

March-April 2021

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Equestrians in Lockdown

WORDS BY Jessica Morton

PHOTOS Courtesy of the equestrians featured in the story

At the beginning of January 2020, Chinese authorities made the first public announcement that a new type of virus was circulating in the city of Wuhan.

Little did we know at the time that this novel coronavirus would devastate global economies, shutter small businesses and impact the physical and psychological well-being of millions of people around the world. Travel restrictions and lockdowns implemented to curb its spread have upended everyone's lives.

The pandemic caught most people in the equine industry off guard. Some have faced significant financial hardship, isolation and loneliness, while others are dealing with newfound fears about the future whilst simultaneously protecting their families from the virus.

There are horse owners and riders who are quietly mourning the loss of their most treasured psychological release – time with their horse – due to social distancing restrictions, while others have found more time to ride.

I live in Italy and early last year, I was asked to write about my experience keeping horses during the pandemic. Reading that original article, I realise I was flying blind in those early days.

I thought that after a few weeks of lockdown, the virus would be contained and things would go back to normal. Well, that didn't happen! So, I decided to write again and find out how fellow equestrians are faring around the world.



Italy's March 2020 lockdown was one of the strictest in the world. We were forbidden to leave our homes except to buy food, visit the pharmacy, or work in one of the professions considered essential. At the time, it made sense to ask people with horses in fully serviced liveries (agistment) to stay home, but for those of us that kept horses in non-serviced facilities, the restrictions made caring for them tricky.

In the end, I was able to turn both horses out for the duration of the spring lockdown. It wasn't an ideal situation but at least they were not confined to the four walls of a box for 12 weeks. As soon as the restrictions were lifted, I moved them to a friend's property where they had more room to move, better quality pasture and lots of excellent trail riding.

ABOVE: After missing her horses over the first lockdown, Alice, an Australian living in Italy, brought them home to live with her and has been able to enjoy long rides and spend more quality time with them.

Waking up each morning knowing my horses don't understand what's going on and still trust me implicitly for their daily needs helps me put all those feelings and emotions aside, and focus on what needs to be done.

I lost my job in mid-September. The physical and emotional fallout from that experience hit me hard. My pride was damaged and I felt apathetic, unmotivated and worried about the future. Initially, I didn't even want to ride but by spending more and more time with my horses, I gradually got back on track.

Soon, I was exploring the countryside in the saddle and feeling better. Just as Winston Churchill said; 'There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man.' I credit the time spent with my horses for helping me find my mojo again.

Navigating economic anxieties

A year on, professional equestrians across the planet are still struggling to navigate these uncertain economic times while keeping their families, employees and horses safe.

As a seasonal business, most tourism operations, some of which and trail riding operations earn the majority of their income over a five-month period, which then provides for the horses and staff all year round.

COVID-19 imposed closures and cancellations had a devastating impact on tourism operations; some of which needed to lay people off and not hire seasonal staff.

The horses still needed to be maintained though, so even in the face of decreased profits and inability to operate, costs and care had to be met.

Louis Geyer is based near Durban, South Africa. Since 2008 he has run a successful trail riding business through the Cape Winelands region.

The pandemic travel bans triggered waves of cancellations which required that he draw upon his emergency savings to keep his business afloat, feed his 35 horses and pay the staff wages. "One year of lockdowns has wiped out five years of planning and savings. It will take another five to ten years to get back to our pre-pandemic situation."

Finding time to keep the horses fit has proved equally difficult. Without seasonal workers and only half the number of hands on deck, Louis' workload has doubled. He's felt despair, emotional distress and general hopelessness. He credits his horses, staff and family for pulling him through the tough times.

"Waking up each morning knowing my horses don't understand what is going on and still trust me implicitly for their daily needs helps me put all those feelings and emotions aside, and focus on what needs to be done."

Life on hold

During the lockdowns, most riding centres were either closed or severely restricted to allow only those individuals directly involved in horse care on the premises. This made it particularly difficult for riders without their own horses to partake in their treasured sport at a time when it was more necessary than ever before.

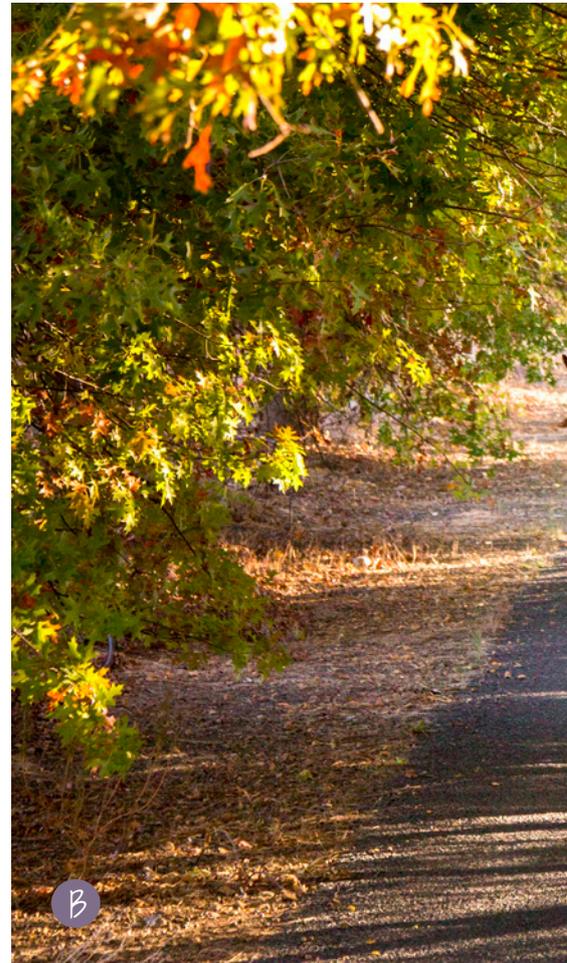
Mathilde Gregoire, a digital marketing professional based in Canada, found that when she needed horses as therapy, it was difficult to get access.

"I went from riding on a weekly, sometimes daily basis (travelling and riding many different horses), to very few hours in the saddle in the past year. Not owning a horse means you cannot justify travelling to the stables if your region is on lockdown. This has made it much more difficult to spend time with horses. I have always considered horse riding to be very beneficial therapeutically. It has helped me overcome some difficult moments in my life in the past and I am saddened that I do not have the possibility to be around horses as much as I would like to right now."

IMAGE A: Monica was unable to ride at all during the first lockdown because she didn't own a horse. For the second lockdown she leased Fly and can ride three or four times a week.

IMAGE B: Louis Geyer's trail riding business in Durban, South Africa, has taken a big hit. He says it will take five to ten years to get back to their pre-pandemic situation.

IMAGE C: The initial emotional toll of the pandemic left Jess, the author, unmotivated and worried about the future, but spending more time with her horses has helped her get back on track.



Social distancing sounds innocuous enough, but young people are evolutionarily wired to be more dependent on their friends than their parents, and remote learning throws normal school social patterns out of whack.



For Shelley Maxwell, who is based in Surrey in the United Kingdom, the pandemic instigated a complete reset thanks to her family's Arabian horses. Furloughed from her job last year, she used the unexpected free time to get back in touch with nature, her family and horses. Keenly aware of her emotional energy, horses seemed to sense what she was feeling and helped her process what was going on.

"Never before was I able to ride daily and enjoy living life in the moment, with no schedule to abide by. The horses really did help me to come back to the person I was before. They kept me healthy and they kept me strong. Being able to hug them when I had no one due to social distancing restrictions and a total lack of human interaction, really got me through the day."

Coping without peer-support

Research suggests that young people are experiencing more stress, anxiety and depression than other age groups during COVID-19. Social distancing sounds innocuous enough, but young people are wired to be more dependent on their friends than on their parents, and home schooling throws normal social patterns out of whack. For young people around the world, the pandemic has been particularly tough.

Nine is a student in Holland who grew up in the Arabian Emirates. Her family decided to return to the Netherlands shortly before the pandemic hit Europe. Nine initially was enthusiastic about the move but has struggled with readjusting to the Dutch way of life due to social distancing measures and online learning.

"Initially I was excited about experiencing the Dutch lifestyle and having the chance to socialise with new people. It all seemed so different and exciting. Then the pandemic hit. My school went completely online and the new friendships I had made were not strong enough to sustain solely remote communication.

Monica from Tuscany was not able to ride at all in the first lockdown since she didn't own a horse. When she heard about the possibility of a second lockdown, she started looking for a horse to lease. A stable near Livorno had a handsome Paint horse named Fly that she could share with the owner. She is now able to ride this beautiful and easy-going horse three or four times a week, even though Italy is still in lockdown.

For Matilda Axelsson, who is originally from Sweden and is now living in Spain, the pandemic actually allowed her more time to spend with horses. At the beginning of the pandemic in Sweden she was a project manager for a large multinational company. Her family decided to relocate to Spain, and horses have helped her more than she could ever have imagined. "When I feel stressed or miss my family, I go riding. I come back home like a new person."

Things can change rapidly

The emotional distress of being separated from their horses during the first lockdowns motivated many horse owners to move their horses to their homes.

Alice Simonetti-Morrison is an Australian now living in Italy. Before the pandemic she lived part of the year on each side of the world. She decided to hunker down over the pandemic in Europe and is working remotely from her home in Sicily.

After the first lockdown Alice brought her two horses to live with her. She can now take them on long rides and spend more quality time with them.

"Horses have taught me a lot of things in life, especially resilience and patience. One important skill I have yet to master is prioritising what is important and allocating the right values to what makes me happy. As with every challenge comes positive lessons, COVID-19 has exposed all the superfluous, the unneeded, the frivolous things in my life. Less is more. Naturally, horses are now on top of my life essentials list.

"Spending time with horses is one of the most productive ways to experience relief from pandemic-induced anxiety and make sense of the constant stream of changing information in the media. We may be able to hide our real feelings about the pandemic from our friends and family. But we cannot fool our horses."

IMAGE A: For Matilda Axelsson, who is originally from Sweden and is now living in Spain, the pandemic actually allowed her more time to spend with horses.

IMAGE B: For Shelley Maxwell, who is based in Surrey in the United Kingdom, the pandemic instigated a complete life reset thanks to her family's Arabian horses.

IMAGE C: Nine is a student who is struggling under COVID restrictions. She relocated to her home country of the Netherlands during the pandemic and with home schooling has been unable to make new friends. The lockdowns have also restricted the time she can spend with her Lipizzaner mare Favore.



"The borders closed and I couldn't visit my grandparents anymore. Usually I'm a happy, positive and active person, but I lost all of my energy and the side of me that was spontaneous. I ended up feeling lonely and homesick... even insecure. I no longer do any of the things I used to do and love, like hanging out with friends, taking long walks with my dog, playing about with my horse, sport and joking around with my brothers."

Lockdowns and online schooling have restricted the time Nine can spend with her Lipizzaner mare Favore. "Before the pandemic I managed to ride around four times a week. Every day we had time to do things together and enjoy each other's company. I would sit in the grass with her, take her for walks, or go for a hack. We practiced horsemanship or played in the paddock. I would sometimes brush her until she was totally white."

"Because of the lockdown we can't spend so much time together anymore. It seems I'm always in a hurry." Spending time with Favore helps Nine stay fit, get off the phone and laugh. "As soon as I see her, I forget everything, it is just me and her."

Monica is another student struggling under COVID restrictions. She has been living in Livorno, Italy, since her studies at the University of Milan were converted to distance-learning during the first lockdown and wave of infections.

"When everything started, back in February 2020, I was finishing my last year of University and preparing to graduate. The virus began to spread rapidly in the North of Italy and my university was one of the first to shut down. I came back home to Tuscany convinced that within two weeks everything would go back to normal. Little did I know how long this would last."

"Due to the restrictions, I couldn't ride at all during the first lockdown. I missed horses and I was frustrated that I couldn't enjoy the spring weather. I remember feeling so angry, I just couldn't believe that all of humanity had been forced to stay in their houses for months on end."



Monica managed to travel twice to Portugal during the summer break when restrictions were relaxed. There, she had the chance to ride Lusitano stallions on the beach and take private dressage lessons. These travels helped her escape reality for a short while and start considering opportunities for overseas study in the future, which she hopes to undertake soon.

Back in Italy, when the October restrictions were announced she felt tired and demoralized. "I wasn't even angry anymore. This time I feel the effects that the lockdowns are having on me. I am on edge about every little thing. I fight a lot with my parents over irrelevant issues and I feel trapped because no matter what I try to do, every day there are more restrictions and controls that make life more difficult."

Interacting with horses and riding on the beach has been Monica's escape from the detrimental effects the COVID-19 pandemic has had on her emotional well-being.

"Horses have been fundamental for coping during these tough times. Just being around them is sufficient to raise my mood. I can disconnect completely from the rest of the world when I ride, whereas when I am stuck at home, I just overthink everything. When I'm riding, I put my phone away and simply feel connected to nature. I can live in the moment, without any pressure."

Reimagining the future

The whole world is adapting moment by moment right now. Despite widespread uncertainty surrounding the future, it is essential that we as horse people look out for each other as we face the second pandemic year. People around the world are suffering monumentally the effects of psychological turmoil, emotional isolation and financial hardship. None of this has been easy and there are no instructions to follow. Be safe, be smart, be kind

A hopeful outcome of this pandemic is that whatever 'new normal' emerges in the months and years to come, we will not forget the power of horse-human interactions have in comforting and combating trauma and anxiety.

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