

YOU GIVE ME FEVER



Senior student Holly McCown provides care and support for equine patient, Supernatural Fella.

Story by Patrice Scott
Photos by Dave Adams

A yearling and a long trailer ride prove to be a near deadly combination as a Missouri couple learns the truth about a condition they once believed was a wives' tale.

In August 2009, Russ and Felisha Ellis were excited to enter their American Quarter Horse in the Bayer World Select Horse Show in Amarillo, Texas, 500 miles from their home in Agency, Mo. They bought the highly desirable Cremello colt from a farm in Mississippi and named him Supernatural Fella, because he was—well, super. Felisha's sharp eye sized up the competition and was anxious for the judging to begin.

"He spiked a fever," Felisha says. "He was off his feet, breathing shallow, and we had to scratch him from the show." Show veterinarians prescribed medications for Supernatural Fella. Disappointed, they made the 500-mile journey home.

Supernatural Fella ran a temperature for days after returning home. The couple decided "enough was enough," and Russ trailered him to veterinarians who diagnosed him with pleuropneumonia. "They gave him about a 25 percent chance of survival and asked what I wanted to do," Russ says. "I'm taking him to K-State because I'm going to do everything I can to save my horse," Russ tells them. "Get everything set up while I gas up the truck because we're heading to Manhattan."

Russ called Felisha at work to explain the severity of Supernatural Fella's situation. She responds in stunned disbelief, "How in the world can this happen?" she asks. "He just has a temp."

Dr. Troy Holder, equine emergency clinician, and Dr. Amy Nagy, equine internal medicine resident, were waiting for the patient when he arrived at 8 p.m. Tests confirmed he had pleuropneumonia, more commonly known as "shipping fever," a notorious illness that presents after a young horse

is transported a long distance. Stress, having the horse's head secured in one position directly behind the hay manger, and the horse eating with its head upright are contributing factors to shipping fever.

"We've hauled horses everywhere and never had this problem," Felisha says. Russ was doubly surprised. "I'd heard of shipping fever but thought it was a wives' tale."

At presentation, pleural fluid and a tracheal aspirate were obtained for culture to determine the best antibiotic to use. The initial treatment plan involved broad spectrum antibiotics, fluids, anti-inflammatory medications and icing his feet to prevent laminitis.

The patient was well beyond the ideal treatment period of 24 to 48 hours from the causative insult. "He had two weeks of progressive disease when he arrived at the hospital," Dr. Nagy says. "By that time, the condition was chronic and very serious."

The case transferred to Dr. Laurie Beard, associate professor of internal medicine, the next morning. She explains pleuropneumonia (or pleuritis) is a sign of a bacterial infection of the lungs that may cause fluid to accumulate between the lung and body wall, the pleural space. "We can fix pleuropneumonia," Dr. Beard says. "The big worry with these patients is the tendency to develop complications such as diarrhea and laminitis."

Dr. Beard says an ultrasound revealed pockets of fibrin in Supernatural Fella's pleural space. "This is certainly evidence the disease has been progressing for a number of days," she says. The medical team worked aggressively to remove fluid from the pleural space over the next two weeks. "We placed an indwelling drain in

his chest to remove the pleural fluid," Dr. Beard says. Drainage of the pleural space had to be repeated several times; however, it was difficult to drain all the infected fluid.

"The problem was the fibrin," she explains. "The infected material bonds together and drainage through a tube becomes very difficult." Further complicating the already complex situation was the location of the fibrin. "There were many small areas of fibrin in his chest, rather than one or two large areas," Dr. Beard says.

Supernatural Fella was not responding as hoped so his medical team changed course on Sept. 29. "We had to get more aggressive and perform a thoracotomy," Dr. Beard says. (A thoracotomy is a surgical procedure in which

The 16-hand-high stallion was at an unspeakable low during his time in isolation. From Left: Dr. Amy Nagy, Dr. Karie Vander Werf, Dr. Laurie Beard (center), and senior student Holly McCown, right.



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Supernatural Fella at home in Agency, Mo., just before the fateful trip to Texas.

pleural space is opened and irrigated to remove the infected material.) "We're very careful about when to do a thoracotomy. If the procedure is performed too early in the course of the disease, the lung can collapse. If we wait too long, the disease continues to progress."

The patient tolerated the procedure well and his pleural space was irrigated to remove the infected material. Supernatural Fella was stable and demonstrated steady improvement over the next two weeks. Then, as suddenly as he became ill at the horse show, his condition declined sharply.

On Oct. 16, Supernatural Fella's temperature unexpectedly spiked to 106.5, and he broke with profuse diarrhea. The team transported him to isolation where the situation turned grim. "He came as close to dying as he could have," Dr. Beard says. "Many people would have given up at this point."

Dr. Beard called the couple and delivered the shattering news. "We just cried and prayed and cried and prayed," Felisha says. "We were worried about the development of founder (laminitis)," Felisha explains. "We could live with founder; we couldn't live without a stallion." Russ, hit hard by the latest setback, urged the doctors to press on. "I could hear the compassion

in her voice, and told her, 'Do what you need to do to save our horse.'"

Treatment of the diarrhea, Dr. Beard tells them, includes massive amounts of IV fluids, anti-endotoxin drugs, plasma—and time. "Honestly, when he broke with diarrhea, we could have lost him," she says.

Even Dr. Nagy, as she sat with him in his stall night after night, began to wonder what she'd do in the same situation. Supernatural Fella was on so many medications and just didn't look good. "We spent entire nights with him and literally took shifts sitting on a chair in his stall," Dr. Nagy says.

With this latest development, Russ and Felisha were forced to face a dark possibility after speaking with Dr. Beard. Could this be the end? But, their dreams. Russ and Felisha hoped to teach the world about Cremellos.

They aren't albinos, such a common misconception that the AQHA did not allow registration of Cremellos until 2004 citing their color and blue eyes as genetic defects. Rather, they are a product of carrying two copies of the cream gene, and resulting foals will have

one copy of the cream gene. "We want to breed and raise world champion palominos and buckskins," Russ says. The couple changed every aspect of their horse operation to accomplish this goal. They had so much to do yet.

Giving up truly never entered the equation for Russ and Felisha. Russ uses numbers to tell Supernatural Fella's story: At the Bayer Select show, Supernatural Fella weighed 1,300 lbs. On Sept. 8, the day he arrived at the teaching hospital, he weighed 1,150 lbs. At this point, the 16-hand-high stallion was less than 900 lbs.

Supernatural Fella remained critical for three days. On the fourth day, the colt stabilized. "He was looking so much better, like he wanted to live," Dr. Beard says. "I was confident he was going to make it. Slowly, over the course of the next week, therapy for the diarrhea was discontinued."

Within another week, on Nov. 1, "Fella," as Dr. Beard affectionately calls him, was discharged. The harrowing two-month saga came to a close with a happy ending.

Dr. Nagy learned an enormous amount about internal medicine on this case. Perhaps, the biggest lesson was the lesson itself. "I learned that you ride it out," she says. "I learned that after you see enough cases, you get better at making that judgment call and experience matters."

Dr. Beard says she appreciated Russ' attention to detail and their working relationship. "We understood each other," she says. "This case proves that we can be successful, but it takes a financial and emotional commitment. But the fact of the matter is, we can do it."

The hope at the world show, the fear learning he was sick, the anxiety not being with him, the uncertainty if he was going to survive. Two months of highs and unspeakable lows Felisha aptly condensed into four words, "Thank God he's alive."

Preparing for the Future

Dr. Beard says there are simple measures that can be taken to prevent shipping fever. "Make sure the horse is vaccinated for herpes and influenza to help prevent viruses. Transport them in a well-ventilated trailer and untie their head periodically to allow normal postural drainage." If the horse develops a fever associated with a long trailer ride, contact a veterinarian as soon as possible.

Taking no chances since nearly losing the colt, Russ and Felisha are consulting with Dr. Maria Ferrer, clinical assistant professor of theriogenology, about Supernatural Fella's reproductive issues and semen collection. "If ever there comes a day when we don't have him with us, he'll be with us in another way," Felisha says.

Dr. Ferrer explains the associated dangers of having a 106.5 temperature. "A prolonged increase in body temperature (fever) can have a negative impact on semen production," Dr. Ferrer says. "It usually takes a few months to know if there is long-term damage."

The couple brought Supernatural Fella back to the hospital twice for semen collection, and the verdict is in. "We have four babies on the way," Dr. Ferrer says proudly. "It really is quite exciting."

And some day, someone will be carefully trailing those yellow babies to their new homes. 🐾

Care givers from left: Dr. Karie Vander Werf and senior students Michaela Clark, Holly McCown and Matthew Porter take the patient outdoors for fresh air.

