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When the Thrill is Gone Horse theft can happen in plain sight

by Angela Kirby

At the top of their game, this outgoing teenager and her striking mare had been an inseparable pair since the girl was nine. Her beautiful horse was everything to her. But it wasn't the ribbons, trophies, or the fact that they were competing for a state championship. The heart of the matter was the bond that had formed between a child and her beloved horse.

Thrilled to be facing the final competition that weekend, on the afternoon of August 27, 2005, the young lady raced back to the stables after the lunch banquet. She was eager to prepare her stunning sorrel mare for the next day's event. That week, the show experience had been filled with fun and surprises as she celebrated her 16th birthday and received snazzy show clothes, a new tail extension for her mare, and a beautiful halter adorned with silver.

But what she found, or didn't find, in the stall first confused and then devastated her. Thinking someone had played a joke on her, the young girl's life quickly spun out of control.

Tahoe, the mare Jennifer had ridden, taught tricks and loved for six years, the horse she had taken to the height of competition, had vanished! The new tail extension Tahoe proudly wore was gone with her, and the shiny, leather halter that had hung by the stall had been used to lead the horse away. Jennifer's presents, her horse and her best friend had all been stolen.

How Well are You Prepared?

With the change in weather, comes the inevitable... show season. Riders and instructors have logged countless hours in the arena conditioning the horse and perfecting the performance. The horse has been tediously groomed; his mane

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When Tahoe was taken from her stall during an event, the battle to recover her took its toll not only on her family, but on the horse as well.



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and tail braided, hoofs painted glossy bright, coat brushed into a gleam. You've done everything possible to catch the judges' eyes.

You have prepared for the best, but how prepared are you for the worst? Whether you compete in the hunter/jumper circuit, halter classes or 4-H events, your horse is at risk. What have you done to protect him from theft?

Horses aren't just stolen out of pastures in the middle of the night. Horses don't just get loose on trails. It can happen anywhere at anytime no matter how many people are milling about.

Have you ever noticed that when you arrive on the show grounds, personnel is waiting to check your Coggins papers and match them to the horses in the trailer, but no one pays a bit of attention when a trailer leaves the event?

Have you ever strolled through the stables and event areas and noticed how unassuming attendees are? There are trailers sitting in the open without locks that can quickly be hooked up to a truck and driven away. There are saddles stacked on the ground with the owner no where in sight.

More worrisome are the horses left tied to trailers in the midst of heavily trafficked areas and out in the open. Who would question someone walking up and leading that horse away? Perhaps more unexpected are the horses that are led directly from stalls and loaded onto a trailer before being hauled away like Tahoe.

Disappearing Without a Clue



Horses left tied to a trailer for even 30 minutes could become the targets for theft. This happened to Seven in Montgomery County, Texas.



Brazen thieves not only stole these two polo ponies in Wellington, Florida, from event grounds, they hauled them away in the owner's truck and trailer.

One of the most brazen cases ever reported to NetPosse is that of thoroughbred mares Brandy and Honky Tonk. Robert and Lauren's "girls" are highly trained, and deeply loved polo ponies. On December 15, 2004, not only did someone disappear with these horses, they loaded them into Robert's Elite trailer and hauled them away with his Ford 350. Horses nor vehicles have been seen since. And this was from a populated polo club. The owners have gone to uncommon lengths to find their beloved girls, but so far no solid leads.

How can a stolen truck, 28-foot trailer and two mares with roached manes simply vanish without a trace? Apparently, pretty easily... so how much safer is your

horse?

Judy was stolen from a wagon train in Alabama. When her owner, Shane Dumas, discovered she was missing along with another mare, a search party began combing the area that night. By a stroke of luck, he saw her white coat flash in the moonlight off an old logging road. The mares had been tied to a tree, while the thieves left to go retrieve a truck and trailer.

In Paso Robles, California, Chad Krainock took his horse Scorpion to a professional steer wrestling competition. Late that Saturday night, his bay gelding vanished from the rodeo. That was May 2003. Scorpion has not been recovered.

Seven's young owner rode her around the rodeo grounds all day before competing that evening. After leaving her tied to the trailer for 30 minutes, he returned to find her gone. Also missing was the truck and trailer that had been parked next to them. Did Seven leave with them? This sorrel mare hasn't been seen since disappearing in Montgomery County, Texas, May 2005.

In July 2007, Merry was at her first hunter/jumper show in Georgia with her new owner. The family was perplexed when she was missing after they left her secured to the trailer. A thorough search of the show grounds was fruitless, and a theft report was filed with local law enforcement. Then days later, Merry mysteriously appeared back at the event location. To this day it is unknown whether or not Merry's disappearance was a failed theft or not, but she is safe at home.

Most recently, Pinta, a pregnant paint mare, was stolen out of her stall during a roping event in Miami-Dade County, Florida, on March 21, 2008. There is a suspect, but the mare has not yet been found.

Cory's case exhibits the typical reaction of event officials when a horse disappears. Again, this quarter horse was stolen while tied to a trailer. His owner Susie was upset because "The rodeo officials insisted that the horse was out there, but we just couldn't see him in the dark. I hoped they were right but knew they were wrong." Her instincts were dead-on.

Fortunately, she followed her gut and filed a report with police and posted flyers. It was 12 days before Susie received the much-anticipated call that her horse had been found... in Georgia. They had been competing in South Carolina. According to the investigation: "Two men had driven into this Westminster rodeo with an empty trailer, loaded Cory and driven away. He was later found after being identified from a flyer."

As Susie well knows, there is nothing worse than going home from an event with an empty trailer. So how do you protect your horses during this hectic show season?

Tips to Protect Horses & Property at Events:

- do not leave horse unattended or at least for long periods of time - vary



Judy was one of two mares stolen during a wagon train. They were recovered off an old logging trail while thieves apparently left to retrieve a trailer.



Pinta was loaded up and taken from her stall during a roping competition. While event personnel verify horses in the trailers arriving at an event, no one bothers to check a trailer that is leaving.

routine - have someone you know keep an eye on the horse

- lock your trailer hitch so it can't be hooked up and towed off
- permanently ID your horse so it can be more easily identified or ownership proven - some unscrupulous people are "shopping" for horses that match paperwork they possess such as a Coggins or Breed Registration
- stow and secure tack before leaving vehicle or stall
- post security signs on trailer, truck and stall so thieves are more likely to be deterred
- do not give complete information on the breeding of the horse on the stall door. This may attract thieves to pick your horse because of the breeding
- Photograph your horse dirty and clean
- do not leave halters and lead ropes by stall doors when you do not have a sign posted.
- put identification information on tack - the best ID is your drivers license number preceded by the state code (do not use the drivers license number if it s a social security number)
- microchip your saddle for positive identification

Be Prepared if it does happen:

- know what event officials and local law enforcement agencies to contact
- have an accurate description of the horse and current pictures to help in the search
- recruit locals or others familiar with the area to help search
- contact NetPosse and file a report so our volunteers can get the information out



If a horse is stalled at an event, two ways to deter theft are to remove his halter and post a sign on the stall stating he has permanent identification.

- sometimes event officials are reluctant to issue a public announcement because they do not want to panic other attendees or cast a bad light on the event - this is your horse that is missing or has been stolen from this event - be insistent but polite
- fax and post your flyers (NetPosse will create a flyer if you file a report)
- call the media - local radio stations, television stations, newspapers , magazines, your horse club newsletter, etc.
- contact local tack/feed stores and auction houses
- organize a group of family and friends to spread flyers, visit auctions, etc., or post to online communities
- contact your breed registry to let them know your horse is missing
- ask others on the grounds if they saw anyone suspicious
- if you locate your horse, keep it in sight. Call local law enforcement agency. Keep pictures, proof of purchase, Coggins papers, etc. with you at all times.

Tahoe is Found but an Innocence is Lost...

As the shocking news flew through the horse community and over the Internet, word got back to Sharon that the mare had been repossessed by the previous owner, but this was perplexing because, after owning the mare for six years, Sharon was confident that the agreement with the seller had been settled in full. So why would this person take Tahoe?

Over the course of the next year, Tahoe's theft had a ripple affect on her family that was larger and more emotionally devastating that any catastrophe this family had ever imagined. Jennifer wound up moving away from Michigan and her mother to live with her dad in Florida.

During this time, it didn't take long to verify that Tahoe's former owner had taken her. A year after this ordeal began, Sharon finally had her day in court, and she was reduced to tears as a judge not only ordered, but demanded that Tahoe be released immediately back to Sharon.

However, when Sharon laid eyes on Tahoe, what she found was almost as heartbreaking as the broken relationship with her daughter.

Like Jennifer, Tahoe has been through a year of complete and total hell. Gone is the vibrant mare with the winning attitude. In her place is the shell of what she was only a year before when she was ready to take Jennifer to a state title.

In place of the once muscled, sleek, and spirited paint mare was a wormy, foundered horse with heaves. Since that time, Sharon has worked hard to rehabilitate Tahoe. But how do you heal the psychological wounds that are not so apparent?

This is not the homecoming anyone expects when they begin the journey to recover a stolen or missing horse. So where is the victory?

While the recovery of Tahoe carries mixed emotions, the good news is that Tahoe was successfully found and returned to her rightful owners.

One of the greatest tragedies in these situations is the hurt and trauma endured by the victim - many times a child or teenager. No matter what age, though, we can all be educated to help prevent the theft of a horse under these conditions. So as you and perhaps your child anticipate all the excitement of the upcoming show season, do not neglect to prepare for all of the possibilities. Showing and eventing aren't just about the ribbons and trophy saddles; these experiences offer so much more, not the least of which is the bond shared with a wonderful animal.

Even if you are out of town at an event, NetPosse can still help if your horse is stolen or missing. Call us at 704-484-2165 or visit us on the Web at www.netposse.com.



Tahoe's recovery wasn't the happy ending it should have been. She was not able to return to the show ring due to the neglect suffered during the year-long court battle.



Showing and eventing aren't just about the ribbons and trophy saddles. Can you imagine going home with an empty trailer?

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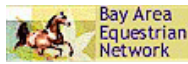
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