

## Where there is a will there is a way

### Precious Gem and a lesson in survival

My little 'Princess' as she is called on the farm, was born during some wonderfully sunny days in June 2003. A healthy normal pregnancy and birth, but four days into her little life things appeared to go wrong.

The first symptoms were that she hardly moved away from Mum and was certainly not interested in the other crias and their antics. Then she started to what I would describe as 'sun gaze'. She would stand, not crouch, and just stare in what seemed to be the direction of the sun for ages and ages. I rang my vet, Graham, and talked the symptoms through with him and he said it sounded like a cerebral problem. But as he was speaking to me from Edinburgh airport, he obviously could not make a visit that day. So one of his partners was to come out, once free from a calving that she was in the middle of.

Almost immediately from putting the phone down to Graham, Princess had her first convulsion. She was just four days old. I carried her home, with a panicky mum in tow, and whilst enroute to our farmhouse, she had another two fits. Over the course of the next 15 minutes, as she lay in my lap back at the house, she had a further 17 fits. Whilst this was going on I was back on the phone to Graham because I was afraid she would not make it if we had to wait for Ann, his partner. He suggested I take her straight to the Cambridge University Vet School and animal hospital.

This was to be my first introduction to the school, but was not to be the last. I travelled the 45 miles to the vet school with mum and cria in the back of my trailer, with no idea how many further fits she had during the course of the journey. I was on my own at the farm so had no one to take with me either as driver or as nurse maid in the trailer. It was one of the worst journeys I have ever made.

When we arrived she was barely alive. Because of the symptoms I had described to Graham, and which had been relayed on to the hospital she was put on steroids and other medication to try and suppress the convulsions. They also started taking blood and setting up other tests on her with monitors linked into her from every which way where, and drip for fluid. Not much was going in for my part, as I admit I was distressed just from seeing her undergoing all of those fits. We settled Mum down with her and by the time I left at midnight the convulsions appeared to have abated.

The following day however was a new story. She had continued to fit overnight, and the results of the blood tests showed that she had meningitis (which in itself is not a common ailment for an alpaca) and not a cerebral problem, so the steroids

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had actually exacerbated the fitting. She was then put on medication, which started to control her actions. By the seventh day, because she had stabilised, and was now taking a small quantity of milk from a bottle instead of suckling from Mum, they released her for me to continue administering a further week's course of antibiotics three times per day.

Everything was going fine, then on the penultimate morning of the final day's medication I noticed she was beginning to look at the sun again. The following morning the same. This day also coincided with a course I was holding on the farm and just happened to have one of the vets from the vet school attending. She was familiar with Princess and what had happened whilst she was in hospital. I took her to have a look at her and she confirmed that the symptoms were recurring. Fortunately, my husband had just come up to the barn with the vehicle and more delegates. I did no more than hand over to the speaker, apologised to my delegates, gave a hurried explanation, grabbed Robert and told him to drive like the wind to the Cambridge Vet School again. I sat with Princess on my lap, who had by now started the convulsions all over again.

This time she was in hospital for 5 weeks and was a very very sick cria indeed. The vet school confirmed that the meningitis had indeed reappeared. It was thought that an abscess had formed over the frontal lobe, which had burst, causing the disease to spread back again into her system. This time when she came out of hospital, I was quick to notice that she appeared not to be able to see out of one eye. More tests were done and this was confirmed.

In hospital she had been fed by tube until a few days prior to her release. But when I started to give her a bottle, her stomach distended, and she had to be tubed. After deliberation it was suggested that the lambs milk powder was too rich for her. I found someone with nanny goats, producing fresh goats milk. I became their biggest customer, buying all they could produce. Once on this she started to take the bottles of milk offered, with relish, and slowly started to gain weight.

Her progress was very slow, and although mum tried to take her back, Princess had lost her ability to relate to her. However each night I tucked mum and babe up behind their own bales of straw and mum stayed with her throughout the night. It was a very emotional time for all of us.

Princess could have died so many times during all of this, but she did not. I have never met an alpaca with such a will to live. She is truly amazing, and all the while she comes back from almost nothing, I have supported her fight and given my

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all too. Together we have grown in leaps and bounds. She is now known by many of my friends and clients, some gingerly ask how she is, only to be amazed when I tell them about her, others follow her progress with great interest.

Winter of 2004 I nearly lost her through a massive weight loss, which was not spotted. I was undergoing chemotherapy and very weak myself. Unable to make the trip around the farm to do my routine body scoring on the alpacas. One day in late December, at very low ebb myself, I insisted on getting to see my animals but could not find Princess. Eventually I found her huddled by the fence and she mewed to me when I called but was disinclined to get up. I got over to her and found her almost totally emaciated. She was brought back to the house where I could look after her myself. She had gone down to 19 kilos. I was horrified. But again with a great deal of TLC and special feeding regime we gradually brought her weight up again. However, my vet and I think that this drastic weight loss was the final straw for her eyesight. She is now totally blind but nonetheless an active alpaca in every other way.



Two tired bodies crashed out

Princess could have died so many times during the past two and a quarter years, but her will to live has been amazing. All the while she is willing to fight, then I am going to give her all the support I can. I have asked the question of the vets at the Vet School, and of my own vet. 'Is it she who wants to live, or me who wants her to live?' Every time their answer has been the same, that they believe Princess is telling us all she wants to survive.

She is now 45 kilos and yes under weight for her age, but each week she is weighed and is increasing all the time. I tried to teach her to put her head in the drinks bowl, but she panics at the touch of the water on her nose, so she is still given a bottle 3/5 times per day, depending on the temperature, and can now drink out of a special container I have adapted. This has a teat on it, which she nudges up to and drinks from.

I have taught her to understand some simple commands, one is that when I shout 'fence, fence' she must veer off from the direction she is heading, other wise she will hit something and when I am silent she must keep coming forward. This way she is not committed to one paddock only and I can move her around the farm as I rotate the rest of the herd.

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Bottle feeding time

She cannot live with the adult females as they tend to bully her, but my weanlings love her, and wait for her in the mornings. They play and skip with her in the field, and two even wait patiently now for her to come down to the barn at night for their feed. They also know which of the feeders is hers, and do not try and poach her food.

At night she nestles down by the adjacent penning and on the other side of her, her mum quietly nestles next to her. I like to think Princess does know she is there and that during the night, they are both aware of their mother/daughter bond.

If I ever doubted that alpacas have long memories, then this proves that they do. I never forget that mum has been through a great deal too, because she has had to suffer the pain of her daughter's innocent rejection of her, and has had to watch me take over her role in Princess's life. But between the three of us, a strong bond has formed, and mum I know, sees that her daughter trusts me implicitly and therefore so does she. Throughout the early days of recuperation, mum would watch me endlessly and protectively, but trustingly.

I have always believed that most animals are very therapeutic. Never more so than since I have had alpacas and been ill myself. During my worst moments with cancer I was able to draw a lot of strength not only from Princess, but the rest of the herd as well. They knew of my weakness, and if I sat on my chair amongst them, they would gather round, and settle down at my feet, rhythmically chewing their cud until I made the first move away. When I had the strength to put their feed out, they would wait patiently until I was done, instead of the normal eager stampede to get to the feed bowl first.

Alpacas truly are an amazing animal, and strong in so many ways. They can teach us mere humans many a lesson in tolerance and patience and endurance.

All of this and oh so cuddly too!