

We tried working through with Rory, but a few sessions in, it was obvious that it was not going to work. I always prefer to get owners to create the solution, but not this time. I took over working Toby, starting with long reining. Again, the pattern of working nicely, flicking over into aggression with no identifiable cause, back into softness and then aggressive fight again. I had Toby going nicely in the arena, and then expanded from the arena into to paddock and back and forth. Each time expanding the distance and his comfort zone. Then within each session for no reason (? leaving the other horses), he would flick into wanting to eradicate me. This is not fun. It is not a hero thing, I did it. I rode through it, and won the day, sure, but my preference is to not have it happen at all.

One little session took 2 and a half hours, just to get Toby to accept a simple walk. I was most definitely not making unreasonable demands. But his reaction was extreme, and truly, very dangerous. Particularly for a less experienced rider. Toby in the end, agreed to a temporary truce, but I knew that was not a yielding or giving. It was Toby saying, "I've finished for the moment, but I am not giving in". Now the time involved was no longer simple. I needed to be able to pick the end time of each session – it MUST be on my terms, and you cannot do that if you have a time frame (like lessons) to meet. After putting the options to Toby's owner and his parents, Toby came to boot camp. I was not even sure I could do anything, as truly, I had been unable to find any cause or trigger and this is always a part of my program. Try and identify what has started the issues involved.

We picked Toby up. Right from the go, he started stomping in the float. Rory calls it "clawing". A very appropriate term. Not a simple pawing the ground. A real angry aggressive clawing the float floor. Despite some time, Toby didn't settle, and when we collected another horse, then dropped it off, Toby got worse and decided to leave the float. His first attempt was through the front window on the highway. Eventually, he came out through the narrow person door. Thank you to the truckies who helped us that night. That was not fun and a night I hope never to repeat. The decision was made to continue home despite the smashed float window and call the vet. Don't panic, not a life threatening wound, but certainly needed attention. He had stripped the skin from one front leg. That in itself was another saga. Despite the tranquilizers the vet gave him, Toby was having none of it. You could see him fight the anesthetic. At this stage, it was very obvious that this was a horse with vast amount courage, endurance, determination and an ability to stand up for himself.

So, Toby was at home. The wound was bad, but he was not lame. Although he couldn't be ridden for a couple of weeks, it did allow me to start observing and interacting with him to try and develop a plan of approach. Remember, at this stage, we still had no idea what was going wrong. Dressing the wound was a nightmare the first few times. Bless the hobbles – it meant I could keep safe while I did the task. During the first few days, Toby became easier to deal with. Antibiotics, wound

dressing, none of which is fun for the horse, and yet, Toby improved. After a week, I could start working him in a more formal sense.

By now, one thing was clear. His “off – button” was not working. He would not or could not relax. There are a couple of ways to approach this, one of which is to use tiredness to get them to start thinking of stopping. A method I call “Emptying the fuel tank”. Given this horse’s history, I had my doubts of this working. This horse never lacked courage or a willingness to put effort in. He has a huge capacity for work. This technique is seen often with people who lunge before riding – it lowers energy levels, until the horse is tired enough to think about stopping. I’ve seen it used so the horse gets fitter and fitter, and the problem gets worse. The only way to be long term effective, is to change the horse’s attitude.

So, right back to beginning, walk, stop, pause, walk, stop, wait, walk. All the time trying to get Toby to realise that stopping was ok, it was encouraged, it was even wanted. This work was done on long reins – why put myself at risk? Remember, getting hurt unnecessarily is for morons. If you cowboys out there feel a need to ride every bit of fight and anger and stress, go for it guys. When you land up in hospital, I will think that is evolution in action. There are better safer tactics, and if you are too lazy to learn them or to think, then you deserve the pain.

One week or so on the long reins, very gently, with some small stresses seen. Toby showed me he hated having me directly behind him. It became a bit of a game, but for him was very serious. I see this reaction in mostly in horses which are insecure or have been abused. A lot of interaction on the ground, lots of grooming, walking, leading and general interaction. A lot of “approach / retreat” with his ears, his mouth, his tail. Rub and get closer, watching for a reaction, retreating and then approaching again, and again and again.

About a week in, I made a mistake. I asked a little much, a little too long, or perhaps, maybe, it was something that had to happen, that Toby had to find out where my limit was. It was late in the afternoon, but we got into a fight situation. Just on dusk. Yep, I was on the long reins. And once in that situation, there is only one way through. I had to come out the victor. It was not nice. I never like or enjoy it. But I won’t back down. If it has to be done, then I will do it, but always, I am trying to help the horse find out that I am not asking for anything difficult, and as soon as I can. Toby threw himself around. He nearly fell over in a rear a few times. He didn’t care that the slope was there, or the tyres or anything. His whole focus was on not doing what I want. And he didn’t care if he or I got hurt.

My aim was, to have him walk and stop and walk calmly. That’s it. Just a couple of times in a row. Enough to show he understood and accepted my request. He understood, but was most definitely not going to comply.

So, I got into an “emptying the fuel tank” situation with me offering the “it’s ok to stop and chill” invitation anytime I thought he might be interested in taking it. It was the only way out for me. So, trot, canter, go go Toby, go, you want to go, then you will GO. I couldn’t get that either in the beginning – if I said white, he said black. No matter what I asked, he would do the opposite. A battle of wills. I want my horses to be looking for what I want, to be trying to understand. Toby didn’t care. He hated me.

He hated people. People are terrible, horrible and should not exist. 4 and half hours he fought for. I am not proud of this. But once in that situation, there was no other way out. If you start a fight, you must win it. So I did. Exhaustion in the end, got him to start to rethink, at least temporarily. In the end, I got my calm walk, stop walk stop walk. This night confirmed for me several things. One was, a fight is not the way to deal with this horse. That I needed to find a way where he made the choice to want to deal with me and to understand what I was asking. Secondly, that this horse had an amazing capacity for work. And if I could get that working for me, what a horse. By the way, Toby is a stunningly built horse. The Man from Snowy Rivers horse, only in bay. Top movement, lovely paces, and athletic. And tough, so very very tough. If there was a way to get this horse on track, what a horse he will be.

So, where to from here? My gently softly approach had only partly worked at this stage – Toby understood me what I was asking, but was not willing to give it to me – after all. I was a “human” – one of those things that are horrible and disgusting. At this stage of the business, I dreamt of having a round yard, but alas. Not enough cash to do the deed. My thanks at this stage to Glen and Rachel, who lent me theirs for several weeks. My groundwork had improved Toby with ears, mouth and tail, but still not good enough to satisfy me.

I have never really used the round yard to do “join up” or any of the techniques more often seen by the western horseman. I certainly believed these techniques had great validity. I had done similar things, but on the lunge as without a round yard it is very difficult. So here goes. I floated Toby up there – it wasn’t far, but we still had stomping and restless. I am glad the journey was only short.

The first few sessions, getting Toby to even acknowledge I existed was a challenge. Sure, I could get him to move, I could change his direction, but he would turn away from me. I could speed him up, and I introduced different stimuli to gain his confidence in various noises and “scary” things. Each time he stopped, you could see he was intent on ignoring me. He was doing his best to try and pretend I didn’t exist.

It took about a week, then he started to not look away. There is a huge number of DVD’s that show these skills in action. If you are interested I can recommend some, and I can recommend which ones are not so good. The first time he actually turned and looked at me of his own violation was the start. And the day I entered the yard and he chose to come up to me for a rub and some affection was huge. Now Toby was willing to trust me and try for me. From here, I had very few problems, though of course you do not know that until you are through the other side, and given what lies underneath, it was a couple of weeks later that he was being ridden out in a fully relaxed manner.

Rory came down at this stage and had a lesson on him. I showed him the relaxation position. That if you pick up one rein, Toby has been taught to stop his feet, and relax. “If you get into trouble, here is home base for you both”. Some tension came right at the very end of the day – well after the lesson and a ride out and then Rory riding on the arena some jumps and games, but Rory successfully took the tension out again. A good thing to happen as we could watch the signs emerge, apply the techniques we had worked out and watched them be effective. Oh, and Toby allowed Rory to do anything to his ears eyes mouth and that tail was so relaxed.....

From here Adam and Rory decided for me to deal with the last couple of issues – tying up and standing quietly and floating, which really was the same issue. So, Toby had some long hours, standing tied while stuff happened to other horses. I used hobbles to make him work for any wriggling he wanted to do, but even hobbles will only slow a horse, they will not immobilize them. Still, after a while, Toby was happily standing quietly for dinner, and then waiting while I had mine. Sometimes 3 – 4 hours. If you ever do this, it is not a case of tying the horse up and walking away. You need to make sure the horse can be comfortable. Feed, water, not standing on concrete. The area needs to be clear, and the tie up post needs to be secure. Never tie up so low they can get a leg over the rope or that a horse can become tangled. Always be around to supervise and monitor. Once Toby managed the task of patience, then time to go back to the float.

Now, instead of dinner at the tie up rail, dinner was served in the float. Initially, dinner was of no interest. Toby was “hang on, this should be moving, there is excitement, stuff is going to happen and I have to be awake for it. C’mon HURRY UP I am ready”. Again, same conditions as tying up. Supervise, safety, comfort. And now when I told Toby I didn’t like that “clawing”, he listened. A few times I got the timing spot on. And even better, I got the element of surprise. About a week later, Toby was routinely having dinner in the float, and he stopped expecting anything to happen in a hurry.

The last week Toby was with me, we held a school at home. Rory came down, and I could not have asked for a better situation for hand over back to Rory. And finally, some questions got some answers. The schedule was not huge. Tuesday, groundwork and light trail ride. Wed – group lesson, after lunch games. Thursday reasonably long trail ride and then cross -country jumps. Wednesday lunch Toby showed some soreness in the back. Equissage over lunch meant Toby continued happily. Thursday lunch, Toby was very sore indeed. Rory chose not to jump him, but rode him the short distance home. Toby tried very hard and did not show any malice or vice. When we got home and we felt his back, Toby was uncomfortable. He objected strenuously to penetrene A so we rugged him to keep warm, and let him walk around the paddock as much or as little as he choose over night. Overnight, we looked at the saddle Rory was using – and it put a huge amount of pressure right at the back of the saddle. Lots of back bone clearance, but Rider balance was as far back as it could go.

Friday morning, when we looked Toby would let us look, but saddling up some indications of his old behaviour emerged. I had had no problems with back pain or saddle pain while he was with me. By examining Rory’s stock saddle (not one he had used before), we could see the pressure was too tight at the front, so the saddle was lifted too high, pushing the rider right to the back. By trying a selection of saddles I had here, we found that most of the saddles sat the same on Toby – tight at the front, so low at the back. The only saddles that fitted comfortably were my Bates Innova and my old faithful Kieffer Wein, both dressage saddles which are totally unsuitable for what Rory wants to do.

Enter Dave. Thank you Dave for your input and advice and especially for your knowledge and interest in Stock saddles. I am not a fan, but only because I have found many stock saddles are badly made and badly balanced for the rider. But, for what

Rory wants to do, a stock saddle is the style of choice. So, putting Toby in the float (a nice little practice session) we popped up the road to borrow Dave and his saddles. By trying the collection out, we found very few saddles fitted this little horse well. He has the shoulder width of the big warmbloods, but he is only 14.2hh. The best fitting (non dressage) saddle we had – out of the 10 we had to try was in fact a Captain Buck, a cut down military saddle used for endurance. This fitted beautifully. During us trying all these saddles, watching Toby's attitude change was lovely. After about the 4th, I think he realized we were not going to get on, so he was not going to be hurt. His eyes became soft again. Once we got the Captain Buck, he was comfortable again; comfortable enough we could get on and try a small ride without him showing signs of stress.

Two days later, I visited Toby back at his home and we looked through the collection of 6 or so saddles his owners had to try. The only saddle to fit him was a Bates Kimberley swinging fender. But this saddle was an 18". I can't see Rory ever getting that huge. The saddle had been fitted with the red gullet – a very wide gullet plate, allowing it to sit very low and wide in the front over his shoulders. Adam and Rory went shopping for a new saddle. I suspect this was the origin of all the issues, but by the time I met Toby, it was an issue that had become totally buried by emotions, pain and distrust. I wish to thank Toby's owners for their faith in me, and for allowing as much time as they did for me to work with this lad.

Toby was one of the best quality horses I have worked with. If I want to camp draft, play games, make it safely down a rough steep hill or if a big job needed a horse with a huge capacity for work, then please Rory, may I ask to borrow Toby? Once Toby regained his trust and confidence there was one hell of a talented horse. Toby never hesitated to try for me, once he trusted me. Trust was the biggest issue. Inconsistency, pain, asking too much too soon, and again, *undeserved* pain drove this little horse to an attitude and actions which became dangerous to ride. A horse will understand and accept a smack or reprimand, if it is deserved and earned. They know the rules, but if those rules are applied in such a way the horse cannot understand them, then problems will occur. Or if pain is constant and cannot be escaped by any action, it can drive a person crazy with stress, let alone a horse. Always, if your horse is doing the right thing, let them be as comfortable as you can allow. That is the best thing you can do for them. If they do the right thing – LEAVE THEM ALONE! In Toby's case, a poorly fitting saddle most likely caused ongoing pain and discomfort, which he could never escape from. No wonder he hated people, they caused the pain.

I wish Rory all the best of many years, and may Toby teach you as much as he taught me.

Postscript. We just had our second camp, and Rory brought Toby back for a few days. Although he got sore from lack of fitness, he never once showed anything other than a willingness to please. Toby was a happy lad, and I got great joy from watching Rory and Toby travelling together. They even gave jumping a go, though I am sure Toby was trying to say to Rory "look, just leave me to it, I think I have it figured". And then Toby would approach the jump with a real look of concentration and just pop over. Rory would then be left trying to keep up. It was all calm, and steady. A great week for me to see them happy and working together.