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Tommy only moments after his birth by emergency caesarian section (above) and at 30 minutes old (left). His mother unfortunately had to be euthanized due to late stage tetanus.

# A Little Miracle Called Tommy

By Margaret Evans

In the chaotic clatter

that is normal life in Marrakech in the Kingdom of Morocco, people head out almost every day for the souks, the city square, and the shopping places, weaving and jostling along the old narrow streets and dodging buses, taxis, bikes, and horse-drawn caleches.

Inside the ancient walls of the medina, traditional customs are honoured in the daily babble and haggle as merchants and shoppers barter and argue good-naturedly in Arabic, Berber, French, or Spanish at rows of stalls and tiny shops. Traders and suppliers navigate the twisting alleys with goods, both practical and fashionable: fabrics, spices, meats, rugs, brass, ironworks, leather, caftans, scarves, and burnouses. There are powders, potions, and perfumes. Rising above the voices are the rhythms of drums, reed pipes, and song. There are acrobats and snake charmers, fortune tellers and fire eaters. Then there are the beloved story tellers, or halakas. Above it all is the muezzin, the one who calls the

faithful to prayer. And amid the maelstrom are donkeys pulling carts, weaving through traffic, moving with their own prerogative into the centre of the souks which, since medieval times, have been reserved only for pedestrians and equines. Someone yells “barek!” as a donkey twists its way with yet another delivery cart.

But on the evening of Sunday, October 11, 2009, at the nearby Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad (SPANAs) veterinary clinic, a new alarm sounded as a cart clattered urgently into the yard. People were yelling, there was a kerfuffle, and the veterinary team jumped into action.

“We were in our Marrakech clinic with the British Ambassador and his family, including his eight-year-old son, Tommy,” recalled Jeremy Hulme, chief executive of SPANA, which provides free veterinary care for working animals in some of the world’s poorest countries. “It was the annual prize-giving for all the caleche (carriage) horses and their drivers. (We vote on) best

caleche, best new driver, prettiest horse, best pair, etc. Owners get a little money prize while their horses get a sack of barley. Suddenly there was a bit of a rumpus, an emergency admission. A jenny donkey had been brought in on a cart in the last stages of tetanus. She was rigid, recumbent, and breathing shallowly. Donkeys are tough and if we catch tetanus in the early stages we have a pretty good chance of success. But this one was way too far gone. The only option was humane euthanasia.”

But there was a problem. As their resident vet, Dr. Boubker, examined the donkey and prepared to end her suffering, he noticed that she was pregnant, a fact not mentioned by the donkey’s owner who had by now left the clinic. It was only caught when he happened to notice milk in the teats.

Instantly the veterinary team shifted gears and prepared the donkey for an emergency Caesarean section. Moments later, a tiny, hairy, grey colt was delivered and laid on insulating matting. He was all



legs and tummy but, amazingly, breathing. As he was wrapped in towels and rubbed to maintain warmth in a makeshift intensive care ward set up just 30 seconds earlier, his mother was quietly given the injection that released her from all pain. They had saved her baby. But now they had to keep him alive. And in those first moments of life, they called him Tommy.

“Does tetanus cross the placenta?” Hulme posed the question in our email correspondence. What about the toxins?

While two vet graduate volunteers, one from Dublin and one from Cambridge, continued with the immediate care of the foal, Hulme telephoned SPANA chairman and advisor Professor Derek Knottenbelt, head of the Equine Unit at the Liverpool Veterinary School in the UK. Professor Knottenbelt said that the foal would not have been infected by the tetanus. The bacillus stays in the original wound site. It's the toxins that kill and while they won't normally cross the placenta they will contaminate the colostrum.

“The mother's colostrum would be toxic but we could take a blood transfusion from another donkey to extract the plasma which would help his seriously challenged immune system,” said Hulme. “We could also give a tetanus anti-serum, just in case.”

Challenges tumbled in front of them with every breath. With no colostrum and no mare's milk substitute in Morocco, what to feed Tommy became the next dilemma. They turned to UHT (ultra high tempera-

ture) milk with a spoonful of honey every two hours day and night. But then there was yet another problem: Being possibly premature (though by how much no one could determine) he had no sucking reflex. That problem was solved with a naso-gastric tube which, in itself, presented problems.

“(Because of) feeding the tube across his trachea as often as that, it would be very easy to get a drop of fluid into his lungs, a potential disaster,” explained Hulme.

Fluid in the lungs would lead to pneumonia, the last thing the little guy needed. His temperature did rise and he was put on antibiotics. But within a few days, his temperature normalized and he continued to make progress.

As fragile as Tommy was, his will to live gave him the edge to grab and hold onto life. Days passed. The little foal gained strength, got his legs under him, and set out to explore his world, starting with his tiny hospital quarters and the little garden. By the time he was ten days old, he had developed a sucking reflex. To the huge relief of the veterinary staff, he could feed from a bottle and he was even nibbling at hay and grass. With Tommy's growing strength came his irresistible curiosity to find ways to have fun. He wasted no time making a real nuisance of himself, bouncing around the vet yard, getting into mischief, checking out the vets' trays as the staff tended other animals, and making friends with another donkey called Obama. But Tommy was adorable, and used his long ears and PR appeal to the max.



**ABOVE:** A naso-gastric tube had to be used to feed Tommy for ten days until his suckling reflex developed.

**LEFT:** Although the disease could not cross the placenta, Tommy needed a blood transfusion and tetanus anti-serum to boost his immune system because his mother's colostrum was contaminated by toxins from the tetanus.

“He wants to play all the time,” said Hulme. “He really enjoys it when the daily school visits bring lots of children for him to play with.”

In a world where an animal's value is measured in its working ability, it was truly fortuitous that the owner had taken the time to get the stricken jenny to SPANA's facilities. But for the keen eye of Dr. Boubker, Tommy would have perished with his mother. A story that began with tragic consequences continues to bring hope for a brighter future for a donkey foal.

If you would like to know more about SPANA, their goals, their accomplishments, and their amazing work, visit their website at [www.spana.org](http://www.spana.org). 🍁



**ABOVE:** Tommy soon found ways to have fun and made friends with another donkey named Obama.

**BELOW:** Tommy's playful, curious nature quickly endeared him to the clinic staff and veterinarians, despite his frequent bouts of mischief.

