

**“Your horse is going to die!”
The words no horse owner wants to hear**

The reality of living with an Orange Horse in Palliative Care with T Cell Epithotropic Lymphoma



Crispy was diagnosed with T Cell Epithotropic Lymphoma (an extremely rare equine cancer) on 9th June 2023. This cancer is so rare the oncologist and vets are not sure how to treat it and what course our life will now take. Scans on 23rd June showed that it had not progressed to other areas of his body. It was on his penis. He had a cough, but the vets didn't think anything of it. I was worried, as he'd had it for about 2 months and never had it before. I was told take him and enjoy him.

I melted down, this is not just a horse, this is my HEART horse. My child, my world, my reason for everything. I struggled with this diagnosis, but eventually decided to make every minute count, every ride as if it was our last.

We started regular trail rides, not just a gentle ride, but we tackled hills with gusto, coming down was often a challenge for us both, but he never let me down. All this done barefoot. His dressage work was finally coming along and I was having absolutely amazing rides thanks to the guidance of our coach. We entered our first competition in years at SIEC in August. He was a star in my eyes, didn't bat an eye at all the other horses. I decided that despite not having competed for years, we were going to try and qualify for the Amateur Owner Rider Nationals in December. Entries close on the 18th October, so I had a month to try and qualify!!! Nothing like a challenge. So I entered all the comps I could in the time, made the plans. Unfortunately, it was not meant to be.

23rd September, was Central Coast Dressage, he hadn't been well that week, but on the day he was looking great. Took him and he felt amazing. The Saturday test we almost achieved the qualifier we were after. We got 63.365%, we were after a 65%. The Sunday he worked better but the results weren't quite as good. That's dressage.

The Tuesday following this, we had a lesson. He was a little stiff to begin with which was unusual, but then he warmed out of it and had another amazing lesson. Strangely once we had finished he became a little stiff and had trouble walking. From here my life fell apart.

2 weeks followed with roller coaster temperatures – 37 – 39.6. He threw everything at me, stiff not being able to move, high temperatures, dehydration, not eating, stretching to wee and not being

able to, going to lay down, getting to his knees and deciding against it. Then came the scary breathing, initially, I said it sounded like pneumonia not really knowing. No one knew what to do. It was like a gurgle with a whistle. Not always there, but I never want to hear it again.

Many talks with his cancer vet Mary Jane from Agnes Banks Equine Clinic, my good friend Ilona (my go to in times of drama) and the local vet Peter. So 3 vets on his side, Sue my friend the herbalist and me the ever vigilant owner who knows her horse better than anyone could imagine.

We gave him antibiotics, bute, electrolytes, herbs. Blood tests showed he was low in magnesium and protein. Not at levels which worried the vets. Yet, the roller coast ride continued.

Finally on Friday 6th October, he started lifting his hind leg at me for the first time. His sheath was very swollen and the oedema under his tummy was large. He clearly wasn't comfortable. So after talking with Mary Jane, we decided to take him to Agnes Banks for a Scan. I took him down expecting something simple. I had a bright alert horse, who was a little uncomfortable. I never knew my world was about to disintegrate.

The scans showed that my beautiful boy did in fact have pneumonia. Both his chest and abdominal cavities were full of fluid. So much so, that one section was 15cm deep in fluid. It should only at most have 5cm. In addition, to the fluid, the cancer was evident everywhere. The vet was surprised that so much could change in 3 months. She offered to give him his angel wings then and there, but I could not even consider that. Yes, that is the clinic where he was conceived, but I couldn't let him pass in a clinical environment. So, I was sent home with bute and Dexapin and told he probably wouldn't last the week. When Crispy came out of the sedation he was as bright as before, I was shattered.

It was a long 2hr drive home, knowing I was bringing my beautiful boy home for the last time. His last ride in the float. The last time I'll clean the float up after him. I decided on that drive, that once he went I would get out of horses. Sell everything, sell the property. During the night I did realise, that I am a horsewoman and that horses are who I am, even if I would never love a horse like this ever again.

So, what does it look like having a horse who has been given a death sentence in your paddock? A horse that to look at has a bright shiny coat, is alert, bright, interested in what is happening around him. A horse who is clearly uncomfortable but has no intention of listening to the vets.

As the primary carer of the love of my life. I can tell you it is sheer hell. I'm not ready for my boy to leave. I'm scared I won't get the timing right. I don't know how I will cope without him in my life. He is not just a horse. He is my soul. He calls out to me when I get home, he stands at the fence and looks in the kitchen door waiting to see me. He can be grazing, see's me, lifts his head and says hello and goes back to grazing. He watches my every move on the property. He supervises when I blow the mower clean outside his paddock. He screams, for me when someone gets out of their paddock. How can life continue when I no longer have this.

I'm scared to wake of a morning, today may be the day. Reality, hits I've had my last wonderful moments on his back. Today, may be the day that he is not longer in the paddock. With trepidation, I look out the window, is he in his paddock, if so what's he doing? Is he in his stable which he loves?

So, I crush up his herbal tablets and put them in boiling water. I get carrots and licorice and head down to his stable. If it's a good day, he calls out to me. Sadly, it's not the big loud scream I am used to. It is much softer now, sometimes just a little nicker where I see his nostrils move, sometimes

nothing. I would dearly love to have another big loud scream which I can record and keep with me forever on my phone to notify me when messages arrive.

He has decided he no longer likes or needs his old food. No longer is he eating the pellets that cost me \$50 a bag. He would rather the cheaper \$20 per bag pellets which his aunt Bloss gets. He doesn't want any of the usual additives. Just plain oaten chaff, naked oats and Lympia pellets. If we are having a good day, he will have 2 meals twice a day. I make him a small feed and make sure he eats it. If that's just about gone, I'll make him another.

The twice daily temperature checks! I can tell now by touching him when his temperature is going to be over 39. He feels so hot between the back legs, I'm sure you could use him as a BBQ. It's always an anxious time, how high will his temperature be this time. The morning last week when I went to take his temperature and he had a part of his bottom sticking out. That involved another frantic call to Ilona and Peter. Ilona assured me it would be ok and she was right, it has disappeared back inside. Crispy is such a star, he keeps eating or standing whilst I take his temperature. Basically, anything I want to do with this boy he trusts me to do it. The bond between us is a once in a lifetime.

For weeks now, Crispy has been having stuff syringed down his throat. Has he ever complained? No, he opens his mouth and takes whatever it is I'm syringing into his mouth. It can't taste nice at all, but because I ask, he opens his mouth and takes it. I don't need a halter on him. Lol we do have some rules though..... I'm not allowed to try syringing anything into the right side of his mouth. Only the left. Regularly now for weeks, he's been having electrolytes, antibiotics, bute, magnesium and gut herbs. I mix the antibiotics, magnesium and gut herbs together and give it to him in one concoction. Then we follow with bute and electrolytes if necessary.

Every evening my wonderful neighbour comes over to give him the Dex intravenously. I don't like giving needles so Nic comes and does that for me. She's also taught me how to take his heart rate, so we can monitor his actual level of pain. We are just about finished our first bottle of Dex and I'll pick up another bottle tomorrow. My beautiful boy, just stands there and let's us inject him, no complaints. He really is the perfect patient.

As part of spending my last times with my beautiful boy. We take walks or rather he takes me for walks twice a day. I follow along on the end of the leadrope. He strides out, takes an interest in what is happening, hunting out whatever he wants to eat. No where is out of bounds now. Who cares about his legs, who cares if there could be snakes in that grass/trees. As long as he is happy. We stride out, then he'll suddenly stop and I have to feed him carrots or licorice. Today, he wanted me to do bodywork between his legs and abdomen. Once that's feeling a little better off we go.



I try not to cry when I am with him, but that's virtually impossible. I bury my nose in his coat and smell him. I've always done this, but now I never know when it's going to be my last time. I'm constantly telling him how much I love him and how grateful I am for the things we have done together. I've started telling him it's ok. If he needs to leave, he needs to let me know so I can organise it for him. I've told him I'll be ok. That is the biggest lie, as I won't be. I'm not ok now. I'm broken, I'm heart broken, I'm devastated.

I have an amazing husband who has a love hate relationship with Crispy. Lol Crispy attacks him. Dave, came home last night with an armful of bags of licorice and carrots. I have amazing family and friends who now the word is out, are contacting me to see how Crispy is going. People who know me, know Crispy is larger than life. There is always a story about him. He is a horse only his mother could love but we have so much support it is wonderful and I really appreciate it and it's nice to know that a spectacular orange horse has affected so many.

I've made plans for when the time comes, as much as I deny it, it's going to happen soon. I would have loved to have him cremated, but at \$6K that is not even a consideration. So..... he is going to be buried in line with A about 3 metres outside the arena. I'll put a tree there which hopefully will give some shade. I'll also put the brass plate off his competition halter with his name on the fence. I will be able to see his tree from the house. When I get another horse (which I realise now I have to do) I'll think of Crispy every time I ride the arena.

I don't know much these days, the hurt is over taking me. I'm not functioning properly. What I do know is that, my days with my boy are limited and that I'll do my utmost best to make his last days as comfortable as possible. I owe it to him.

Epilogue – Yesterday afternoon at just after 5pm Saturday 14th October, 2023 (a month before his 18th birthday) my beautiful, proud, majestic, difficult boy gained his angel wings and crossed the rainbow bridge.

Friday morning he was great, by the afternoon, he was backing up, not wanting to go on his walk and his temp had reached a high of 39.9. I made the call and made the arrangements. Peter the vet was to come between 4-6 Saturday afternoon and the excavator would be here at 8am Sunday morning.

I spent Crispy's last day with him. His morning temperature was 37.0, he was bright, nickered to me, happy and eager for his walk. Had I made the wrong decision. Should I cancel the plans. My brain was going to and fro. "Yes, no, yes, no, it's better a little too early than a too late, I can't lose him, I love him, cancel the plans, no it's time"..... Backwards and forwards my brain went. We went for another walk, had a brush, cuddles, carrots and licorice and hung out in the stable.

As the day progressed by the afternoon, I knew I had made the correct call. Progressively over the afternoon, I noticed that his breathing was quite rapid, he stopped wanting to mug me for carrots and licorice (he'd already had 2 bags of carrots and 1.5 bags of licorice so he could have been carroted and licoriced out). He sneezed and from then his nose dripped clear fluid. If he moved suddenly his breathing was scary.

At 3.20 I realised it was time. He was ready to go. I could see it in his eye. He just had to hang on until Peter got there to give him his wings. I cried and I cried. Other times, I just sat there watching him, taking him all in. I never got sick of just looking at him. I also found a strange kind of peace in my soul. No longer would my boy be suffering.

At 4.15, we started our last walk together. I took him to say goodbye to Bloss, she knew what was happening. It was a long slow walk. We stopped when he wanted to pick at grass. When we got to the bottom paddock, he suddenly became bright and wanted to investigate the paddock. He even went to where his mum Coz is buried and it was as if he knew.

He wasn't alone as he crossed the bridge. I was there, as was Dave, Mum, my neighbour Nic and friend Tara. Tara had the great idea and had laminated a picture of Crispy and I on my wedding day. We buried him with red roses from my garden, the picture, carrots and licorice.

Like his mum. Coz (Coz had a shooting star as she passed), Crispy had to have the last say, I'm sure he sent the green ant which bit me on the bum crack and my back when I was laying on the ground hugging him. He was surrounded by love to the very last. He even had a single tear at the very end. When we finally had to leave him. Bella (our dog) who had been laying next to him stayed down there for 10mins. She walked around him and checked he was ok before she left his side.

Last night we held a wake for Crispy, to celebrate his larger than life personality. A small group of friends who have all had a part of Crispy's life. I cried, I laughed, I was able for a brief time forget the devastation of my heart.

Something must have been happening in the universe yesterday, as out of the blue so many people were sending me messages asking how Crispy was. I thank everyone for their love and support, it really meant a lot to me and Crispy.

The flame has gone out on my beautiful boy but he will never be forgotten. A large part of my heart is buried with him. The love of my life. The horse of a lifetime!!!!

