

Story of a Gray Filly

by Tara Miller

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Brave Striker earned her name the morning she was born, in fact probably within a few hours of birth.

Her mother was a granddaughter of the famous stallion, Dash for Cash, the greatest Quarter race-horse sire there has ever been. This mare had won 2 races when she was two. Dash for Cashes are not only fast but very sensible, this you cannot say for every race horse lineage.

We bought the mare early one winter with the intention of eventually breeding her to our cow horse stud. She was a pretty gray mare though rather spoiled or perhaps mentally upset from the often wretched life a race horse leads. She was grossly unruly and a bit dangerous. Anyway, Mike cowboied on her quite a bit that winter letting her be a horse, seeing what she was like and teaching her manners. She came around to be a very nice mare; being smart, well natured and under the training of an experienced horseman., my husband Mike, she was soon a very pleasant horse. We found out what we had hoped to, this mare was a good type for raising colts.

In the spring we turned the new gray mare in with the brood mares to be pasture-bred to Colonels Oak. There is something odd about gray mares; often other horses do not like them. This was the case with this unfortunate newcomer. The other mares would chase her off and not even the stud seemed to care for her. She was always off by herself looking lost and forlorn with a bite-mark somewhere on her back. Sooner or later they would learn to get along and somewhat let her into the herd. And we have seen before where a stud does not accept a mare into his band but will still breed her when she is in heat, we hoped this was what would happen with the gray race mare.

Later in the summer, I was checking the mares and found the gray mare could hardly walk. Most likely she'd had a bad fall; the field had willows, creeks, bogs, badger holes and other hindrances that are good for a horse to grow up in and get accustomed to but the race-raised mare had not had that opportunity.

The injured mare could only managed small draggy steps with her hind legs. I shuffled her to a horse trailer and brought her to the barn. The vet determined that she had a fractures pelvis. He also determined that she was in foal. He said she would heal up quite a bit but thought she would always be somewhat crippled, though he felt quite certain that the injury would not prevent her from having the foal without undue trouble.

He was right; the mare got better and did not seem to be in any pain, but was still quite lame. We kept her in and cared for her for quite some time. That winter, we put her in the wrangle pasture with the riding horses, close by where we could see her every day and she would move more to keep from building excess scar tissue, also getting in better shape for foaling. The remuda pretty much left her alone, they did not chase her off like the mares had but they did not make friends and make her a part of the herd either.

Around the first of March, Mike mentioned that we had better get the gray mare out of the wrangle pasture and keep her alone in a corral until she foaled. The next day we closely inspected her and saw that she hadn't bagged-up much yet and since she wasn't really due for

several weeks we figured we could safely leave her out for a little longer.. The bit of exercise she got in the field was good for her, though we definitely did need to get her in and away from the other horses in plenty of time before the colt was born.

Dry Mares will often try to steal a foal.

Geldings can hurt or even kill a new born foal. It is not intentional; they are curious and also get to playing. They won't leave the foal alone. running it around and wearing it down. The foal can get stomped on, struck or kicked in the wild playing. Or a small frightened foal can be fatally hurt in a ditch or fence. There are all sorts of scary things that can happen to a new born left with geldings or dry mares.

If a foal does not drink from its mom and get colostrum within a short time it will most likely eventually die from not having the important protection that this first milk provides. A new born needs the antibodies in the colostrum soon, for within hours its stomach's ability to absorb it lessens.

If a mare is continually defending her baby it can not suck. A good experienced mother can usually fight, protect, and run off with her foal. First-time mothers are usually not as sure of what they are doing and sometimes are not aggressive enough to offer good defense. Only wet mares should be together during foaling. Our disabled gray mare definitely needed protection.

Well, then an unexpected thing happened which made us feel very stupid and especially ashamed. - The mare had a pre-mature colt. - There was nothing we could think to excuse our serious mistake and we were sorry.

Mike rode out to wrangle one crisp morning and there was a big stir going on in the pasture. The horses were wildly stewing around by the fence and the gray mare was pathetically trying to get into the bunch but being chased off by the other horses. As Mike got closer he saw blood on her tail and legs and knew that she had foaled, but no colt was in sight. He was worried and quickly spurred his horse over to the frenzied herd bunched by the barbed-wire fence, almost cringing for fear of what he might see inside the circle of noisy turbulent horses. He figured what the something the remuda was wound-up about must be, and then from within the noise of the horses he heard a feisty faint squeal and knew the colt was still alive.

Mike quickly took his rope down, hollering and swinging the rope, he broke in through the horses.

Then he saw it, a tiny gray colt that was backed up against the barbed-wire fence. Its head was held up alertly with a stiff bow in its little neck and the tiny thing was staunchly striking the big horses in the nose, sending them back again as they reached out to see what this wee delicate creature was. The poor premature colt had scrapes and bite-marks and small splotches of blood on its body and one of its determined little eyes was swollen halfway shut. It stood squarely and mighty against the fence, facing off the herd and saving its own life - a courageous noble sight that won Mike's heart. What a brave little foal, a brave fighter, a tremendously brave striker!

Witnessing the small colt's great display of fearless spirit, Mike chased the wildish herd away with his horse and rope. The little gray foal stood panting from exhaustion. She was so small, like a dog. Leading his horse, Mike picked her up in his arms and carried her through

a near by gate and down the road to the house. He wrapped his horse to our hitching rail and brought her up the steps. I heard him knock on the door and was amazed to open it, I didn't know what he had at first and was amazed to see it was a beautiful but miniscule grey injured foal in his arms. He gave me a quick reply to what had happened as we laid her on a quilted blanket in the warm furnace room, Mike put gentle iodine on her navel to help protect her from invading germs as I called the vet. We were lucky and the vet was close by and would be there right away. Mike got on his horse and went to get the mare in, knowing she would be quite upset and the sooner we fed the baby the better. I gently rubbed the sad little foal with a towel, put ointment on her scratches, iced her eye and spoke encouragingly to her. Dean, Mike's yellow Corgi, licked her face as she quickly fell to sleep in the warm room. Her silver mane and tail was like a puff of downy silk, I could close my fingers around her little legs, she was so delicate and soft it seemed like you could barely feel her. She looked like a little toy and so perfect!

I felt rather helpless and prayed the precious beautiful colt would somehow make it. Dr. Beiermann arrived and gave our baby an IV with glucose and electrolytes, antibiotics, and a couple vitamins; that was about all he could do. She never even woke up while the Doctor was there. Dean lay down next to her and we kept an eye on her, loving her, waiting.

Mike came in with a bit of the mare's colostrum in a beer bottle. We stirred the foal and she partly opened her eyes and twitched an ear. Mike carefully held her onto her chest with her head up and squeezed a little colostrum into the back of her mouth. Then he held her mouth shut and softly rubbed her throat to get her to swallow, keeping this up until she got a few sips down. We were happy for that, just a little, real often, is what she needed. She went right back to sleep in the warm room.

It was calving season so Mike had to get back to work as there were all those mother cows and new born calves to look after. He had put the mare in a stall in the barn, she was cooperative to milk, even though she was very worried. Every so often Mike would look in on us and bring colostrums milk as he could only get a little out of the mare at a time. I fed her as Mike had every thirty minutes and then every hour. I removed the empty IV and she kept getting a little stronger, more awake, and sucking the bottle a little on her own.

After lunch, my friend Lynn came by and thought the preemie was so darling, she just had to stay for a bit to help care for her, she helped keep us company. The gray baby surprised us when we went to the adjoining kitchen to warm her bottle, came back and she was standing there sniffing Dean! The first time back on her feet and we hadn't even heard her.

It was a beautiful afternoon, we cut the sleeves off an old warm coat and tied it around the baby and carried her into the sunny yard where Dean and Lynn stayed with the bundled foal while I went for Mike, who was at the barn changing horses. Just in case the mare didn't know her foal, Mike tied her in the stall then he carried the soft silvery foal to the barn, Lynn, Dean and I coming along.

The sooner she could be with her mother the better. Joyfully, the mare was elated to see her foal, fussing over it with great affection. With Mikes help, keeping it on its feet and directing its nose, the foal was soon sucking. There was not much milk in the mare's bag, but at this point the young foal didn't drink much at a time and the volume would increase with the stimulation of sucking. The cows were busy calving so Mike had to go back to tending

them. At first I went down every hour and helped the foal but in a few hours she really didn't need my help any longer, her balance was gaining and her mother would nuzzle her to where she needed to be. I kept checking them often into the evening though they were doing well on their own and warm in the bedded stall with a heat lamp tied to the ceiling and the baby's coat on. The new born sucked very often and had to stretch her head up to reach a tit. Her mother was eating well, was comfortable and loved her foal to pieces. They were totally grafted to each other. Around ten p.m. I was down checking them and Mike finally came into the barn to put his horse up, looked in on the content couple and we called it a long day. We went to bed relieved; we had grown quite attached to the brave little one.

The little gray foal could walk under her mother without her back touching the mare's belly. She often stood right under her mother looking out at the world. She was a little doll and the mare was a very proud and doting mother. For a couple months, we took care to not let the baby get cold as that would be very hard on a preemie. We also limited her moving space as her bones were delicate and there is a thin bone in a preemie's knee that can easily shatter. During the day the mare and foal would be turned into an outdoor stall to get some healthy sunshine with the foal often wearing her coat and our Border collie, Bob's, blanket with his name on it. We gave them toys, like empty milk jugs for the baby to push around, a ball tied to the fence to shove, and rubber feed tubs to pull and flip over, the foal was very curious and alert. At night the mare and foal were enclosed in a bedded stall in the barn with a hanging heat lamp. We kept the stall clean to not irritate the foal's delicate lungs. By May, we could turn them out into a corral during the day and the baby only needed Bob's blanket at night in the barn. By mid June, the foal had grown big and strong enough that we could leave them in a corral day and night without a blanket. The baby was very gentle and liked people but Mike didn't want us to pamper the colt too much for it could lose respect and get bad habits if we let it play and nip or kick at us so we pretty much left them alone to be horses. The mare always had fresh water, good grass/alfalfa hay and minerals. Besides that, they took care of themselves.

In mid-summer we turned the motherly mare and exuberant foal out into a small pasture by the house and it was nice to watch the little brave one run and buck circles around her happy but hobbling mother. The green grass and open space did them wonders; they were fat, slick and frisky, and the foal grew rapidly. The foal would run far away, her mother watching with her head held high and nickering, then the baby would jump, buck and run back to her mother like a flash of silver.

Late that fall the gray colt was weaned and put in with the other colts. We waited until she was 7 months old to wean her so she and her mother separated without much stress as the baby was ready to be on her own with her peers and the mare was in foal again to Colonel Oak. Though the filly was a bit smaller, she fit in well with the colt herd, she loved to play and romp and even became the boss mare. It was very noticeable that whenever we moved the colts in the pastures or if they were running and playing, Brave Striker was always ahead with firm purpose in her tight body and her ears pinned back, steady fast to stay in the lead. - You would see the colts tearing along across the field and see the graceful

light gray filly out in front - that was Brave Striker - the brave little survivor with the big try, the big heart, the one to admire.

The End

Post script;

Tisa is a pretty ballerina that was our son, Ves's, friend who was working on the ranch and bought Brave Striker with her summer wages. Brave Striker was two and we knew Tisa would appreciate her and take good care of her. Together they are two very talented girls. I helped Tisa train Brave Striker to ride and she became a wonderful cow horse and rodeo horse. Tisa and Brave Striker have had a few harrowing experiences that I plan to write about some day. Tisa is now married to Ves, so it worked out that we get to follow Brave Striker's life and the way she continues to impress with her determination, sweetness, intelligence and talent.