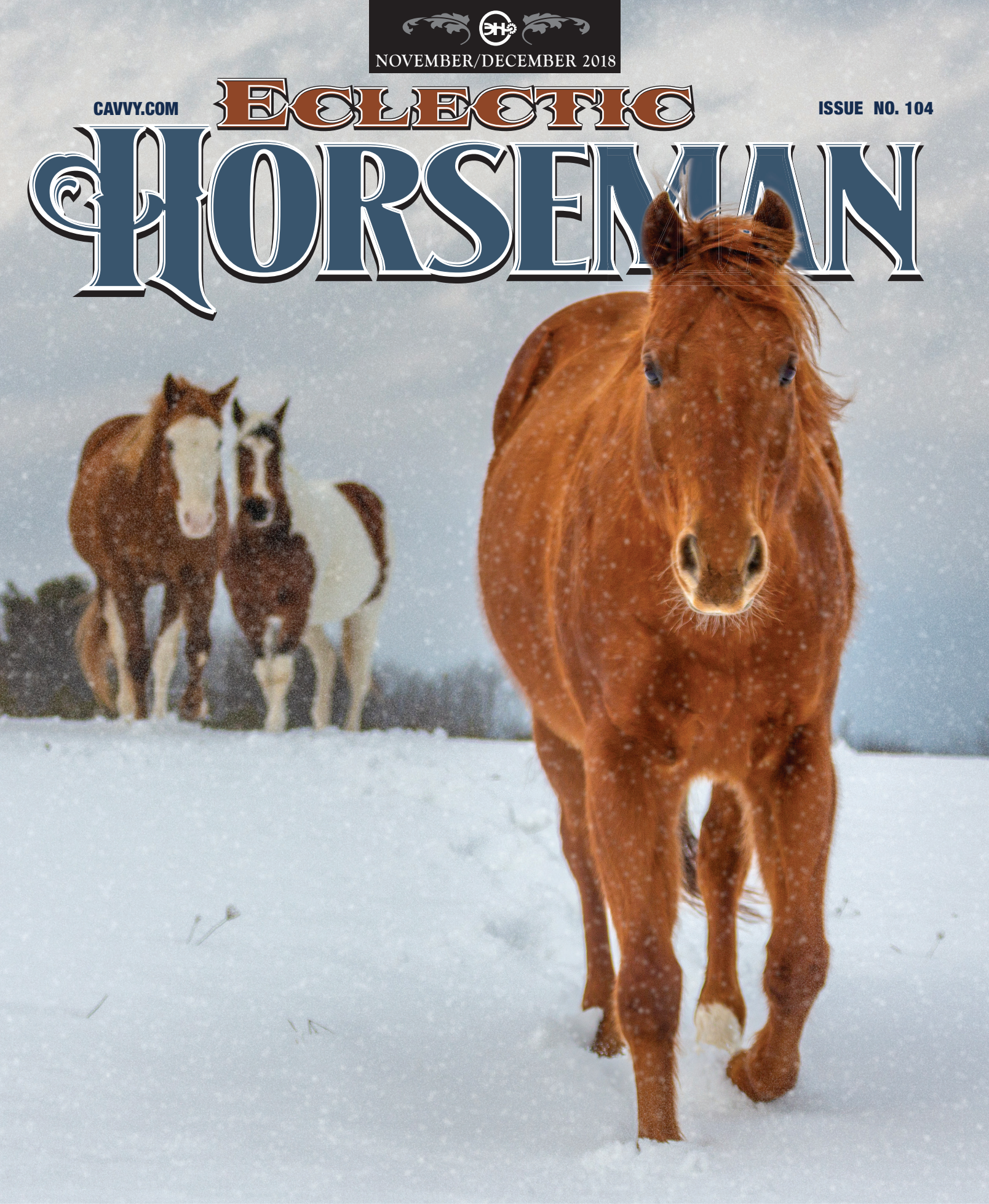


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Jim Hicks - Lateral movement while turning loose inside of the structure. Photo by Donnette Hicks.

What I Learned About “Turn Loose” From Cancer

By Jim Hicks

I feel most riders don't really understand what they are asking from their horse. When we establish a partnership with our horse, we introduce different training tools and have the expectation that the horse should give up their independence and just do what is expected of them without objection. Somehow we forgot that the horse is a living, breathing being with thoughts, feelings, and concerns about the situations we put them in. The problem is that we do not fully understand the mental and physical experiences of the horse in these situations.

I thought that I had a good understanding of what it is like for the horse to turn loose to the situation and allow its body to be directed and confined to structures not of their own choosing, but I realized I had no idea.

On January 6, 2017, my perspective shifted dramatically when I was diagnosed with stage four tongue and throat cancer. In that moment, I realized that my life had just changed forever. I was facing a process that would prove to be both confrontational and scary. I had to learn how to embrace my situation. I was abruptly thrown into a whole new world that would challenge me to accept the fact that I would have to learn to trust other people with my life. I learned very quickly that there is a big difference in perspective when you have to live with, and accept, the reality that your life depends on trusting others. In the next few weeks I was run through a series of tests that would require me to focus my mind in such a way that I could prepare myself for the rigors of my prescribed treatment.

I was like a colt that had been removed from my familiar environment and placed in a round pen—in unfamiliar surroundings filled with people and things that I did not understand. I was being moved around and directed by people I didn't know. In other words, I was learning to look to, and trust, my nurses and doctors who knew the best way for me to regain my health. I was experiencing firsthand what it meant to turn loose.

Once the type of cancer had been pinpointed, the next thing that needed to be determined was whether or not the cancer had remained isolated in one location. This was determined using a series of two PET scans. The first one required me to put my arms above my head and remain still for approximately forty minutes. During the second one, they would place me in a different position for about twenty minutes. This proved to be mentally challenging and very frustrating. As the scan began, my mind and body were both distressed. My mind said, “Stay still, hold the position,” but my body came up with every excuse to move; a cramp in my neck, an itch, a cough, you name it, I was

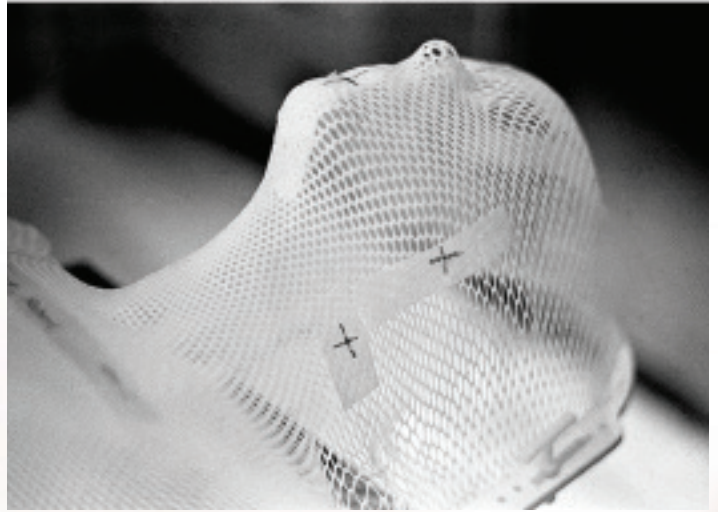
looking for a way out. I wanted to remove myself from this situation! I knew that I needed to get my mind and body to unite and become quiet, my life depended on it. I thought about my years of working with horses and talking about getting the horse to turn loose. I made two important distinctions for myself. The first thing that came to mind is how easy it is to talk about concepts, but until you experience what it means in your own mind and body, you don't really understand. The second thing that came to mind is that I had the tools to find relaxation inside the unfamiliar, at least long enough to get through my scan. I thought to myself, "You have asked many horses over the years to work through mental and physical concerns in order to turn loose to unfamiliar situations; now it's your turn."

This was a pivotal shift in my state of mind moving forward into the unknown, and was the first step toward preparing me for what was to come. The next step in my treatment was to have a mask formed to my face and neck that was to be secured to the table so that each time the radiation was administered, it would be precise. My treatment schedule was five days a week for a total of seven weeks. Each treatment that was administered lasted approximately 35 minutes. The first treatment was a source of great mental anxiety. It was going to be the first time that I would experience having my head secured to the radiation table, thus rendering me completely immobile for the duration of my treatment. I did not like the idea at all! I was going to have to trust my team completely. I remember lying on the table, feeling the confines of the mask, hearing the fasteners being secured for the first time in preparation for my treatment. A wave of anxiety hit me, triggering several emotions. This would prove to be an interesting moment for me. I tried to relax and embrace the situation, which sounds good in theory, but it was quite another thing to work through the emotions that were only exacerbated by my flight or fight instinct.

My radiation team had finished securing my mask to the table, immobilizing my head and neck. Then it was time for everybody to clear the room in order to begin. I was informed that they would observe me during the treatment using the camera on the ceiling and talk to me over a speaker system in the room. The only way that I could communicate during this process was to wave at the camera, and if a problem occurred, they would stop. This did not make me feel any better because the reality of the situation was that it would take at least thirty to sixty seconds to shut things down and remove the mask. All of the preparation had been done. This was the point of no return. It was the second time in a matter of weeks that my life was going to change forever. I thought to myself, "You are entering this room with cancer and you are going to leave with radiation in your body, and the two are about to upset one another at an acute level with the precise intent to remove a cellular patterning that is promoting discord in my body."

I also thought, "Get your shit together!"

As the treatment began, I found myself acutely aware of the room. I heard every sound: noticing small details, collecting information, expanding my awareness of my environment.



Jim Hicks's Radiation treatment mask

At this point another wave of anxiety hit me. The reality of having my head and the upper part of my chest restrained became mentally challenging. All I wanted to do was move and I couldn't for the next thirty minutes. I thought to myself, "All you have to do is turn loose." I realized in that moment that I would gain an understanding of what it is like for the horse to learn to accept the situations we present to him. As I lay on the table with my head completely immobile, I thought about the different ways we put our horses in similar situations thinking we understand what it means to the horse. I was now learning what it means to really turn loose mentally and physically. My life was dependent on getting right with the situation. With this in the forefront of my mind, a moment of clarity hit me like a lightning bolt: I have been presented with a situation not of my choosing, but I could choose to fully engage in this experience and gain an intimate understanding of what it means to be completely vulnerable and dependent on complete strangers to conduct themselves in a trustworthy manner.

Over the next seven weeks I would repeat this treatment 34 more times to complete my treatments. This process proved to be a valuable experience in expanding my depth and understanding of what it is like for a horse to turn loose to the halter, bridle, saddle, rider, and the many situations that we expose them to with the expectation that they simply accept what is presented. I have given this a lot of thought over the last year and what keeps coming up for me is that we can think that we have an in-depth understanding of a concept, but until we experience what it means and really feel it in our body, we will not be able to fully get out of our head and feel with our heart.

I have a greater insight and understanding of what it may be like for the horse to trust people and the situations that are being presented. Through my own personal experience I have come to realize that it is easy to become unaware of the horse's perspective, potentially leaving them mentally or physically compromised. I don't think we can ever really have true understanding and empathy for the horse until we are put in the situation of being confined, restrained and reliant on other people to be trustworthy in their approach and conduct with us. I am grateful for the experience of having cancer and the lessons learned.

My biggest fear is forgetting.