

This mare was confiscated from a township just outside Potchefstroom



The Highveld Horse Care Unit

by Theresa Odendaal

He hardly resembles a horse anymore. His once glossy coat is dull and lifeless, his muscles wasted away. He is little more than a skeleton, his ribs and hipbones jutting painfully through a skin covered by mange and weeping sores. His eyes are sunken deep into hollow sockets, filled with a voiceless plea. Does anybody care?

SA Horseman spoke to Bev Seabourne, manager and one of the directors of the Highveld Horse Care Unit. The Unit is dedicated to bringing justice to abused and neglected horses, ponies and donkeys. Bev established the Unit in 1991.

It is not merely a policing body, aimed at rescuing and confiscating horses. Their greatest contribution is the ongoing training and education of horse owners. They host regular township clinics and have taken over the monitoring of security horses patrolling the railways. Bev says

that this has led to a major improvement in the condition of these horses. All that was needed was a little education and awareness on the part of the owners.

Difficulties

The Unit's work is fraught with difficulties. Covering an area of 4 000 km², the logistics are almost incomprehensible and the costs astronomical. As a non-profit organisation, they rely entirely on donations. Fortunately, they receive money from the racing industry as well as some from The Horse Society, but more is always needed.

Veterinary care is very expensive and although Dr Dale Wheeler of the Horse Racing Authority, does *pro bono* work for them, they still need to pay for drugs, vaccines, and the like.

The legal process is also difficult. Once a case has been reported, the Unit sends an inspector to assess the case. Three warnings are issued, coupled with advice. If the advice is not heeded, they then



One of two Thoroughbreds confiscated from Heilbron. They were only nine weeks out of racing and had been “thrown out” to get rid of the “drugs”. Her deterioration was rapid and harsh.



This mare was confiscated from an American Saddle Stud in Randfontein. The owner had been given numerous warnings, but as is clear from this picture, failed to feed the horses in his care.

have the authority to confiscate the animals. In cases where immediate action is required, the animals are confiscated there and then.

The slow legal process then kicks into action and the case is referred to court. It can take up to two years for cases to get to court and legally, the Unit has to keep the animals in their care during that time. Of the 5 000 cases every year, only about 100 lead to confiscations.

If the prosecution is successful, the maximum sentence is a mere R8 000, or a prison sentence of three years, suspended for four years. The Unit must monitor the owner and ensure that he or she does not acquire any horses during that period.

Danger

Bev and her team have more than often had their job cut out for them. Some owners can become very difficult and often resort to violence. Apart from verbal abuse, they have been physically assaulted, locked into properties, held hostage and had their vehicles damaged. Nowadays, they carry bolt-cutters so that they can escape. They are also allowed to carry weapons.

Adoptions

Adopting a horse that has been nursed back to health by the Unit, is one way to assist them. It is a good option to explore when looking for a horse and for anything between R500 and R3 000, one can get a wonderful, often well-trained animal.

Potential owners are inspected and have to sign a contract stating that the horse may not be sold for profit. The aim is to ensure that people who adopt horses, keep them. The Unit

monitors adopted horses for the remainder of their lives and visits them twice a year to ensure their continued well-being.

A handpicked group also assists the organisation by fostering confiscated horses. This helps keep the Unit’s costs down and often these “foster parents” will school the horses, increasing their adoptability.

Angels of mercy

The people who work for the Unit, are very special indeed – angels, with a lot of love to go around. But how do they cope? They are often traumatised and frequently subjected to horrific sights. Bev says that one learns to balance one’s life. The fact that they are a very close-knit team, helps. They support each other and although there are often tears, there is also joy. They just have to remain focussed on their job and not lose sight of the aim – the welfare of all horses, ponies and donkeys.

Assistance

As the Highveld Horse Care Unit relies entirely on donations, we implore the public and companies to assist them financially with donations, grants and legacies. Pharmaceutical companies and feed suppliers can also help by regularly donating some of their products to this worthy cause. Second hand tack is always needed – most tack shops serve as depots.

Horse lovers can also assist by fostering horses, adopting horses and of course by reporting cases of cruelty. Visit their website on www.HorseCare.org.za and find out how you can go about making a difference. SAH