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## **The Mud and I**

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The winter rains had been unrelenting. My 16-hand Arabian, Babba Louie, had been a great partner in our many trail rides over our 12-year partnership. On a beautiful spring day, we would ride an easy trail into a remote section of our Regional Park. Following the recently graded service road towards the higher meadows, I noticed that the creeks and hills had been forever changed by the tremendous water flows of this past winter. Ragged new cuts had been torn through the earth creating waterfalls into ravines on either side of the trail.

I was enjoying the solitude, the communion with a wonderful trail horse and the spectacular spring weather. My mind went fleetingly to some recent requests by friends and family that I take a cell phone along when I ride alone. I reviewed my reasoning that a cell phone generally doesn't work this far out in the Park, and I trust Louie explicitly.

The heavy rains had ended over a month earlier, and I expected that the upper trails would be drying out as they usually do by this time. As we came to the place in the trail that holds a small bog every winter, I could see that the hill on the upper side had collapsed like a marshmallow in a flame. The meadow approach and the bog were now the recipient of a load of rocks and mud, and the trail had disappeared. The drainage pipe that allowed water to flow beneath the trail was also gone.

The downhill side looked exceptionally wet. This was probably not a good choice, as I didn't want to risk losing any of Louie's new shoes. Uphill I could see grass and cattle tracks. I headed Louie up the small hill and told him, "step, step, careful". He followed his training and moved cautiously ...

We had only gone a few steps when Louie staggered. A quick look showed me that his hind legs were trapped in the muddy sink hole that had opened beneath us. I leaned far forward as he lunged and staggered. Facing uphill as we were, we were in danger of going over backward. As he lost strength we settled into the mud up to his belly in a graceful slide.

Dragging my leg out of the mud, I found I could dismount from the saddle on a small patch of ground that held my weight. Louie lay on his chest at an angle to the hill with three legs in the adobe sinkhole. His near front leg was curled under him, the only leg free. He looked confused, dispirited and out of breath. He closed his eyes and groaned.

Louie didn't seem hurt but was exhausted. My new buffalo hide saddle was now coated with inches of smelly, gray, slick adobe. While he rested, I went to the uphill side by his head, talking to him calmly. I pulled the reins over his head, thinking I would encourage and help from the front. I was having trouble finding good footing myself, and kept staggering back into the muck.

Once Louie got his breath, I lightly lifted the reins and said, "Now boy, try it again". He opened his eyes, took a breath and propelled himself up with a staggering lunge. With this great effort, he managed to pull the reins out of my hands and throw his one good leg through the reins. This effectively now hog-tied his leg to his head, pulling his head down as well. While he rested again, half-lying on his chest, face in the mud, I frantically strove to unbuckle the slippery throat latch on his bridle. Once free, I pulled the entire headstall off of his head. I also managed to unfasten the girth on the side that was out of the mud and unbuckle one side of the breast collar. Since half of the saddle was entombed in the mud, there was no way to complete this maneuver.

After a brief rest, Louie gave another lunge. This time with his head free, he was able to push off with the good leg and the goulash of mud made a ghastly sucking sound as it reluctantly released him. Unable to find hard ground, he collapsed flat on the hill. Now, half buried in the mud, the saddle was keeping him from rolling over down the hill and freeing himself. His legs were stuck out straight uphill. I didn't think he'd broken anything, but I couldn't be sure. He closed his eyes, sighed and was quiet. Stroking his neck, I spoke to him quietly.

I thought fleetingly of the cell phone that I did not have. If he could not get turned around and up, should I leave him and walk back down the trail to get help? The walk was 40 minutes and I had not seen a Ranger in Base Camp as we rode by earlier. It would be dangerous to leave him to fend for himself stuck in the mud, and he wouldn't know what to do if he did get out. My other option was to wait and hope that another hiker would take this trail at some point today. My penchant for remote areas now worked against us.

Then, I saw Louie's lips move. Always the gourmand, he was trying to nibble the grass that was just under his prone nose and mouth on a small patch not buried in the mud. If he was going to eat in this position, he was okay, just tired. "Good boy, Louie", I said. With this encouragement, he lifted his head from the ground, gathered himself and gave one more tremendous heave against gravity. This time he managed to pull himself uphill onto his chest. He waited a few moments, and then was on his feet. He staggered in the sticky mud but soon found a firm patch where he stood, dripping chunks of mud. The loosened girth allowed the saddle to stay in the mire with the saddle pad hanging down his side, tethered to Louie from the breast collar where it snapped onto the saddle and the girth. My hands shaking, I finally found and released the slippery snap, and the saddle settled securely into the mud.

Louie took a few steps, nibbled at the grass at his feet, and looked at me as if to say, "now what"? I stroked his neck, saying, "good boy, good boy", and told him what a wonderful horse he was and how sorry I was to get us into this predicament.

Placing the reins over his head, I led him carefully back to solid ground. It seemed as though we were walking back into another dimension, yet it was only about 6 feet away. Louie seemed content to nibble at the grass but kept looking up to check on me as I went back for the saddle.

Removing the bit from the bridle, I now put what was a halter over his head, attaching the reins to lead. We walked a few steps and he seemed to be moving okay. As I watched Louie drying in the sun with mud from his ears to his tail, he began to look like a plaster horse statue. He was subdued, but did not look depressed.

Finally back at the barn, I had to talk sweetly to him to get him near the hoses for a bath and another 30 minutes to scrape the hardened mud from his coat and tail. The mud was in every orifice and gave new meaning to "embedded". Amazingly, he still had on all of his shoes.

Louie had never panicked during his ordeal. He'd kept his head and energy for the fight to free himself. He deserved that good roll in his shavings, even though his coat was not quite dry. I mashed up two Butte pills with his food for him and treated myself to two Ibuprofen from my pack.

Life's lessons learned: **Always ride with a trail buddy when possible, but if you must ride alone, give someone your itinerary (barn helper, ranger, friend). If riding in unfamiliar territory, check the weather and trail conditions with local officials or websites. Carry in a fanny pack on you: a cell phone, whistle, compass, folding knife, Aspirin or Ibuprofen, long plastic ties and matches. In case of emergency, Don't Panic. If it is your horse that is in trouble, speak quietly to him, no matter what you are feeling, and try to figure out how to help him. If your horse is down, remove all gear that will get in his way. Your horse's instinct for survival is strong. If he does not panic, let him try to figure out how to help himself. If your horse is injured or bleeding, treat the injury. A makeshift tourniquet can be made from your bandana, the reins, a stirrup leather, or the plastic ties in your pack. If it is you that is injured, stay where you are or near the trail so you can be found. Always carry drinking water. Attach an easy boot with bag firmly to the saddle and include a hoof pick and some vet wrap. Use a trail bridle that can convert to a halter and tie the lead rope around your horse's neck for quick use. Train your horse before you head out to the trails. He should understand leg yielding and verbal commands such as "Back", "Step", and "Whoa".**

Be careful, be cautious, and have fun!

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