



Photo Credit: Olie's Images

# ***Fight*** ***to continue*** ***the dream...***

The story of Ima Firefighter's pelvic fracture  
And the survival of Walz Performance Horses

- Written By Sonya Walz

"It can only get better; Things can't get worse." When we are faced with tragedy or a horrible setback, these are the things your loved ones tell you. It is what we tend to cling to in order to help us keep going, and to help us keep working towards our hopes and dreams. But, what if you think things can't get worse, and then they do? Will you have the strength, the courage, and the desire to keep going?

This is my story of how I almost gave up; Of how I thought things couldn't get worse, but they did, and of how I had to decide if my dreams were worth fighting for and worth starting over. I am not writing this for people to tell me they are sorry about what I went through, or for people to tell me "good job". I am writing this so that if one of you is put in the situation where you aren't sure if you should continue, maybe you will think back on this, and do what I did! FIGHT TO CONTINUE THE DREAM!

In July of 2016, Ima Firefighter suffered a serious injury and the original (but incorrect) diagnosis was a broken third trochanter (a part of the femur where the ligaments attach). In November of 2016, Sweep The Leg Johnny lost his battle with plural pneumonia. One stallion has died and the other is not recovering like we were anticipating. Then we received the actual diagnosis on Ima Firefighter; When you think things can't get worse, know that they can. This is when you have to make the decision to give up or go on.

Here is Backdraft's (Ima Firefighter) story. I am calling it his story, because he is the one who had to survive and I am the lucky one who was there to help him do it. In July 2016, as

we were headed to the first barrel, there was a sound like a gun shot (as I am writing this I am nauseous and short of breath remembering). I got off fully expecting to see a broken leg, but he was just standing there solid as a rock, with his right hind slightly cocked. Nothing was swollen and nothing was tender to the touch. Based on the sound, the lameness and the lack of any swelling, our veterinarian suspected a possible broken bone in the hoof.

His leg was stabilized (I wrapped it like no leg has ever been wrapped - I was making sure that if there was a break, it would be taken care of) and he was taken to an equine hospital. X-rays and blocks were done starting at the very lowest spot. The images were

clean and the blocks did not take away the lameness. The only thing that was found was slight inflammation in the stifle area and some fluid near the patella. It was speculated that maybe he had hyperextended himself and we were lucky it wasn't anything worse. But, as the theme of the story goes, it would later be determined to be worse.

He was taken home and put in a stall. During the first few weeks he would put some weight on his leg when standing, but when asked to move he would not use it. About a week later as I was rubbing his hip muscles I could hear a sound and feel a "catch". The

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Photo Credit: Gabriel Krekk

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vet contacted colleagues who suggested the possibility of a third trochanter break. This type of injury usually occurs in race horses when they start at the gates. The force that the hind end exerts is so strong that the site of ligament attachment on the femur actually is broken off. That point is called the third trochanter.

Backdraft was once again transported to the veterinary clinic where x-rays were attempted, but because of the muscle mass in his hips, the machine simply could not get images. The next step was an ultrasound. A shadow was observed along the top area of the femur leading to the diagnosis that the third trochanter must be broken off. Trochanter breaks are treated with 3 weeks of stall rest followed by increased walking time. By the end of summer, he was taking us for walks! He still was lame, but was bearing weight on it. It is important to note for all of you, that he never refused to walk. He never showed signs that he wasn't getting better (instead he was tough). We were excited that he was improving and felt lucky that it was the type of injury that the majority make a full recovery from.

Mid-November in Arizona is when the tragic part of the story really began. Sweep The Leg Johnny began showing signs of being in pain while breathing and pressure to his ribs bothered him. He was taken to Chaparral Veterinary Clinic in Cave Creek, Arizona. He was diagnosed with plural pneumonia (shipping fever). I was optimistic at first. He only appeared uncomfortable, and surely this was something that could be treated with medication, right? Wrong. Ultrasounds showed that it was more advanced than the staff suspected. A drain tube was placed into the lung cavity and when the pressure was released the pain became horrific. (Again, crying while writing as this is so very hard to tell).

Thorough discussion with the entire medical staff occurred and he was placed on multiple IV antibiotics along with pain medications in the attempt to save him. Days later the cultures

came back resistant to all the medications. The call was made to my husband that they could not control his pain and based on the culture results, their suggestion was to euthanize. During all of this, my husband was at our home in Nebraska with our daughters, and I was at our Arizona place alone. Those of you who know me, know that I am an emotional person. I love my animals and get extremely attached to them. I was alone and devastated. I hoped he knew that during his last days we were trying to save him. I listened to the phone calls of family and friends telling me they understood that I was sad. I listened to them tell me that he wasn't suffering any more. I listened to them tell me that things could only get better now. And then came more, "when you think it can't get worse it does".

I watched Ima Firefighter in his run and was thankful that I had him. But, it had been 4 months and he was not progressing like we were told he would. My husband and I decided that he needed to go to Chaparral Veterinary to have his trochanter injury re-evaluated. There is a vet there named Dr. Wade Walker. Taking my horse to him involved him breaking

my heart, and then later being the reason Ima Firefighter and my dreams survived.

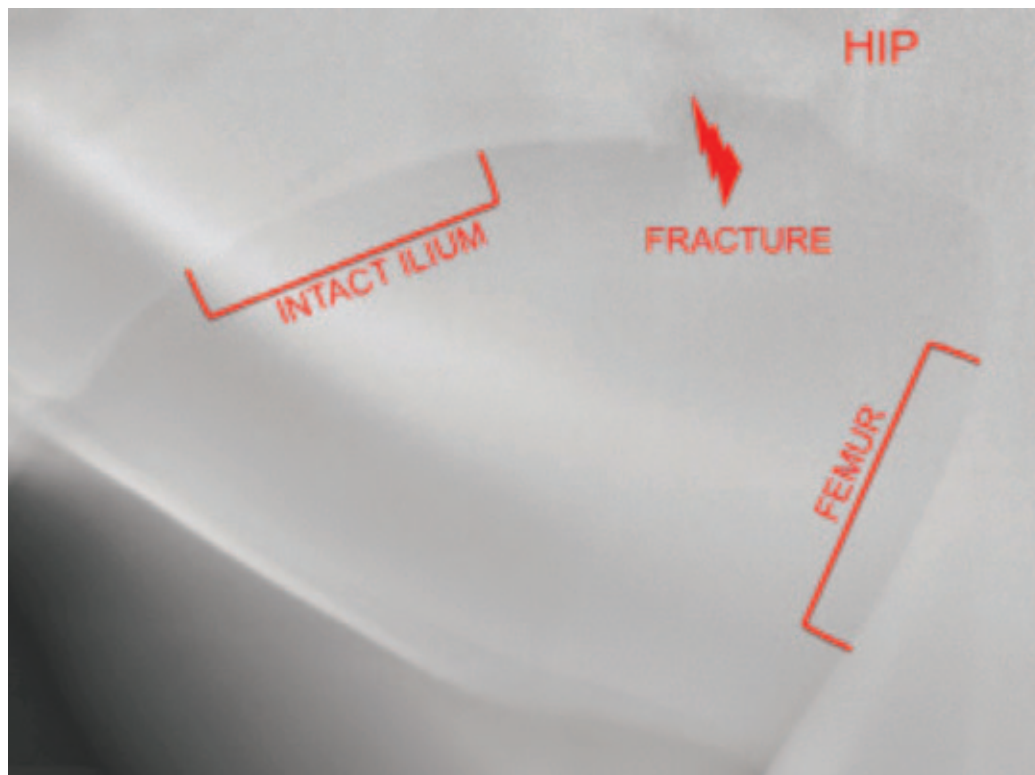
Imagine this scene: Here I am with my prized possession, thinking that he is just healing slower than expected and assuming that I will be told to probably wait a while longer as he heals. Dr. Walker looks at my horse and says this isn't a trochanter break, this is his pelvis. And the panic began! (In my defense, before you all start wondering how I could have let him live with an injury like this since July, and how I could have hauled him 1200 miles to Arizona, his visual signs did not give any indication to how serious the situation was.) I had to leave him, so that he could be prepped for a bone scan the next morning to pinpoint the exact location of the injury. Because of the radioactivity involved with a bone scan, I could not be near him, otherwise I think I would have slept on the floor beside him that night. I drove home filled with fear of what we would be told.

The following day my phone rang. The bone scan followed by X-rays, confirmed what they suspected - a complete pelvic

fracture. The fracture, and its instability, could also be felt during a rectal palpation. I was informed that most horses do not survive this injury and if they do, they are placed in a sling for the first 4 weeks because they cannot stand. Many go off feed because of pain and stress. Dr. Walker said he could not believe that Ima Firefighter had been functioning like he was, it was unbelievable. The scariest thing was how lucky we were that the bone did not tear the femoral artery. If that had occurred, he would have bled out internally in a very short time. All of our best intentions of taking him for walks and not keeping him confined to a stall had prevented the break from healing. And each time he took a step, he could have caused the fatal internal bleeding.

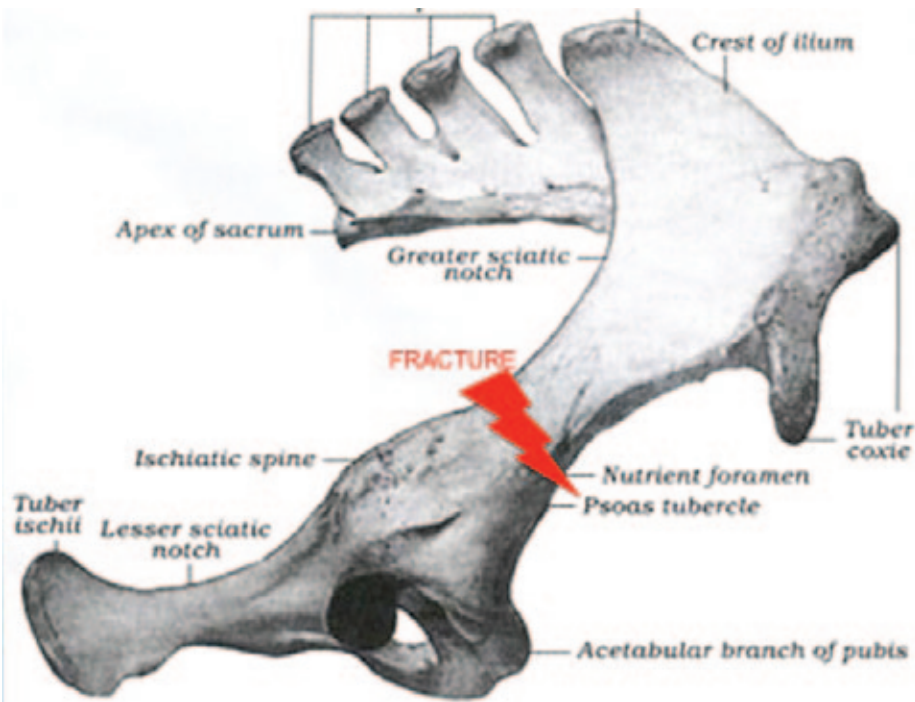
I sat on the floor, listening and not believing what was occurring. I had just lost Sweep The Leg Johnny less than a week before, and now I was being told all of this? In hindsight, I was being told that we were lucky and I was being told that my world was not coming to an end because he would survive. But in that

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X-ray taken from underneath, so this is the inside view • Courtesy of: Chaparral Veterinary





This is a picture of the left side of the pelvis, Ima Firefighter's fracture was on the right.

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moment, I was being told that my world was falling apart. I was told that he would never compete again and that he would be mechanically lame for the rest of his life if he survived. I was told that he SHOULD heal,

but all I could think was "What if he doesn't? What if I lose him too?". I tried to stay calm and think of the big picture which was that we still had him, he hadn't died. But when I hung up the phone with Dr. Walker, I lost it. As stated before, I have a very emotional personality and those who know me, know I

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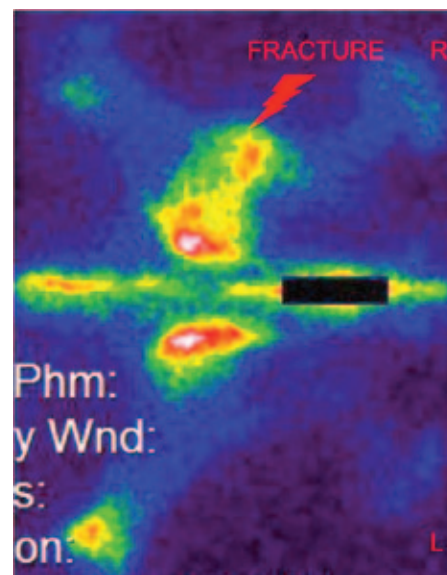
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have some anxiety/panic tendencies (nothing dangerous to myself or others; I don't want to scare you for when you see me next time-ha!). I have never had a "breakdown", but that day I did.

I sat on my floor and couldn't get up. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't decide what to do. I called my husband and I tried so hard to be strong when I told him what I had been told. I knew he was still worried about me after the other incident and I knew it was breaking his heart to not be able to help me. I told him I just needed to sit and that I couldn't talk and he understood. I got sick and then I wept until I couldn't breathe. I then called my dad because every little girl needs her dad no matter how big we get. I told him I shouldn't be reacting like this, I remember telling him "My family is okay, it isn't my children, it isn't my husband, it isn't my mom or dad, I know it could be worse. I know that I am so lucky that everyone I love is safe". But this horse is my world. He IS Walz Performance Horses! He is my dream, he is my world, he is my pride and joy! He is my friend and the one I go to when I don't want to talk to people, but yet when I still need to talk. And now I have been told that he will never be the same. I have been told that my actions could have killed him.

This is where the beginning of my story applies - when I said you have to decide if you will pursue your dreams. I sat there in my own pile of Kleenex and self-pity and I told my dad: I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do please! And by saying I didn't know what to do, I meant in that moment. I didn't know if I should get up or if I should stay down. Do I post all of my horses for sale and quit? Is this a sign that I have lost? How will I get through this? How will my business survive?

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Bone Scan of Ima Firefighter's fracture

I was alone, and I felt helpless and powerless to help myself.

The next day I brought him home to begin strict stall rest. I had made him a wonderful 12x12 in the corner of his run and I had put down about 50 feet of shavings! I put his pony friend beside him. I was prepared. I drove in an overly cautious manner because what if today was the day he nicked that artery and died? Imagine how carefully and slowly I unloaded him and led him to his pen! I let him loose and the big jerk (yes, jerk because he scared me so bad) took a run at his pony friend (seriously-who treats their friends like that?) and hit the panel. He then laid down (on the bad hip) and rolled in his shavings like a dog does when he finds a horrible (yet wonderful to him) smelly object! I almost died from fear - how could I get him through 3 months without him dying and how could I get the injury to heal? I called Dr. Walker and his reply was to chuckle and say "I think your horse is going to be okay!". Of all the things I have heard during this ordeal, this was probably the most reassuring!

After a couple days, my panic subsided (notice I didn't say left) and I had some time to start thinking about what to do. I had to ask myself some simple questions and some extremely hard questions. With those questions come some serious realizations as to the truth of the situation you are in. When I was a small child, I wrote that when I grew up I would be raising horses with my cousin Susie and living in Buffalo



Photo Credit: Gabriel Krekk

Gap. I put Buffalo Gap because that is where my grandparents lived, and that is where I got to spend time with my cousin Susie the most. I said I wanted to work with Susie because we both loved horses. I still talk to my cousin Susie daily (yes, daily!) and we get together and run barrels, take care of our horses and in general, appreciate how lucky we are. So, my childhood dream was still my dream, it had just changed a bit. So, the main question of "is my dream still alive?" was answered easily.

Knowing that I had decided that I was going to pursue my

dream and that I was going to do whatever I could to make that happen, I had to then begin to answer the harder question of "Is this dream still a possibility?" Technically anything is possible (or so we are always told). I had to decide if I was going to find a replacement stallion for Sweep The Leg Johnny or if I was going to go back to a "one horse operation". Ultimately, our decision was made to begin searching, and that search took 4 months to find "The one"! The stress and excitement of stallion shopping is a story for another time.

The question of "How do I deal with my clients?" was the really hard one. I pride myself in being professional and courteous. Being the type of breeder that understands people's situations, and that makes sure I am helpful is very important to me! I had to contact the rebreed clients and tell them that one stallion was deceased, the other was potentially not available for 2017 breeding season, and that a new stallion was in the process of being purchased, but all we can tell you is the bloodline we are looking

for? I have to say that the people I have as clients are AMAZING! They were understanding and all of them were easy to work out options with!

From the end of November until late February, Ima Firefighter stood in his 12x12 pen. I bought a hanging ball and the horse lick treat things and not once did he play with them. He waited patiently and politely. He did not go off feed, he did not get crabby, he did not get depressed. I believe that he sensed the importance of his situation. For those of you who have watched "The Black Stallion" just replace Alec with me and The Black with Ima Firefighter and you will have an idea of the bond and the relationship that is between us! If I put him in that stall, he would wait and trust me. He stood with his head over the gate and watched all of us doing our daily activities. I always knew he was smart and kind, but this confirmed it 100 times over!

The mid-February vet appointment was stress and panic all over again. We would find

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out if the bone had in fact started to heal. The fear was this: If it hadn't started to heal with rest, then it probably never would. He had been so well behaved (well, besides that first day of pony frustration and wild rolling) so there would not be anything to blame the lack of healing on if there was a problem. He took his first walk in almost three months that day. Walking to the trailer I was sure he seemed better, but was it just wishful thinking?? When he walked into the vets, Dr. Walker also noticed the improvement which led to some of the fear being replaced with excitement. Getting x-rays of a pelvis on a horse who has a big muscled hip is not something that occurs quickly. Images are shot and then determined to not be good enough or not at the right angle. Images are reshot, and reshot, and reshot.

Finally, the correct one worked and Dr. Walker's exact words were "Sonya, come look at this". It wasn't said with exuberance to let me know he was happy with it. It wasn't said with sadness to let me know there was a problem. It made my stomach knot, and the reply from me in a wavering tone was "I don't see it". He then replied with the excitement I needed "Exactly! 40% regrowth already-what you are seeing isn't an actual fracture anymore, it is a shadow where the fracture was and it now has woven bone!". YES! YES! YES!!! Since my story is one of honesty, I will tell you that I knelt down and cried a bit. My horse was going to survive! The woven bone meant that the bone was healing and that it was now structurally strong enough to safely make the trip back to Nebraska. We were then told we could do hand walking, but that it was not strong enough to withstand any sudden or powerful movements.

By the end of May we were able to safely collect him via ground or chemically (and that too is a story for another time!). By mid-summer he was allowed to be free in his run and we were putting him on the walker occasionally. By fall, I was lunging him at a trot

for a few minutes a couple times a week in addition to the 3 days a week on the walker. In November, Ima Firefighter once again made the journey to Arizona with me. I took him back to Dr. Walker and he told me to go ahead and turn him out, let him run! Do any of you know the fear that is involved with that???? To ease my anxiety level, I choose to turn him out at the vet clinics arena that day because if something did go wrong, we would already be there! He bucked and played and did an amazing impression of a champion Arabian stallion-prancing and snorting and holding his tail high and proud! That day was probably the best day since the day before the injury in July of 2016.

I waited a long time to know that he was truly healed and that he would stay his amazing wonderful self! The next day, I ponied him in the desert and again, the dancing Arabian showed up. He will always be a bit "off" because his right hip is dropped (If you touch your horses flank at the top, you can feel the point of the hip/pelvic bone. On Ima Firefighter, you have to move down about 4 inches to feel it). He



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doesn't know he is not completely right. He doesn't know that he isn't the strong, powerful picture of perfection he once was. He still believes he is king of the castle and between you and me, He always will be king of the castle!

The story has a happy ending. Ima Firefighter is happy and healthy. Our new stallion is on track to be outstanding. My emotional status is back to being happy and joyful. My business has survived! Know that the things that make us the happiest are the things that sometimes challenge us the most. If it came easily, maybe it isn't as good as it could be. Working harder than

you ever thought possible is the key to achieving the dream. I have gone through an emotional hell, and I do not mind saying that I am stronger and better for it! I have a better appreciation for my clients. I have a stronger love for my family and friends. And I have a deeper respect for people who also have struggled with their own emotional issues. I know that the things we have in life are things we are blessed and lucky to have. Appreciate your successes and learn from your failures.


Thanks for reading,  
Sonya Walz 



Photo Credit: Olie's Images