

The Trials of Torrin...

And success at Coyote Ridge!

By Michael Sabatini

Torrin was born April 14, 2006 at “Trinity Fjords” in beautiful British Columbia, Canada. Torrin was neither the first, nor the last fjord which I purchased from “Trinity Fjords”. In all, I have six Trinity offspring, including Torrin’s full sister Alexi, as well as two of Torrin’s half-brothers, Trinity’s Strauss and Trinity’s Bach. I have heard fjord owners say that “you can’t have just one fjord” – much like potato chips or M&M’s; however, this was not the motivation for filling my barn with Trinity offspring. My long-term goal was to drive and compete with a four-in-hand and most team drivers have at least one spare horse. I felt that horses that shared similar breeding, or even better horses that were related, would be easier to work as a team, as they would have similar movement. Torrin, however, is proof that horses are living creatures with minds of their own...

Fjords, in general, take to driving quite easily. They are compact and powerful, yet they possess a calm temperament and quiet disposition – the perfect combination for a carriage driving horse. Torrin certainly had the power, the conformation, and an exceptional athletic ability. His disposition was affectionate and friendly; calm, however, it was not.

I ground drive my horses for many, many miles before I ever hitch them. Right from the beginning, I could see that Torrin was not relaxed. He seemed uncomfortable with blinkers, yet he was equally upset in an open bridle if I had a whip in hand or tried to drag a tire behind him. He also did not like the PVC pipe which I normally place in the shaft loops (while ground driving) to simulate the pressure of carriage shafts. In short, he simply did not seem to be enjoying this work which was absolutely necessary to prepare him for carriage driving.

Okay, time to get serious - time to seek some professional help!

Long story short: we worked with a horse whisperer on the west coast, we worked with an Amish farrier in Montana, we worked with our breeder in British Columbia. Yes, we did eventually hitch Torrin and drive him with his half-brother, Trinity’s Stein. Unfortunately, Torrin’s nose was up in the air, his hindquarters were hunched in fear, he did not do a flat footed walk... in short, he was still scared.

Perhaps there was a medical issue. Perhaps something was causing physical pain. Perhaps.

I asked the vet to check Torrin, almost hoping that there was some physical disability, something wrong that could be treated... I explained to the vet that Torrin’s full sister, Alexi was my very best driving horse. Strong and confident, she could fly through marathon hazards and then slow to a relaxed walk or trot without ever becoming upset or “jazzed”. The vet looked me in the eye and said “Michael, you’ve got two children here. One is headed to medical school and the other is headed to prison.” I must say, I’ve never felt that medical analysis was worth the bill which I received for the farm call.

So, I decided if Torrin didn't enjoy carriage driving, perhaps he could be my saddle horse. He stood 14.3 hands and had an unusually lean, athletic build for his breed. Brianne Stomberg, a friend in Montana, started him under saddle and when he returned home, we began taking long trail rides. Torrin seemed much calmer with the direct physical contact which exists between horse and rider. It is that very lack of direct contact which contributes to the challenge of carriage driving.

All seemed well until an incident which occurred just two weeks before the 2016 Fjord International Horse Show. Torrin and I were training for the show and had ridden about four miles, mostly trotting with some cantering. As we headed home, I asked him to pick up the canter. Immediately, I felt him tense and break into a full gallop. I quickly realized that the sun was setting at our back and we were being "chased" by our own shadow. Funny thing about shadows, they run just as fast as the horse. Not to fear, I figured he would slow soon enough. Unfortunately, that incredible athletic ability allowed Torrin to cover a lot of ground fast. We were running out of road and I realized that we were headed toward an electric pole supported by a steel guide cable. If I hit that guide cable, it would have cut me like a cheese slicer. With only a few strides to go, I decided to roll off Torrin. Landing on my back with a thud, I was grateful that I always wear a helmet. I was equally regretful that I was not wearing my eventers' vest – that body protection doesn't do any good if left hanging in the tack room! And then Torrin stopped, as if he had been trying to take us to safety.

I knew that I was injured, but the old horsemen always say how vitally important it is to "get back on the horse". And I did not want him to learn that this was a way to end a training session. So, I got back in the saddle and rode him home (about a half mile away). There was enough adrenaline flowing that the pain initially seemed manageable. When the adrenaline wore off, I realized that riding Torrin home had not been one of the better decisions of my life. A trip to the emergency room revealed that I had cracked a rib and fractured five vertebrae. Lesson learned: there are times that the rider needs to consider his own welfare.

There are several ways to proceed after an accident: sell the horse; keep the horse as a lawn ornament; or get back to work! Of course, I had to wait a couple months for my back to heal. And the more time that elapses between an accident and riding (or driving) again, the more difficult it becomes to resume training. I wish I could say that I felt no trepidation when I climbed back onto Torrin several months later. The simple fact is that riders sometimes fall and drivers occasionally wreck. With due care, accidents are infrequent, but they happen. Horses are large powerful creatures and need to be treated with respect.

I figured if Torrin could spook after trotting four miles, we needed to ride further! So, we started training for the Coyote Ridge Endurance Ride which was scheduled for the end of April. There were two distances: a twenty-five miler and a fifty, as well as a non-competitive trail ride. I had not competed in endurance for more than two decades and Torrin had never competed in endurance. We also had to contend with snow and ice until late March, so we had limited time available to train. So, all things considered, we set our sights on the twenty-five miler.

Upon arrival at ride camp, I was surprised to see so many trailers. Between the three events, Coyote Ridge had seventy riders! Needless to say, we were the only fjord entry, surrounded by a sea of Arabians. Fellow riders seemed friendly enough and I heard a lot of comments about my “cute” fjord. Obviously, these Arabian owners weren’t accustomed to seeing a fjord compete in endurance. The motto of distance riding is “to finish is to win” and the only special awards are for first place and “best conditioned horse”. With that said, Torrin placed 21st out of 40 – not bad for a novice endurance horse competing with experienced Arabians!

Torrin has taught me some valuable lessons during our time together:

- Breeding alone does not guarantee a horse will excel at any one particular discipline.
- The horse-human relationship is a partnership. The horse must enjoy the activity as much as the human.
- A horse may fail at one equine discipline yet excel in another.
- Horses and humans do not perceive the world (and its dangers) in the same way. The human needs to view the world through a horse’s eyes.
- Accidents happen: Wear your helmet and body protection! Take care of your horse, but do not forget your own welfare is important too.
- Love your horse. Persist. And you will share wonderful moments together!

