

# Hustler's Recovery

with Olivia Palfreyman

**H**ustler is the horse that has never called time on anything. If he hears someone say he cannot do something, it will become his life's mission to do so, and even without, if he considers something important enough, he will fight as hard as possible to beat it. It was the story of Hustler responding to people saying, "Quarter Horses can't do dressage", and it is the story of Hustler's recovery.

For those that recall, Hustler was the 'Horse's Tale' in the January 2021 edition of Horse Deals. With the 2020 season of training behind us, we were on an adventure of a lifetime as we were confidently stepping through Elementary and headed towards Medium and Advanced. It was all in reach, but as they say, the universe had other ideas. On January 5th, Hustler had a freak paddock accident that left him with only a tiny chance of paddock recovery.

## A Serial Hooner

Hustler has touched a fence three times in his life: the first when he was a weanling and degloved his leg on a cattle rail (nobody knows how), the second when I first put him next to a horse after being gelded in 2017, where he reared up and landed over the electric standoff (escaped embarrassed but unscathed) and the third on this day. Hustler is a serial hooner and, whilst partaking in his standard zoom protocol that morning, got his foot caught under a tree root as he slid to a stop at the fence. With 700kg of power and strength behind him, Hustler completely flattened the post and wire



Before his injury Hustler was showing promise at six-years-old with success in the dressage and showing arenas. Photo: DJ Photography.

fence as he rotated over it. He severed everything on the way to the bone on his near foreleg. This included three extensor tendons, muscles, tendon sheath and blood vessels, all above the knee. The result of this was Hustler completely lost all extensor function of the leg. He could not extend his toe or place his hoof flat on the ground himself, and if he shifted his weight forward, he would knuckle from

the knee and fall straight down onto his cannon bone. He was also losing blood rapidly and, not surprisingly, panicking as he tried to continue cantering.

Our heartbreaking morning was actually a very lucky one. I was not supposed to be home at the time, but instead watched it happen. This meant I could stop him from panicking straight away, call the vet and further help, and begin to slow the

bleeding. All I had was the shirt on my back, so that had to suffice – base layers make very good pressure bandages! By some miracle, our vet (Dr Rebecca Forsythe from Hunter Equine Vets) was on our road and able to arrive within five minutes of my phone call. We all knew this situation was very touch and go, and if he had a chance at all, it would be from a quick response. With confirmation from Scone Equine Hospital that there was likely something they could do to save Hustler, Rebecca set to stabilise Hustler enough to travel. She was able to stitch the blood vessel and apply a Robert Jones Bandage, which acted as a splint to stop the knee bending. To load Hustler on the float, we had to lift the injured leg with a lead rope every step and hold it forward to stop him from falling. We still have no idea how he stayed up the entire two-hour drive to Scone.



The initial injury was the severing of three extensor tendons, muscles, tendon sheath and blood vessels just above the knee on Hustler's near fore.

## Where to from here?

Hustler's prognosis was certainly not in his favour. It was practically impossible that he would ever be sound enough to ride, and the odds of being paddock sound were also extremely low. We were all too terrified to ask for numbers on those chances! If he was able to make it through surgery successfully, cope in a full leg cast for six to eight weeks and 24/7 box rest for months, avoid infections, wound and cast complications and regain extensor function, we could then assess what the gait irregularities were. We expected this to include visible lameness, flicking of the toe and swinging his leg out (due to the cast causing the leg to heal in this way). If he continued tripping or knuckling over, we may also still need to make that tough decision. Hustler has completely changed my life and given me the world, so giving

"The normal I was dreaming of was just for him to come home and live safely in a paddock."

him the chance to return to a good and safe paddock life, even though such a slight chance, seemed the only decision we could fathom making.

With this in mind, we set off on our 'first priority' as Hustler's surgeon, Dr Amy Williamson termed it, 'to try to save his life'. While we initially thought all tendons would be too far retracted to suture, Amy managed to do so with two of the three tendons. The tendon sheath was also sutured, and the x-rays looked clean – this was a massive relief, seeing as we were not sure if he hit the fence post as well. We also had a horse that swung his way out of surgery in a full leg cast like he had been doing so for months. Challenge number one ticked off.

## A Family Away from Home

After time at Clovelly, Scone's intensive care hospital, Amy recommended we move Hustler somewhere in Scone to continue his recovery instead of trying to bring him home. This was as the risk of casting complications were quite high and required very prompt action, which couldn't be guaranteed back home. She suggested Cannon Hayes Stud, and when she explained it was only five minutes from the vet hospital and owned by one of Scone's specialist vets and her husband, I couldn't say no! Hustler is quite the family man and happily adopted the entire team, being Dave Morrissey, Lucy Cudmore, their family, and team member Jackie, as his second family. If you ask me, this is what set Hustler's recovery apart from the prognosis. Despite one big 17.1hh

dressage horse not matching all Dave's Thoroughbreds, Hustler fitted in perfectly and was treated as one of their own. They also managed to keep me calm from two hours away with constant video and phone updates, which was quite an achievement!

With constant supervision and consideration of his needs, Hustler was always settled and comfortable in the box, and this made casting a relatively smooth experience. For the first three weeks, Hustler sailed through recovery with flying colours; however it plateaued towards the end of January as we began experiencing some colicking episodes. We were very aware that these resulted from being locked in the stable permanently. Simply put, there was nothing we could do about that this early on, other than try to keep Hustler settled and introduce as many 'normal paddock' components as we could. You have to bear in mind Hustler couldn't even leave his stable whilst it was being cleaned, so movement was minimal. Dave and his team went to great lengths to do this, including handpicking grass to try to stimulate natural gut processes, multiple 3am checks when Hustler would begin bashing his stable down, and following any treatment he needed at all times. My favourite stories of their level of care involve Dave and Lucy's son Teddy bringing Hustler the Easter Bunny's leftover carrots. At one point, Hustler also had two people convinced they were responsible for feeding him, and hay three times a day was doubled once or twice. We never could work out why he was not losing weight!



Hustler in ICU enjoying scratches the day after the injury.





The 19th of January after first cast change.

### The Good & the not so Good

At five weeks, *Hustler* decided he had had enough of the cast and promptly removed the padding out of the top. On removing it, we discovered extensor function some two weeks ahead of schedule! The ability to transition *Hustler* to bandages was exciting. However, we were all a little saddened to see *Hustler's* knee was severely restricted. It looked as though the tendon scar tissue had developed quite thickly at the base of the knee and continued to stretch over the joint. The most he could bend his knee was enough to bring the hoof one to two centimetres off the ground. We did our best to look at the positives, including that *Hustler* started small hand walks (with lots of reminders to slow down) and could have the bandages removed by the end of February. They had caused some grief, as being the full height of the leg, they tended to slip and had worsened some existing cast rubs.



*Hustler's* first walk without a cast on the 11th of February.

Balancing *Hustler's* competing needs made his return to the paddock quite challenging. After a significant colic episode at the start of March, we did attempt time in a yard, but on day two had to abandon the idea due to

injury complications. *Hustler's* knee was worsening, with increased swelling and fluid beginning to drain from the healed wound site, with bleeding in tow. At anything more than a slow walk, he would knuckle over constantly, making *Hustler* extremely stressed. This, I think, was the grimmest looking part of the recovery, as we just had no idea why the sudden complications were happening. Dave quickly became our brains trust and led *Hustler* through more x-rays, antibiotics and bandages as we ruled out infections, sequestration and strengthened the leg some more. The antibiotics and bandages seemed to do their job well, and it was not too long before Jackie had *Hustler* on adventures to meet "his girls" at the broodmare paddocks four or five times a day.

Big changes began to happen after Bob Sim, our farrier from home, reshod *Hustler* in Scone. With the knee restriction, they could only work out how to shoe *Hustler* by sedating him and holding the injured leg out in front to apply the shoe that way. I'm pretty glad Bob has never said no to a challenge, and thank goodness he brought helpers! The correct shoeing support allowed *Hustler* to get more ground clearance, and with the draining fluid finally improving, *Hustler* was suddenly off and powering as the tripping began to reduce. A week later I got the best video ever from Dave, *Hustler* out in a yard, off the lead and calm! Over time, *Hustler* spent more and more time outside, and the strengthening really started. It was not the most lineal process, as Dave would say, "it depends on *Hustler's* mood" – if he woke up on the wrong side of the stable, there was nothing you could do to make him sensible and think about his feet. It was incredible to see him on my way back from AQHA Nationals over Easter out in the yard, completely calm

**"Initially Hustler was walking like a drunken sailor and was unable to take a step with the injured leg without repositioning the good leg straight away."**



At home, *Hustler's* first time in the paddock on the 8th of May.

and safe. The only problem was as soon as he saw someone close by, he would start pacing and demand to be returned to the stable just like he used to do at home. Eventually, we were all game enough to leave him out at night, and by the end of April, he was in a big paddock 24/7, trotting around as Dave would say, "like a normal horse". I told everyone I would not believe it until I saw it.

### Finally Home

After a long 17 weeks, we were finally comfortable with *Hustler's* situation and made the very exciting trip to pick him up. Jackie had called me the day before and said he looks ready to put a saddle on – he would chase her to breakfast, spend his days playing with his girlfriend next door and leaping around completely normal. I was a little terrified to hear he was back charging fences! I did not quite know what to expect when I arrived, but I can confirm *Hustler* was that good and was also feeling that good - my once perfectly mannered Golden Boy thought he could now act like a yearling! We were all so excited to have him home that we forgave him for this, sat our chairs down next to his paddock and, with a celebratory drink in hand, watched him frolic around the paddock all afternoon. This started sedately but escalated to bowling up the fence line, leaping and bucking as he chased his best buddy (*Prima Donna SP*, *Hustler's* full sister) in the next paddock! He was banished from having a neighbour for quite some time after that, and it did take a couple of days for the frolicking to stop.

*Hustler's* rehabilitation process so far has been fascinating and very rewarding. It is not very often that you get to break down biomechanics to the degree he requires, reteach coordination and independence and reshape movement, and having

*Hustler's* training backing behind him, he is the perfect candidate. On initial assessment, I concluded *Hustler* was walking like a drunken sailor and was unable to take a step with the injured leg without repositioning the good leg straight away. This was definitely worlds away from the horse I had six months prior that could walk for a ten! So, for the first two weeks, we simply walked at different speeds. Our goal was co-ordination and improving awareness of all parts of his body. I then started asking the same questions in various positions (e.g. shoulder in and turn on the haunches) and over poles. With the help from our incredible support team, including Rebecca Hill from Equine Biomechanics, week three had *Hustler* able to drive weight down very well on the injured leg and move it entirely independently. Much to my joy, he could also keep his body straight and in balance, allowing me to correct the rare instances where he tries to swing the leg from the shoulder. We laugh at him a little bit because he is very self-conscious about the swinging leg, but any time a new piece of gear goes on him he will, without a doubt, swing the leg for a few strides before realising he is capable of walking normally! It is interesting to see his muscles react in this way because of how they have adapted to his recovery needs.



The site of injury on the 17th of June.

### A Better Result than Imagined

It must be said that good horsemanship involves knowing your weaknesses and mitigating these to ensure progress. I was always conscious of the early days of the injury, and I was constantly hesitant to step outside our comfort zone. A recommendation to engage the Equimotion team came at the perfect time. Having seen Equimotion's incredible results with tendon injuries, I was confident they'd compliment *Hustler's* recovery perfectly and got in touch with Emma straight away. *Hustler* has so far responded very well to their rehabilitation plan that targets improved proprioception and flexibility through the leg, and I am



*Hustler's* first ride back. Although there's a way to go, *Hustler's* team couldn't be happier.

looking forward to tracking his continued progress with them. With gradually increasing ground and pole work, *Hustler's* movement has been improving by the day, and the tripping and knuckling have essentially stopped. As I write this, we are up to 20 days without catching his toe. Although a prolonged process, the thickening of scar tissue over the knee and wound has also started to reduce. Perhaps most exciting, *Hustler* and I have had our first ride back. It was five minutes of the best walk and trot of my life as far as I was concerned, and I did not want to get off! *Hustler* and I both smiled from ear to ear for a few days after that.

### It Takes a Village

There is no "I" in the story of *Hustler's* recovery, and it would be wrong to tell it without thanking basically our entire world. Most importantly to my mum and dad, who have provided us with unwavering support in so many ways since that first phone call, to my grandparents who insisted upon creating "The Hustler Fund", and to every other family member and friend who has been there for us. I have always felt like we are on this journey with a hundred other people, so thank you for crying with me at the bad times and cheering at the good times like *Hustler* is your own. It is also true that nobody has paid me this year but instead donated to The Hustler Fund (as perfectly termed by some students, #hustleforhustle). Thank you to each and every person who has helped *Hustler* work through this, Bob Sim (Coalfields Horseshoeing), Rebecca Hill

(Equine Biomechanics), Equimotion and Julie Cook (Nature's Farmacy). The biggest thank you again to Dr Amy Williamson (Scone Equine Hospital), Dr Rebecca Forsythe (Hunter Equine Vet), and every vet and vet nurse who worked to save our Golden Boy. Lastly, to *Hustler's* second family at Cannon Hayes, who initially took *Hustler* on for six weeks and waved goodbye to him at 17 weeks. We would not be here without your dedication and patience. Amy and Dave deserve a medal for continuing to call me, even when they had to start many conversations with something to the effect of "don't panic!" (I still panicked).

Where *Hustler* is today is a far cry from January 5th. When people asked me what his recovery would look like, I have always answered, "our goal is to get him as normal as possible". The normal I was dreaming of was just for him to come home and live safely in a paddock, but it has become very apparent to me that *Hustler* has his own definition of normal that involves a saddle on his back. As Bob Sim keeps saying to me, "horses are incredible healers, don't be surprised". While *Hustler* still has a long road ahead of him if he is to get there, it is truly phenomenal to have him sound enough to reintroduce light riding at only five and a half months. We know if anyone can dance again after this, it is our *Hustler*. Getting to dance together again would without a doubt be *Hustler* and my greatest achievement yet, and would certainly warrant a celebratory bottle of Moët. 🍷