



Photo: Jonathan Evans

# Penny's Problem

By Margaret Evans

The girls were excited. With the fun of Christmas and New Year's Eve behind them and school started again, they had begun to feel stall-bound with all the bad weather. But a clear weekend in mid-January allowed them to get out for a hack along the river valley. They had wanted to go to the lookout on the hill, but the trails were closed due to snow and fallen trees. Just getting back in the saddle and riding anywhere was freedom, and they were making plans for the midwinter multidiscipline Snowball Schooling Show at Blue Meadows Equestrian Centre where they all took lessons and clinics with Mavis McDonald. There would be dressage, flat, and hunter classes in the indoor arena.

"What a great idea!" said Meridy excitedly. "And all the classes are basic levels. Perfect!"

"No one's in show condition in midwinter," grinned Sandie. "I wonder how many will show up. Some Moms or Dads won't want to trailer horses on snowy roads."

"Lucky us that we live close and we can ride there," Meridy commented, patting Daisy.

"So long as we can get one of our parents to drive there with grooming tools and rugs," thought Anita out loud. "Our ponies might get chilled standing around after warming up on the ride over."

"My Mom will," stated Jill.

"Any of our Moms will," grinned Meridy.

They trotted on, enjoying the sheltered trail that followed the river then rose up onto benchland above their hometown of Brokeville. High branches of aspen trees, bare of their quivering leaves, were roosts for the occasional crow and bird of prey. Old stems showed the drilled-out holes of cavity-nesting birds and the deer trails showed recent tracks. Bushes hung in the suspended animation of winter, awaiting the lengthening light of spring to trigger renewal. Slabs of ice clung

to the river's banks while its waters carved a narrow silent channel in the centre. A weak, yellow sun hung limply in a pale blue sky as though its effort to make an appearance was almost more than it could handle. Some debris under the snow on the trail caused Penny to trip and Anita guided her carefully through and watched for more obstacles on the path.

"What are you going to enter?" Meridy asked no one in particular. "It'll be flat and hunter classes for me."

"Dressage Training Test One." Jill's answer was obvious.

"Penny should do dressage too," said Anita thoughtfully. "And a few flat classes." Given Penny's excitable nature, flat work always helped to keep her focused.

"Flat classes for me too," said Sandie, patting her mule Fanny.

The show was the following Saturday. On Friday night, Anita gave her pony a really good grooming. Penny enjoyed the rubdown and Anita spent some time untangling her mane and softening it to give it a shine. She did the same with Penny's tail and the protective "feathers" on her pasterns. In winter Penny grew a thick coat and lots of leg hair that kept her warm when the winds blew, but keeping it clean and untangled always took time. Cleaning her pasterns, Anita noticed a small wound that had sealed and crusted over. She quickly cleaned it up and finished her grooming routine before cleaning tack.

The show was starting at 10am on Saturday. The girls were dressed warmly when they met at Anita's house, then rode to the equestrian centre. Since it was a fun schooling show, they weren't expected to dress in show clothes but they all knew the advantage of clean, appropriate turnout. As expected, all the Moms were coming to help. Anita's Dad was taking her brother Matt to a hockey game. Anita's Mom would drive the

horse trailer over filled with grooming tools, vet first aid kits, stuffed hay nets, water buckets, rugs, coolers, extra clothes for the girls, snacks, lunches, and more snacks. They knew from past experience the daunting amount of accessories children and ponies need at shows.

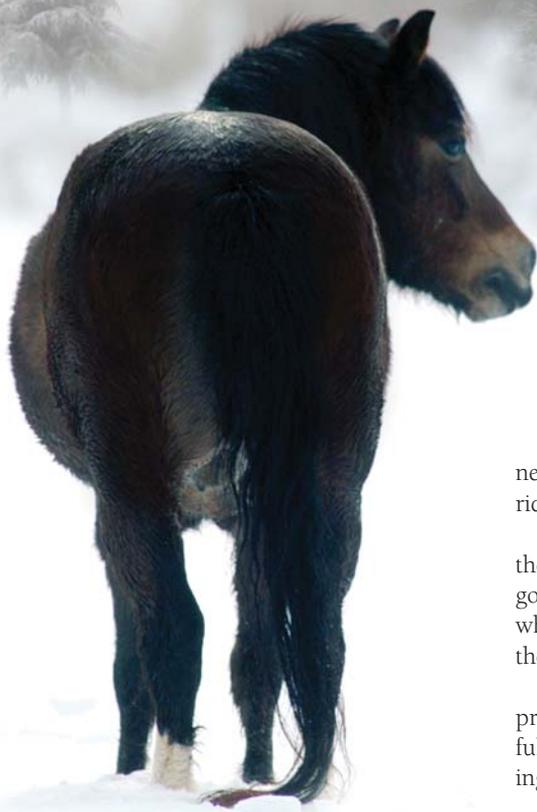
It was a fun morning of flat classes and the walk-trot dressage tests in the indoor arena. There were 40 riders, most of them students who rode the school horses. A few trailered in or rode over and the girls had fun reuniting with riders they had met at Blue Meadows Equestrian Centre, and at last spring's clinics at Triple Creek, High Acres, and Horse Hair ranches.

Anita placed third in the equitation class. But as much as she was excited to win a ribbon, something was starting to nag at her. Normally she'd be pleased just to have Penny perform well in equitation. Penny's quietness had given her the presence and obedience the judge was looking for. But there was something in Penny today that wasn't quite right.

Soon all of them were picking up ribbons and special prizes. In fact, everyone got something, even those judged to be the "best at riding the slowest over jumps" or the "best pony doing low hunter jumps in the dressage ring" (because Crackers jumped over the foot-high rails that framed the ring during his walk-trot test). Candice who was riding him felt embarrassed, but then laughed along with everyone else.

The training dressage test was right after lunch. Before mounting, Anita checked Penny thoroughly looking for anything that might be wrong, but she found nothing amiss.

Everyone hushed as Anita and Penny entered the arena at a working trot. Her smooth halt had Penny standing perfectly square as Anita saluted. They moved forward to a working trot, and Jill couldn't help grin-



ning as she watched Anita track left at C, then guide Penny into a 20 metre circle at E. Excitable Penny was being unusually compliant as Anita continued through the movements of the training level dressage test, totally focused on each execution and Penny's way of going.

"She's looking so great," whispered Meridy to Jill. "She's doing 20 metre circles almost as good as Sugar."

Jill grinned. "I think Sugar practices them in her dreams."

"Anita's always practicing them on Penny," smiled Sandie.

The girls all really valued basic training, but enjoyed having fun with their ponies too. They didn't let them get stale in an arena, and were always riding the trails together, trying

new things. This year they were all hoping to ride in the provincials.

As they continued watching Anita's test, they each quietly wondered about their own goals for the New Year. January was the time when they set their goals for the coming year, then figured out how to get there.

In the arena, Anita felt a tiny surge of pride at Penny's unusually quiet and successful dressage test. But an uncomfortable feeling persisted... something wasn't quite right.

Later, Anita would remember that feeling. Right then, she heard a gasp from the spectators as Penny, cantering a 20 metre circle on the right lead at B, stumbled suddenly. Favouring her right hind, she pulled up sharply, floundering on the other three. Anita leapt off and steadied her quickly.

Jill, Meridy, and Sandie raced to help her, and were instantly joined by Mavis.

"What happened?" Anita was white with worry. "She was doing so well..."

"You were great," Mavis reassured her as she bent down to feel Sugar's leg. There was some heat on the inside of her fetlock.

"She's likely pulled herself. Go hose her leg, then we'll get a support wrap on it."

"Pulled herself?" Anita knew how sure-footed Penny was.

The audience clapped enthusiastically as Anita led Penny out. She paused, turned, and

waved with gratitude, then concentrated on Penny's needs. Her Mom rushed over with the first aid kit and a blanket while Jill pulled off Penny's saddle and Meridy took off the bridle and secured the halter. Anita examined Penny's foot for stones, not really expecting to find anything. Her fetlock felt hot and her leg was sensitive to the touch. She moved Penny closer to where she could run a hose on her leg while Jill soaked a wrap in cold water. It was a good thing her Mom had brought the trailer as she could take Penny home while the others rode.

But at home, Penny seemed worse. She stood quietly in her stall, not eating and not moving on her leg as it began to swell.

"Have you taken her temperature?" Mom asked.

Anita grabbed the thermometer from the first aid kit, lubricated it with a bit of petroleum jelly and nudged it in gently under Penny's tail. She always kept it tied to a piece of string which she also clipped to Penny's tail. It was 39 degrees Celsius, higher than normal. Her respiration was up too.

"She needs to see the vet," Anita's face quivered as Mom flipped open her cell phone and dialled Colin Allenby's emergency number. Moments later, Colin called back and

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Mom quickly told him what had happened.

"He's coming right over," she said, relieved.

An hour later, Penny had been diagnosed with a bacterial infection in her leg.

"She'll need antibiotics, a painkiller, and plenty of hydro therapy," said Colin, glancing at Anita. He saw her fearful confused look. "It means lots of hosing. You can use an ice gel pack and wrap it on her leg too. The massage of the hosing really helps, and the gel packs will draw out the heat and help to cool it."

"How did she get an infection?" Anita asked herself out loud, furiously thinking of what could have happened. Then she remembered when Penny tripped on some debris under the snow last week when they went riding; and last night she'd found the crusted wound. Bending down, she pointed out the spot to Colin. He looked at it closer.

"It looks like a puncture wound," he nodded. "With Penny's long hair, it would be easy to miss. And with the ground around the barn so muddy, it's easy for infection to get in."

"I should have seen it earlier."

"Don't blame yourself, Anita," soothed Mom. "We'll start her medicines right now."

"The leg could swell more before the antibiotics take effect," warned Colin as he showed them how to dissolve the pills Penny needed and give them to her by a syringe. "Call me any time but for sure in two days to let me know how she's doing."

"Will she get better?" Anita's voice wobbled.

"You bet," he grinned. He knew very well how anxious Anita would be about her pony.

Anita and Mom got organized straight away with Penny's nursing routine. The pony needed some encouragement to move outside the barn to an area where Anita could hose her leg without the risk of creating an icy patch near the walkway or barn door. She shifted awkwardly at first but Anita stroked her as she directed the flow of water onto her leg, its cold, massaging effect penetrating the throbbing fetlock. Penny settled, then let out a sigh as the cool effect of the water penetrated. Mom took the ice gel pack from the freezer, put it in its sleeve, and after drying Penny's leg to protect the skin from freezing, secured the wrap on her leg. Back in her stall, Penny settled down to rest quietly as Anita gave her the medications.

"She's going to have to stay in her stall all day," said Anita. "I'll get up early to hose her leg before going to school."

"I'll come back at lunch time to check her," said Mom. "Then you can hose her again when you get home from school, and



again at night. That'll work."

"I wish I didn't have to go." But a glance from Mom told Anita that comment wouldn't fly.

That evening Anita phoned her friends to let them know what happened. She finally hung up, showered, and got ready for bed, utterly exhausted. But she couldn't sleep. She went over and over in her mind what she had missed, what she hadn't done, what she should have done.

At school Monday, she was still feeling awful. She was really anxious about Penny, and tired from worrying about her the whole weekend, then trying to get her homework done late Sunday night. But her homework wasn't finished for handing in and Mrs. Taylor, Anita's teacher, looked at her pale face and dark eyes with concern.

"Are you sure you feel okay Anita?"

She nodded, then turned away quickly.

"Her pony's sick," Jill explained quietly to Mrs. Taylor. "Anita's been nursing her."

At lunch, Mom phoned Anita on her cell phone to let her know she had checked Penny and that she was resting quietly.

"Has she eaten anything?"

"Hard to tell," Mom said. "She's pushed her hay around a bit so she might have snuffled at it. She's not used to being kept in. She was definitely pleased to see me!"

"I've never felt so bad," groaned Anita to her friends after Mom had hung up. "I shouldn't have taken her to the show Saturday."

"No one knew," said Sandie. "I remember when Fanny had an infection like Penny and I didn't know at first either. I went trail riding but then I had to lead her home when she didn't feel right."

"That's what I should have done, taken her home earlier."

"Remember when Daisy was sick?" recalled Meridy. "She had a bronchial infection. We had to call Colin too and he thought she'd had it a few days." She paused, remembering how she had felt then continued quietly. "You know, they can't tell us. They don't talk like us. We have to..."

Jill glanced at her. "It's in their body talk. Anita caught on during Saturday when Penny was so quiet."

"That's what upsets me so much," nodded Anita, her eyes filling. "I should have figured it out! If she was a bit slower, more quiet than usual, then she couldn't have been feeling right. But I rode anyway. Penny's so obedient and willing to please..."

"Don't beat up on yourself," soothed Sandie. "We've all been there. You did the most right thing. You got help immediately."

It was, as Colin warned, a couple of days before Anita noticed Penny feeling better. She started nibbling at a bit of hay and eating a mouthful of her rations. But she was still limping and favouring her leg as she was led outside for hosing. It was a week before Penny really began to feel better. The antibiotics had beaten down the infection and the hydrotherapy had really helped to reduce the swelling. Now, bored and alone with the children at school and the parents at work, Penny began to rattle her stall door impatiently, then nibbled at the latch....

"She's gone!" Anita screamed into the phone. "I can't find her!"

"What!" Mom shouted, alarmed. She was still at work. "Get Matt. See if Sandie or Jill or Meridy can help look. She's done her escape artist trick and let herself out."

"The main barn door too? It was open."

Mom cringed. "I left it ajar. I thought a bit of fresh air in the barn couldn't hurt."

In minutes, Matt, Jill, Sandie, and Meridy were fanning out with Anita, trying to pick up her tracks. Fresh snow had covered any tracks by the barn. Then Anita noticed that the gate at the end of the paddock was open. She remembered that Dad had been clearing brush last weekend and had dumped a pile in their woodlot for it to break down naturally and provide habitat for small mammals. Running to the gate, they could all clearly see hoof prints in the deeper snow.

"Penny!" Anita's voice was sharp, urgent. They waited then moved on. Anita called again.

"I bet she's not far," whispered Matt. "If she's feeling better enough to go for a walk, she'll stop at the first chance for food."

"Here's hoping..." grinned Jill.

"Did you bring treats?" Sandie asked Anita. "Rattle the bag."

"I wish I'd brought the grain can," lamented Anita as she held a plastic bag with apple slices high then yelled Penny's name.

There was a sudden rustle in the brush. With a sharp nicker, Penny called back. Laughing, they rushed toward the sound and found her right where Matt had guessed. She was in a sheltered clearing, grazing on the tops of the grass that was peeking above the layer of snow. She threw her head up, ears pricked and eyes bright, and let out a loud whinny in greeting. She was standing square on all four legs. With

a huge grin, Anita moved forward with the treats and slipped on her halter. She grinned with relief to see Penny walking almost comfortably. At least she was putting weight on the leg. It would be another week or so before Penny would be completely better but for now Anita was just thrilled to see her beloved pony well on the road to recovery.

Later, after the girls had gone home, Anita and her Mom secured Penny in her stall with clean bedding, fresh hay, and all her favourite treats nestled in her rations.

"What a brat she is," grinned Anita. "I guess she told us something again."

"She was bored and her tummy was growling."

"Which at least means she feels better," Anita smiled. "I'll never begrudge her growling tummy again!"

Mom laughed as she flipped off the barn light, secured the door, and hugged her daughter as they walked to the house.

"Speaking of growling tummies..." Mom began.

"Yeah," nodded Anita. "I'm starving!" ●