

# The Smart Horse

by Lisa Wysocky

Sarah sighed as she glanced down the long row of horses stabled at the dude ranch. This was the hardest part of her new job as manager of the barn. The morning feed. Sarah was definitely not a morning person, and she was just now able to sort the horses out into personalities.

There was the little brown colored Morgan mare, Honey, whose personality aptly fit her name. Honey was donated to the dude string by a man who had boarded her at an adjoining stable. But a sudden job promotion and transfer made horse ownership a burden instead of a joy and Honey was donated to the dude string as a tax deduction. Because of her gentle disposition and sweet personality, Honey was saved for the little kids, and the adults who were particularly frightened of horses. A few minutes with Honey and everything would be fine.

Then there was Nugget. Nugget was a big, rangy golden palomino mare who could spin, slide and stop with the best reining horses in the country. Nugget was agile as a cat and responded so quickly to the slightest touch that ranch hands half jokingly said she was a mind reader. She was a favorite with the hands, as she made even the most mediocre rider look good.

When a big ride would come in, every trail guide put dibs on their favorite mount. After all, it was hard enough to keep a fifty-horse ride organized and safe, particularly when the majority of those fifty horses were being piloted by novice riders. If a trail guide were riding an unresponsive, or worse yet, uncooperative horse, there was a real chance of someone getting injured. Trail guides needed to be mounted on horses that would do as they were asked, when they were asked, no questions asked.

Taking all that into consideration, Sarah didn't find it unusual that she was drawn to a big Appaloosa gelding named Melvin. Melvin was quick, gentle, smooth-gaited and cooperative. He

was also tall—17.1 hands—and could push stray horses back in line as easy as pie. The other trail guides, however, seemed to find it incredibly funny that Sarah chose to ride Melvin. You see, Melvin was quite homely.

To be completely fair, Melvin was not representative of the Appaloosa breed today. But there was a time going back seventy or eighty years where Appaloosas had been so out-bred, that a number of them ended up with extremely poor conformation. Melvin was one such throw-back—a spotty blue roan in color with little wisps of white hair straining skyward from his thin neck, claiming to be a mane. His rat-tail was almost totally hairless and no matter how much he ate, Melvin was always skinny. He had big, white platter feet that spent most of their time cracked and shoeless, a blob of a head with mule ears, knobby knees and sickle hocks.

If Melvin had a fault other than his looks, or lack of them, it was only that he didn't like to go out in hot weather and Sarah couldn't say she blamed him for that. For all his ugliness, Melvin did have a well-developed brain and was quite creative in his approach to staying off the trail if it was warmer than 78 degrees.

And how he knew exactly what temperature it was Sarah never figured out. But he did know. He was as regular as a precious timepiece. He knew exactly when it got to be 78 degrees and there was no way he'd work.

You see, when it got hot, Melvin got lame. Sarah and her staff would go out into the corral to sort out the horses they wanted for that day and there'd be poor Melvin, in such pain that he'd have to hold his left front leg off the ground and hop on the other three. And he had such a sad expression in his eyes that you knew he was genuinely hurting.

But the vet couldn't find a thing wrong with Melvin. And after a series of vet calls, and the

resulting bills, Sarah knew it wouldn't be long before Horace, the owner of the ranch, paid a trip to the dude barn. Sarah wasn't wrong.

"What seems to be the problem?" he asked with his usual abrupt raspiness.

As he came on a day Sarah was more concerned with wagon rides than trail rides, she had no idea what Horace was referring to.

"This horse, this Melvin we've got all the vet bills on. What seems to be the problem?" he asked impatiently.

"Well, I don't know," Sarah answered truthfully. "There seems to be some soreness off and on in his left front leg, but we can't locate any specific area."

"Well find it," Horace snapped and off he stomped toward the boarding barn, no doubt to stir up trouble over there.

The first clue to the source of Melvin's lameness came as they were taking a big ride out a day or so later. It being well into the eighties, Melvin was left at home, limping pitifully near the paddock gate. Sarah was riding tail, herding up the stragglers. As they passed the far corner of the paddock, Sarah heard from behind an equine squeal of delight and the thudding of happily romping hooves. Looking back, she saw Melvin cutting loose in a series of bucks and jumps that would have put most fit of horses to shame.

"Why, the old faker," Sarah thought with surprise as she sat back on her mount and watched.

Melvin was just pretending to be lame.

Sarah told Joe, her assistant, of her suspicions and asked him to bring Melvin in the next ride he was needed, whether it was hot or not.

And, following instructions, Joe led a painfully limping Melvin into the barn the next hot morning. Confirming her suspicions, Sarah noticed that today Melvin was holding his right leg up instead of his usual left. She gave Melvin a pat as he was led into a stall and told him he'd been found out.

"You're going to have to work today, whether you like it or not," Sarah explained fondly to the horse. "We're on to you."

"Go ahead and put my saddle on him and we'll see what happens," she added to Joe.

Sarah went back to the stable office and finished some paperwork while the barn crew saddled the rest of the horses. When the people arrived for the ride, she helped assign horses and get everyone mounted.

"Looks like a piece of cake today," Sarah remarked to Joe about the ride as she led a limping Melvin out to the waiting area.

But as she started to mount, one of the dude riders, a sloppy, pot-bellied man with poor balance called out, "Hey, what do you think you're doing? That horse is limping. You can't ride him."

Oh, no, Sarah thought. How to explain this one. Be honest or ignore him she thought. Being honest seemed too complicated at that point so she opted for ignoring the man, who by this time had repeated his verbal onslaught several times, increasing the decibel level each time.

"My, goodness," Sarah thought, "he sounds like a broken record."

Joe called to all the riders to follow him and most of the horses, out of habit, turned of their own accord to follow Joe, who was riding Nugget.

The man with the annoying voice had by this time turned quite loud and was sputtering all over the arena, to no one in particular.

"She's riding a lame horse. I can't believe it. I will report this. I swear I will. She'll lose her job. It's unbelievable. I'm sorry I ever came here."

Sarah was going to tell him that she was sorry he was here, too, but when Melvin refused to follow the rest of the ride, Mr. Loud happened to spy the very strong leg pressure that Sarah applied to the horse.

"Oh, now she's kicking a lame horse," he sputtered. "It's outright cruelty, I tell you, outright cruelty. I'll shut this place down."

"Horace should love that," Sarah thought, as she gave Melvin another dose of her unyielding legs, followed by equally firm hands.

By this time most of the riders had gone down the hill toward the trail and were crossing the bridge that led to the woods.

"Come on," Sarah called to Mr. Loud. "We're being left behind."

And without waiting to see whether he was going to follow or not, Sarah turned Melvin toward the now distant group of riders and squeezed him into a trot. For by this time, Melvin was moving sound as a dollar. It seemed that in sight of very firm legs and hands, limping was just not worth the effort.

"I think we just have to be firm with Melvin," Sarah said to Joe after the ride. "It's just a matter of showing him who's boss. If we get after him enough, he'll forget all about acting lame. He really backed down pretty quickly"

And so for the next few weeks, they pulled Melvin in from the paddock, high temperature or not, whenever they needed him. They always had a trail guide riding him. And, even though Melvin needed a few doses of firm hands and legs to start with, he'd trot off relatively happily and quite sound after a few minutes or so.

Sarah typed up a report to Horace that they'd found the trouble with Melvin and shouldn't have any more vet bills. She conveniently left out all the details, hoping Horace wouldn't care what the problem had been, so long as it was taken care of. Sarah never heard either way, so she guessed Horace was satisfied.

Then came the day, not too many weeks later, that a big ride showed up with a few extra riders and they scoured the ranch to bring in every available horse they could find. Some of the trail guides had horses of their own and were urged to saddle them as they didn't have enough dude horses. Sarah was one who often kept a horse on the ranch, and that day saddled her faithful mare, Rocket, instead of riding Melvin. Melvin was to be ridden by a dude.

Sarah never gave it a thought that this would be the first time since the summer heat came that Melvin had not been ridden by a trail guide. Melvin had been so good the past few weeks that they didn't have any trouble with him any more. He showed no signs of his "lameness" and to tell

the truth, Sarah had pretty much forgotten about it.

Sarah had mounted a quiet young woman on Melvin, when she noticed a familiar sloppy face astride another of the dude horses. Great. Mr.Loud.

"Oh, well," Sarah thought, "with luck he won't remember me or Melvin."

But luck was not with her that day and Mr. Loud did remember. And quite well.

"I certainly hope you don't plan on having my sister ride that lame horse," he said.

"Sir," Sarah replied frostily, "if you are referring to that horse over there (and she pointed to Melvin) he is not lame, nor has he ever been—"

"I beg to differ!" he replied loftily. "I saw you kick that horse when he was lame. It was the most despicable display of—"

"Riders out," yelled Joe conveniently. "Riders out. Everyone head to tail. Follow your leader."

And with that, the horses automatically fell into formation, one behind the other, and headed down the hill toward the bridge to the woods.

All except Melvin that is. Sarah saw that Mr. Loud's sister was having some trouble. Melvin was standing dangerously near the barn door and showed no sign of wanting to leave it.

"Here, let me help you," Sarah said as she rode up and grabbed one of Melvin's reins. Sarah's little mare was 14.1 when her feet were long so she had to reach up to grab hold, pulling Melvin's nostril close to her eyeball.

"Come on now, Mel, no trouble today. We're too busy," she murmured to the nostril.

"OK," Sarah added heartily to the sister when they were half way down the hill. "We're rolling now. Just follow those horses ahead of you and I'll catch up in a second."

Sarah let go of Melvin's rein, turned Rocket around and cantered back to close the arena gate. But before she was done she heard screams from the hillside.

"Help, help! Oh, my! Help!"

Sarah turned to find Melvin slowly folding his long legs and sinking slowly, camel-like, into the dirt. He didn't lie down on his side, she

noticed, as would most horses if they were hurting or ill. He was more crouched, like a cat waiting patiently. And, Sarah found, that's exactly what Melvin was doing. He was waiting, patiently, for Ms. Sister to get off. And she did. Right on cue.

"My horse," she screamed in Sarah's direction. "My horse, he's dying!"

And again, right on cue, Melvin slowly rolled on to his side and closed his eyes.

"Just what was going on?" Sarah asked herself. "Was Melvin really sick? He seemed fine a few minutes ago." She strained her brain to try and remember if the horse had eaten his breakfast. Surely he had, she thought. Surely I, surely someone, would have noticed if he hadn't. Although with close to seventy horses to account for, she couldn't be all that sure.

By this time Sarah had dismounted and was kneeling beside the unmoving horse. She checked his pulse, rolled his lips back to check his color. But it wasn't until she moved to loosen the saddle that she got suspicious. She noticed an eyeball open, rolling back to see what Sarah was doing. And sure enough, as soon as the saddle was loosened, Melvin jumped up and shook the dust off.

"Oh, oh he's all right! He must have fainted," sobbed Ms. Sister with genuine relief. "I thought I killed him."

"Now see what you've done," Sarah said angrily to Melvin. "You've scared this poor lady and made her feel bad. What do you have to say about that?"

Melvin just snorted. By this time the ride was far ahead of us and there was no way Sarah was going to get Ms. Sister up on another horse. She wouldn't have it, and besides, they didn't have another horse.

So Sarah led Melvin back to the barn which was just what he wanted anyway.

Of course by the next day Horace had heard all about it from Mr. Loud.

"I thought you had this problem, this Melvin, taken care of," Horace rasped. "Now I get a complaint from a guest. A guest, mind you, who is

claiming you are also beating lame horses. What is it with you people down here?"

You people of course referred to the low-lives at the dude barn. And, low-life that Sarah was, she didn't have any plausible explanation for Horace.

"Well, see that it gets taken care of this time. For good." And off he stormed.

Sarah called Joe to the office and they devised a plan of attack.

"Fact," Sarah stated, thumping her hand down on a wobbly office desk. "Melvin is able to tell the difference between a dude rider and a ranch hand."

Joe agreed with a quick nod of his head.

"Fact. Melvin will either limp or lie down with a dude aboard, making him useless as far as Horace is concerned.

Joe gave another quick nod.

"The solution, then, " Sarah said, "is simple. We find a number of different people from around the ranch, people who can ride fairly well, people that Melvin does not know, and have them pretend to be dudes. Then when Melvin pulls his tricks, we can let Melvin know who is boss. Eventually Melvin will think all dudes can put him in his place."

The next suitable ride was scheduled for the following day and Joe rounded up an assistant trainer from the hunter/jumper barn who was willing to help out.

Alice arrived looking suitably dudish. Baggy jeans, thin upscale walking boots with a too-high heel, and a cutesy looking blouse. Melvin should, I thought, be well fooled.

Sarah helped Alice up and she picked up the reins wrong and started slapping them on Melvin's skinny neck. Perfect.

"I see you are still abusing that poor animal," said a voice to Sarah's right.

Sarah looked up to see Mr. Loud glaring at her from atop a steady buckskin gelding.

"What I fail to understand, Sir," Sarah said coolly, "is why you continue to grace us with your presence if you are so miserable when doing so."

Mr. L. loudly explained that Horace had given him, and his family, he added, a free ride as the past two rides had been so disappointing.

Wonderful.

"Riders out," interrupted Joe from the trail head. "Follow me, everyone head to tail, let's all keep up now."

As part of the plan, Sarah was not going on the ride but was to head back to the office where she could view the hillside without Melvin viewing her. And, as expected, Melvin moseyed halfway down the hill with the rest of the horses before he started into his act.

"Help, help," called Alice on cue.

Sarah grabbed a long driving whip from the rack by the barn door, the kind they carried to help guide the draft horse wagon teams, and ran down the hill. Melvin was completing a graceful drop to the ground when Sarah surprised him with a snap of the whip in the air.

Unfortunately, Alice's planned cries had also summoned help from the front quarter in the form of Mr. L. and Melvin not only jumped up when he heard the crack of the whip, he jumped on right smack top of Mr. L.

Sarah was thankful Melvin knocked Mr. L. unconscious.

The plan worked beautifully. Even better than I had expected, Sarah told Joe later.

"Not only did it cure Melvin," she said, " but we got rid of Mr. L."

True, Horace did have to pay the man off handsomely on top of the generous insurance settlement for his injuries—which weren't serious. And, they sometimes still did have to stand at the barn door, whip in hand, when a dude was riding Melvin.

But best of all, Horace was so mad that Sarah didn't see him for three whole weeks. Now that's a plan that worked.

*Author's Note: The Smart Horse is based on a real event. Mr. Loud never returned to the ranch and Melvin served many more years on the trail. Melvin would periodically come up with new and creative ways to be excused from his duties, but could easily be convinced to change his mind. Please check back at [www.powerofhorses.com](http://www.powerofhorses.com) for new stories periodically throughout the year.*

***See following page for more information on the author.***

**About the Author:** Born and raised in Minnesota, Lisa Wysocky had early success on the national and world championship horse show circuit. She soon was asked to begin speaking and writing about horses. A knee injury cut short Lisa's career as a trainer, but she quickly ventured into music. Six years with Nashville's afternoon paper, the *Nashville Banner*, and her reputation in the music industry as a writer of quality biographical and promotional material, piloted Lisa to a career in public relations.

More recently, Lisa has served as a consultant to independent record labels, and authored the *only* book about country music stars and their horses, *The Power of Horses: True Stories from Country Music Stars*, which features true horse stories and original photos from 18 of country music's top artists. Lisa is also active in assisting clients with their public image and with their interview skills, writes a weekly syndicated celebrity lifestyles column for Ag Features called *Down Home*, and is a regular featured guest on Jones Radio Networks syndicated overnight show, *Danny Wright All Night*.

A witty, down-to-earth speaker, Lisa gives her audiences 'news they can use', along with step-by-step advice on how they can create their own success stories.

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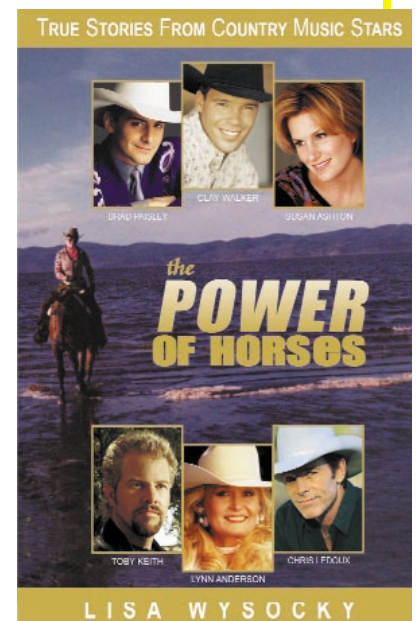
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