

Episode 65: Brandon was dragged by a horse

Here's the thing about horses. They're big. Some of them weigh like 10 times what a human being weighs. They're very smart, and they definitely have a mind of their own. And in some cases, they do what they want to do, which can be really dangerous – especially when the rider is inexperienced.

Brandon was an equestrian stuntman for 17 years. That just means he was paid to do stunts and perform some crazy stuff, with horses. And most of this was done at Renaissance Fairs all around the country, here in the US.

If you're not familiar with what a Renaissance Fair is, it's quite a production.

Brandon

When people talk about Renaissance Fairs, they're mostly referring to the permanent ones that are there that open for usually about two months - some of them run a little shorter, some of them run a little longer. It's sort of just like a theme park, especially some of the ones I performed at. There's one in Pennsylvania in Central PA that is basically the Disneyland of Renaissance Fairs where you just go there and everyone's in period clothing. The food is themed for the period. There are really basic carnival games - throwing axes, knives, jugglers, and stuff like that. There are a lot of different stage acts. Then, a few fairs in the country have professional actor casts that will be in costume and there'll be a storyline that goes throughout the day that people can follow.

Scott

And really, you'd think someone who made a career out of working with horses must have grown up with horses, right? Like, Brandon must have grown up on a farm.

Brandon

No, actually, I didn't. I am a city kid. I grew up in the Milwaukee area playing hockey for most of my youth.

Scott

But one day, as a young man, Brandon and his family were at one of these Renaissance Fairs, and Brandon had a chance to meet with a guy who made him an offer.

Brandon

My family and I always used to go to the Bristol Renaissance Fair, which is sort of on the border of Illinois and Wisconsin. I had a couple of buddies and I just started talking to one of them. I was like, "I don't know what I'm doing. I got nothing going on right now." He was like, "Well, hey, I have this small stunt company that's an offshoot of this larger stunt company that I worked for. If you want to come and learn what we do, I'd love to have you. I was like, "Well, yeah, why not? I'm always into trying out weird stuff. I don't like doing things in a boring or safe way, so I'm not the smartest guy in the world.

Scott

Now, the big thing that the stunt guys in this company would do at Renaissance Fairs is the jousting. You've probably seen this in movies. Two guys, each dressed up in full armor, each one with a big shield and a long jousting lance – I mean like 6 or 7 feet long. And they're each

on a big horse, and they go running at each other, and each man is trying to knock the other one off his horse. Sounds like fun, right?

But – when you're a newbie, you don't start off doing the big jousting stunts. You start off as what is known as a **squire**.

Brandon

They were always looking for squires because that's how most joust companies will get people in. The squires are the guys on the ground whose job it is to, basically– I mean, a lot of people see squires in a show and they just look almost like– you ever see a tennis match and you got the kids running across grabbing the ball? That's kind of what the squires are doing in a really basic sense from clearing the field of stuff to keep it out of the way of the horses. They're making sure that the guys are on horseback because, obviously, when you have a helmet on and stuff, you can't see very well. So it seems like the squires are not doing much but, in reality, they're the most important part of the show. Without good squires, people get hurt and things go really wrong. If they're not good squires, they can't fix it when something goes wrong. So, then, things go really wrong.

Scott

So Brandon was working as a squire. What he didn't know was that his initiation into the world of equestrian stunt riding wasn't going to happen exactly like he thought it would.

Scott

You said you started on the ground. What was your first time actual stunt riding like? What was that experience like?

Brandon

It started real quick. I probably squired for them for about a year or, maybe, a little bit longer. Occasionally, in a rehearsal, I would trot around and stuff where I would just kind of sit on a horse to just, kind of, get the feel of what it was like. We would have a rehearsal. As you can imagine, shows like this require a lot of rehearsing during the week because we perform on the weekends. We'd rehearse every day during the week, so it was a lot of work. If the guys were done rehearsing and the horses needed to be walked out, maybe I just get up on the horse and sit on it just to see what it was like, but I didn't really do any - what I would consider - riding until we were doing one of these temporary shows - I want to say it was a 2 or 3 weekend little, sort of, renaissance fair that they were doing in this park.

In these situations, in Iowa, it's great because people have animals and stuff there. There was a horse barn that just happened to be close by to where the fair was being held in this park - it was probably about a mile away, I would say. The cool thing about it was we could just ride the horses down from the horse barn to the jousting arena because it really wasn't that far away. It was all through grass and fields and stuff.

We had this girl who just started working for the company who was going to be our groom, taking care of the horses while we were doing shows. We always tried to keep one full-time barn person to make sure that - we feel safer when we're doing shows and stuff if any of the horses aren't in the show, if there was a problem with them or something like that - if anything totally went wrong, we had somebody who was not involved in the show that could come and help. So

we had just hired this girl. She had a lot of horse experience. She had worked with horses for years, but horses are like people. They are very individual and they all have their own personalities. So even if you've worked with horses, in general, for years, if you go work for a new company of horses, you still have to get to know that group of horses, like you'd have to get to know a group of people at a new job. So, at that point, I think she'd only been with the company for, like, a few months. I mean, she'd seen the horses that we're using for this run of shows. She'd worked with them enough to know the main things about their personalities, but not enough time to know their little idiosyncrasies and little tweaks and stuff.

One day, she decided that she was going to take me for my first, like, actual ride. We're going to ride the horses down through these fields to get to where the park is. The other vendors and things were not set up yet in this park, so it was pretty much just like a wide open green field area with trees that had, like, a road construction fence as a huge perimeter, and the joust field was a smaller one inside of it. There was nobody there yet, so we were like, "This is a perfect time." She thought, "Brandon needs to get on a horse. This will be a perfect time. No one's around. There's gonna be no vendors, loud noises, or anything like that to spook the horse. She thought, "We're gonna put him on this horse named Caesar" who was one of the, I believe, horses that started with the joust company. He was an old boy at this point - I think he was probably 20-22 at that time. We had horses that have lived to be almost 40. I mean, they can keep going. He was at that point where he was still in the shows because he was a reliable horse. He was an old guy. He was tired. He loved performing in the show but if you wanted to try to take him out for any other kind of rides, this horse isn't gonna take off or do anything weird because he's old and tired, and he'll just go along with it.

So she puts me on him and she gets on this draft mix that we had - this horse named Bonnie who was this big. I forget what she was across, but she was mixed with a draft horse breed, so she was big and slow. So we took up these horses and we went for a ride down through the field. She explained to me, as we come down through the fields, all the basics of horse riding. "You want to keep your back straight and heels down. You hold the reins with your fingers like this. Never yank in the horse's mouth. Just every light touches. Turn your shoulders." She was giving me all - trying to not over-inundate me with stuff - the basics. I was riding Caesar and everything was going great. He's this old horse. He's been really nice to me. We've done a little bit of trotting and a little bit of walking on our way down towards the fairgrounds.

I should explain that, as we're coming down to the fairgrounds, there was a lot of, like, the walk from the barn. It was a small field and, then, mostly trees and grass. Then, it got down into the fairgrounds which were about half trees and half open space. We were, kind of, just trotting through these trees. Laurel was telling me the basics of horse riding and everything was going well. We get around to where we're about ready to come out into the fairgrounds, and my horse, kind of, stops for a second. I was like, "Why is he stopping here?"

She was, "Oh, sometimes, you just have to give them a little nudge or whatever." I saw him, kind of, ticking his head around, like, looking - I'm trying to figure out how to explain - he was kind of just darting his eyes around like he was looking for something. It was just a behavior that he hadn't done yet. At that point, I knew nothing about horses. I was like, "What's going on here?"

We stepped through this clearing and he saw the wide open field. Apparently, what Laurel didn't know about this old horse was he was an old man. He does his job in the show, but he has a short circuit about open fields - he has to run when he sees an open field - and it takes a very

experienced rider to keep him from doing this because he's an old horse. Horses are very sensitive and very perceptive. By the way you're distributing your weight on their back, they can tell how experienced of a rider you are.

Scott

And you were like the opposite of an experienced rider.

Brandon

Oh my god. He was like, "This kid's a dummy." When he saw that open field, he was like, "Oh, I'm gonna run." Like, I wasn't a thought in his head. He had completely forgotten I was even there because I was such a non-threat to being able to prevent him from having his fun. So he looked up, saw the open field, and he took off. Have you ever been on a galloping horse - like a full-on running horse?

Scott

Not really fast. I've ridden some but not like—

Brandon

Like in a canter but, like, never full-on gallop... The thing about a horse in a gallop is their back moves almost not at all - it's like jet smooth. Even though this horse was old, when he wanted to go - I would put this horse against any of the horses that we had in the company speed-wise - he was lightning when he wanted to run and was sprinting full-on. So, in the first few seconds, I was just in total shock. I had no idea what to do. I was just trying to hold on which, luckily, as I said, was fairly easy because his back was not moving. The hardest thing to do when you're learning how to ride is learning how to deal with a trot. Either you ride English-style by posting where you, kind of, stand up and down to match the up and down rhythm of the horse's back - you kind of catch it on the one in three beats so that you're not just slapping. Then, when you get to be a better rider, you'll learn how to sit the trot where you can just, kind of, roll your hips to stay on the horse's back so that you're not popping up and down.

When a horse is running full out, as I said, it's not moving at all, so I got no problem standing on it. But we're going really fast. This horse is really fast. At first, it was not a problem because he saw an open field when we came through the trees and he was just running through this open field. So I was like, "Great. It's scary, but if I got to ditch or something, it's just green grass around me. No big deal." We were going really fast. It's probably going to hurt if I jump off, but it'll be alright. So I was just hanging on at that point. I heard Laurel yelling at me because her horse hasn't even started moving yet at that point not only because she was on this big, fat, slow draft horse.

When Caesar took off, it was just like someone firing a starting pistol and he was out. So I vaguely heard her yelling something as we kind of disappear into the distance - which was one of the little bits of advice he was trying to offer me on the way down - which is if a horse ever does take off on you and it's not listening to any of the normal cues that you're giving to stop, you sort of pull the ripcord last ditch effort, where what you can do is you can grab one rein and pull that rein all the way in trying to get the horse to, kind of, turn his head into his shoulder. Usually, they'll either get annoyed with that and stop or they'll kind of circle - you can kind of just circle them - into a stop, then calm them down, and then get off them.

So I heard her kind of yelling this as I was running away, and I was like, "Oh shit, right. Okay." At that point, he was just full-on galloping through this open field. Like I said, they had the

fairgrounds, kind of, partitioned off in various areas with this construction fence for where these other vendors were going to set up and where they were going to have certain things, kind of, funnel people in through the entrance because this was just a big open park. They had to create all this stuff for where these things were gonna go. So he saw this orange fence. Luckily, the one that he seizes is just a big perimeter fence. He started running along this fence. Now we're running along it and I could see that he was trying to find a way out of it. Now, he knew he was kind of contained and he didn't want to be. He wants to keep running through this field.

Scott

He knows what the job of a fence is.

Brandon

Right, yes. He probably could have jumped it. I mean, I've been on horses that have gone that route before to where they ran to a fence, they went, "Dude, I got this. I'm not worried about it," and they just jumped over it, but he was, like, probably too old to do it and I knew that. So he recognized it and he was like, "Shit." He was following this fence. Now we're at a full-on gallop and kind of slowly going around the perimeter of this fence. I was kind of toggling back and forth. That is really awesome because I had never been on a horse under my own control before when I arguably still was not on the horse and in control. I've never been on a horse that was galloping and, like, the first time you do, it's cool. I mean, the wind is just riding past your head and, like, it's so cool. Between going back and forth, I was like, "Oh, shit, I'm gonna die," and then, like, "This is also kind of cool."

I realize he was running along this fence and that's a problem because this fence perimeter leads right just into the woods from my perspective - that's all I could see. This fence just runs. There's no gap until the tree line. On the left side of the fence where we were currently running, the only other thing there happens to be this large tree that we were, kind of, now starting to run towards. As I kind of realized this, I was like, "Oh shit. Now I'm probably gonna have to make a decision because I don't know what he's going to do because he's still at a full gallop. I've got some time before we get to the treeline, but he's moving in. He doesn't look like he's looking to slow down."

I swear to God, this image is burned in my head for the rest of my life. I was trying to pull either one of the reins to get his head into hitch and I was pulling. I got this rein and, like, I was trying to start a mower - I was just, like, yanking on this thing. It turned out that might have been the dumbest thing I could have done because I think that was what reminded him I was still there. I think, up until that point, he was just in his happy place of just sprinting. When I got up in his mouth trying to get him to stop - this image I have burned in my brain - he turned around, like a full gallop. His head was almost in his shoulder and he was still running full-out. He looked at me like this asshole and I was like, "Oh, no, dude." Now he was at a full gallop. When he got his head back straight again, I realized when he gave me that look, I was like, "I'm done yanking in your mouth. Dude, I'm sorry." Now he's running and he's clearly pissed off at me. Now he's kind of shaky. He's twitching here and there like he's trying to, kind of, throw me, but he doesn't want to stop running. Now, I really didn't know what to do. Then, I saw, as we were following this fence and getting closer to the tree line, he aimed us directly for that tree to my left. This is a big ass tree, man - it's a huge tree. He's not running, like, next to it, but he's running full on at it like he's just gonna kill us both. Like, if he can't run for joy, he doesn't want to live and he's just gonna full-on both of us into this tree.

Scott

It sounds like a kamikaze horse.

Brandon

That's what I thought he was doing because he wasn't even pretending as though he was going to dodge this tree. He's now running at a full-gallop right for this tree. So I was panicking. We're getting closer to the tree. Right before he got to the tree, he did this little crow hop where he jumped from his right to his left and then one big jump to avoid the tree at the last second. So I got thrown from side to side and I was lucky that I was able to squeeze hard enough in my legs to hold on from that last jump he did at the last minute to avoid the tree off to the right. I think what he was trying to do was make me lose my balance that way so that the tree would just clean me off of him. Had that happened, I would have been probably dead because we were going 30-40 miles an hour. I mean, he was full-on sprint.

Luckily I squeezed in my legs strong enough to stay in the saddle, but I was off balance now. I was, kind of, tilting off to the left-hand side because the last jump around the tree threw my momentum to the left and I was struggling to hold on. What I didn't see was right before we got to the tree line - which was right after we passed this tree - there was a little gap in the fence before the tree. There was this little man-sized gap in the fence that he saw and was going for, clearly. As I was off balance to the left-hand side, he made another right turn to jump through this gate and that was it for me - too much momentum threw me more to the left again to stay on, so I started to come off. At the last second, the stirrup stuck on my right foot over the top of the saddle. As I was coming off the horse, my right foot stuck. My right foot was up about just a little bit below the line of the saddle, almost like on the saddle itself. My right foot was up there and the rest of me was being dragged off in the grass.

Scott

So you fell off to the left, but it's your right foot that was stuck.

Brandon

Yes. As I was coming off the horse to the left, my feet were in both of the stirrups. I didn't know anything about horses starting at that point. When you do saddle falls for real, you kick your stirrups out ahead of time to avoid this problem entirely. I had no plans on coming off this horse, so my feet were still on those stirrups. My left foot came out - it swung off as I was going over - but my right foot stayed in the stirrup. If you can imagine my foot in the stirrup, my weight was holding it down on top of the saddle and, kind of, locked my foot in the stirrup on top of the saddle while the rest of my body was, like, ragdoll dragging off his left side on the ground. Does that make sense?

Scott

Does the saddle slide over or was it tight enough?

Brandon

it was tight enough that it didn't move. If it moved, it moved just a little bit. The girth wasn't loose enough for it to swing around, which actually probably worked out to my benefit because that tends to happen to horses. If they feel the saddle go under their stomach, that really freaks them out and they flip out. That's when you need to cut the saddle loose or something because they're going to start bucking, usually, because the saddle pokes him in weird spots when it's upside down. So now, he was running at a full gallop. I'm not a flexible guy. I was, kind of, doing the splits because my right leg and the rest of my body were like one of those little string figures that fall apart when you press it down and stand up when you let go. I was just dragging like a

windsock string man. My right leg was up over the saddle and I didn't know what to do because he hadn't slowed down at all. He was still at a full gallop. Luckily, he was running through the grass. I was getting hit by his feet. Every so often, his hips were, like, kicking me and whatever, but I was doing okay for about the first 100 yards of being dragged. I was hanging in there.

Scott

When you said "The first 100 yards", that's the length of a football field.

Brandon

Yeah. Again, this is the first time I've ever ridden on a horse under my own control. So he was dragging me about 100 yards. Then, again, I have another one of these images of him where he's sprinting. Then, he did that same thing where he puts his head down, looked at me, and he almost had this look of, like, "Oh, dude, you're still here. What are you still doing here? I thought I got rid of you." Clearly, he was dragging me and this wasn't working for him, so he started to adjust his course at a full gallop from the grass into the tree line. So, he was still running in the field. Now, I was in the woods banging off the trees, stumps, branches, and shit while he was full-on galloping. I guess he figured, at some point, I'm gonna hit a tree and it's going to clean me off of him.

Once we got into the woods, obviously, it was pretty tough to keep track of what was happening when I was just in the grass. I was banging off of trees and rocks and I have no idea what. All I know is he dragged me for, at least, the same amount of time I'd already been dragging. By pure chance - maybe from me trying to flop around and trying to avoid trees and branches and stuff - I was able to twist my foot in such a way that it popped out of the stirrup. He kept going and I got out and just laid in the woods for a little bit. I've been telling the story for a few minutes now but, in reality, it was, like, 2-5 minutes, maybe, from the time he saw the field to the time he finally got rid of me.

So, I was laying in the woods. A few minutes later, Laurel rode up on her big draft grass because it took her that long to catch up to us. She was like, "Are you okay?" and doing the standard check of, "Can you stand" and touching my legs. I think I might have broken something then. I never went to the hospital because I was 17 and I didn't really have insurance. She tried to chase Caesar. Once he got rid of me, he just frolicked around the field for a few minutes and then was, like, "Alright, I'm done here." He didn't resist being captured by her. She just, kind of, walked up and grabbed his reins.

The thing about riding is you gotta get right back on the horse you do because, if a horse does this - if they throw you or do something that is dangerous - you have to immediately show them that that's not okay. The way that we would do that is, because we were all positive training-- a lot of horse training can be really abusive and negative. In all the companies I work for, we're all about positive reinforcement training, so we never hit horses or do any of that old-school stuff. What we would do if a horse does behave like this is we would run them for a little bit. So, we went into the little jousting arena there and I limped my way back in there. I got on his back and just rode him in circles for a little bit to show him, like, "Hey, it's not that easy to get rid of me." But it was tough because that was my first real time on a horse and Laurel was old school about it, man. She just looked at me and she was like, "You gotta get back on him. Alright?" I was like, "Yeah." She went and got him. We went into the arena, ran for a little bit, took him back to the barn, gave him treats, and then hose them off and all that.

Scott

It seems like it would have made sense for you guys to have opposite horses.

Brandon

100%, yeah. In retrospect, of course, that would have been right but, like I said, I don't fault her at all because, now, after having been around horses for so many years, I could have very easily made the same mistake because of appearances. If you watched him in a show, you could tell that he was an older horse and he could do the job, but he wasn't a threat. He's a boring old-routine type of horse, so he absolutely would have been one of my choices. If somebody was like, "What horse should you put this newbie on?" I would have picked him too. I don't blame her. Like I said, horses are like people. That was a little tick that she didn't know he had, and that's how I learned that lesson.

Scott

You talked about something called a saddle fall.

Brandon

Yeah.

Scott

Can you describe what that is, how you're supposed to do it, and how do you learn how to do that?

Brandon

Sure. It's scary. It's okay. The saddle fall is basically the standard thing that any theatrical joust has to learn to do because that's what everybody wants to see. They want to see the big blowout. The way that we do them as safe as can be is we have the whole show choreographed. So, we know who's coming off the horse when, and what it'll be like. We're doing 5-6 passes or whatever. I hit you, you hit me, then we both hit each other. Then, on the 6th pass, I'm coming on.

So at the top of my set, the way that each joust pass would start— this is another point as to why the squires are important. Like I said, you got your helmet on. We have almost no peripheral vision - just very limited frontal vision which is this little slit. Even though we do theatrical stuff and all, we all wear real armor because there are many times when that helmet saved my life when a hit went wrong - the shield skipped off - and hit me in the head. Had I not worn, like, a plastic helm or something like that, I'd be in bad shape.

Because we have such limited vision, the squires on the ground kind of set up the pass. They're talking to you the whole time. A good squire is always talking to you and telling you what the other guy is doing. He turns and looks for you. They'll turn our horses into the lane. Then, we raise our lances as a signal to each other that we're both ready to go. Then, we started charging at each other. When you're going to do a saddle fall at the top of your pass, you kick your stirrups off your feet before the pass starts and, then, you go into your pass. Then, what you do is, when you take your hit on the shield, which is in your left hand, you lean back, and let go of the reins entirely. A lot of guys would let go really early before they take the hit just to make sure that there was no chance of them popping the horse in the mouth or anything when they got hit. You let go of the reins and, kind of, just lay back.

You remember those old Nestea commercials where they would, like, fall backward into a pool? They just let go and feel almost, like, a trust fall - that's kind of what you do. You, like, lean back

on the horse. You let your shield drop off to the left, drop your lancer to the right side, and then you, kind of, just roll your butt off of the horse, kicking your left leg up over, just kind of roll up off the horse's butt, and he kind of runs out from underneath you. You, kind of, like, do a little somersault and you fall in the sand.

Scott

Do you land on your back?

Brandon

A lot of guys will land feet first because— have you ever had to ditch when riding a bicycle or motorcycle somewhere? You kind of just quickly kick your leg up over, jump off, and you can, kind of, keep running - that type of thing. It's a similar concept to a saddle fall, but you're just laying back more - it's the same principle of kicking your leg over. If you want to brace your fall, you can kind of hit with your feet and then crumble and roll so that it looks good. But then, a lot of guys will have different styles. One of my bosses would do this really great fall where he would basically just reach his arms back like he was going to do, like, a side dive into a pool. His hands would always hit the ground first because he would literally just reach off the horse. If I was wearing a bunch of armor, I would do a fall very similar to that one. So I would drop my stuff. Then, instead of kicking my leg back over, though, I would straight up just roll a back somersault off the horse, which is terrifying the first time you do it.

Scott

Yeah. I'm just trying to imagine the very first time you do this. I mean, it's like the first time you jump off a high dive or the first time you jump out of an airplane. That first one got to just be terrifying.

Brandon

Yeah, it is, especially when - I was learning and a lot of guys were learning - you don't always have the benefit of a really nice field with really deep sand. So a lot of times you're learning how to do subtle falls on grass or on, kind of, hard-packed dirt. That's really intimidating. I mean, it doesn't seem you're that high in the air until you're sitting on a horse, and you're like, "Shit, I'm kind of high up off the ground. Now, you want me to fall off his horse who's running at not-a-full gallop but a fast canter." It's scary. I mean, you kind of just have to force yourself. I mean, when you're first learning, we'll kind of step up to it. At first, you jump off at, like, a trot. Then, we'll pick it up a little bit on, like, a slow lope. Then, you get faster and faster. The weird thing about saddle falls is it's actually easier to do when the horse is going faster because our number one thing was making sure the horse was safe. So people started learning saddle falls with nothing in their hands because we couldn't trust them. You'd panic and drop the shield on the horse or drop the lance on his head or whatever.

Scott

I would think the number one thing is that the rider is king, but the horses are the asset here. We need to protect them.

Brandon

That's not how we operated though. Our horses matter more to us than anything else. So everything we did was centered around how this is going to work for the horse. Is the horse okay? You have to think that way. I mean, in a show like that, horses are really, like, taking care of you, man. I mean, I've had plenty of horses that have really saved me from possibly bad situations just because we became friends just like you become friends with a person. We

ended up with a good working relationship. They liked me and they wanted to look out for me. I mean, if you're going to be doing crazy shit on horses, you got to know those horses and you gotta trust those horses more than anything first. They're still horses, so you can't rely on them, but you still have to put a lot of trust in them. Then, obviously, you put a ton of trust in the guys you're working with.

Scott

Is that kind of related to your philosophy of positive training as opposed to the old-school type? Can you just talk about that a little bit? How does that affect your connection with the horse?

Brandon

Sure. The way that the companies that I worked for did things is, in the horse world, there's a very cowboy mentality of this old alpha male macho. When you're taking a horse that is unfamiliar with riding, they call it breaking a horse - you got to break them. The guys I work with and I didn't agree with that have-to-dominate-the-animal mentality, so we started looking into a lot of other research like how to train horses and almost learning their language. So what one of the companies I worked for did - we did the craziest stuff with horses - was we would get these horses to stand on pedestals, to bow, and to rear on command. We had horses that would ride through fire and all this crazy stuff. When I was working for that company, that was when I really started training horses because we would start using this method - it was a hybrid method called Liberty training- where you start on the ground with the horse in a round pen. Horses communicate with each other through body language. You're basically learning a very simplified version of their horse language and they're learning that you're learning that.

So what you do is you have a horse in a round pen and you start with, like, a lunge whip and a little riding crop to work like- you know the guys at airports with the flashlights that wave people in? That's kind of the same concept you're using with these whips. You're not whipping the horse. You're just using them as guides to show them where to go. So you'll have the horse in the round pen. You take a step in with your right foot and right shoulder and that'll cue the horse to run around the arena to the right. Then, if you take a step back, he'll stop. If you step in with your left foot, he'll turn and run to the left. So, you start with these really basic activities of him watching you for physical cues as to when he's supposed to turn. Then, after they get that, you start doing things where you step back and the horse will come to you to the center of the arena, and then you can step to the side and he'll keep going. So you start doing all these little physical cues - they're watching you and you're watching them. Eventually, you can get a horse to the point where you don't have any whips in your hands and you're not even moving in a really pronounced way anymore - it's very subtle - where you're just kind of angling your body and making small movements. Once that horse has worked with you and they know you, that's how you get these-

I mean, there are guys out there who do really crazy stuff with Liberty training where they get horses, basically, to act like dogs where they can roll over, get into play with their hooves, and do all kinds of goofy comedy stuff.

Scott

And the audience isn't going to notice these subtle moves that the person is making, but the horse sees it.

Brandon

Exactly. The benefit of this type of training is now you're learning their language. There's something about starting to train a horse from the ground like this that establishes this really strong connection with them. My theory is just because you're not coming at them from a position of dominating - you're coming at them from this position of equals like, "Look, man. I just want to work with you. I want you to work with me. But if you're not feeling it, that's fine. We don't have to." We never forced a horse to do anything. There's a way to train a horse and coach them how to do something, but there's always a point where you go like, "Okay, that's enough of this for today. We'll come back tomorrow." Maybe they'll go a little further tomorrow. With this company, I would spend months training an individual horse in the round pen. We get there in the wintertime and start training 2-4 months ahead of time to get these horses to do what we wanted them to do.

Scott

Is there, like, an incentive? Like, you've got a snack for him every time they do something?

Brandon

Yeah. We had Apple biscuits, carrots, vegetables, and stuff like that anytime that we were teaching them. When we teach horses to stand on a pedestal, we break all these tricks down into really basic steps. First, you get to pick up his foot, put it on the pedestal, and then you jam treats in his mouth - he loves it. Then, you get them to, kind of, shift his weight so, now, he's kind of leaning on the pedestal, and you're feeding them the whole time. So, it's positive reinforcement training like with any other animal. When they're doing what you want, you keep them happy and keep feeding them. That reminds me. We had this one horse in relation to this. His name was Thor, and he was a half-draft mixed with a Friesian. Do you know what a Friesian is?

Scott

Nope!

Brandon

If you've ever seen a movie with a beautiful black horse in it, it's a Friesian - the ones that have really wavy manes. They're jet black. They look shiny and they're beautiful. Well, this horse was half that and half this, like, ugly draft cross. If you put a beautiful Friesian into, like, a funhouse mirror and just made them, like, wide like a couch and, like, give him a squarehead - he still had this beautiful fur mane. That was this horse. He was super food motivated. So when we were teaching this horse to stand on a pedestal, he got it right away. I mean, he learned immediately because he loved these treats we gave him.

One day after training, we will always have a turnout area for the horses where we put them out in the paddock and just kind of let them roam around in a field - toss hay farm and whatever - overnight. So we had this area of turnout where we were teaching the horses. There was a fallen log out in this field. So, we would drive by. Every time I see Thor out in this field, I see him chewing on this log and I was like, "What? Why is he chewing?" At first, we were kind of concerned with, like, "Is he deficient in some nutrient or something? Is that a weird behavioral thing?" But then, every time, we go by at night, little by little over the course of about a month, every now and then, he was just chewing on this log. We're like, "Okay, whatever. If he wants to chew on an old log, he can chew on the old log. It's not gonna hurt him."

One day, we went to lunch and he was out in the field standing on the log waiting to be treated. He had made his own pedestal to stand on. That's how much he wanted to, like - he spent

about a month whittling this fallen log down enough that he could stand on it - his fat ass got up on it -

Scott

Wow. He deserved to be treated.

Brandon

Exactly. When I saw that shit, I laughed so hard. I immediately went back to the barn and got him some treats and went out there. I was like, "You earned it, buddy. You worked so hard for this." I mean, it shows you that the horses really dig. I think what a lot of people don't realize about these shows is if you're training animals, they love performing as much as you love performing. When we'd be backstage with these horses at some of the bigger shows where we have crowds of 15,000-20,000 or whatever, these horses could hear all the people out in the arena yelling and screaming, they're kicking at the stalls, they want out, and they love it. I mean, most of them really get amped up by the crowds. You would see a distinct difference from rehearsal to performance. I mean, we'd always tell new guys like, "Pay attention. Now you're a little bit comfortable. Things are going well in rehearsal and stuff. This horse is going to feed off that crowd like you do. You're both going to be jacked up on adrenaline. Keep it calm." We always had to give the guys that extra speech of like, "Take a breath because the horse is going to be hot out there because they love it. I mean, they really loved it."

Scott

You're talking about crowds that size. Were there any times when someone actually got hurt when you were performing? What do you do in a case like that?

Brandon

Yeah, plenty of times. It's tricky because this is live theater. Especially in front of these large crowds, there is no timeout. There's no, like, "Hold on, everybody. We got an injury on the field. Stop." You have to creatively think on the fly about how you're gonna get through it. There was one time at this show. There was one time at this show - working for the company that I was just referring to that was really intensive on horse training - this guy was one of the best horsemen to date, I know, in my life. He went over to Europe and jousted in actual European jousting competitions. I think he was in Germany for a world competition where he was treated like a joke because he was an American. They gave him this horse that they thought he wasn't gonna be able to do anything with. It turns out, by the end of the competition, he finished, like, third in the world. He had gotten this horse to do incredible stuff for these equestrian skills competitions that we're all part of this tournament. I mean, this guy has probably forgotten more about horses than all we know.

We were doing a show at a fairly large— it was one of the Pennsylvania shows. It's the first show of the day - it's the equestrian skills Show. What we would do for this particular show is we would set up this kind of obstacle course for one part of the show where we would have the horses jump over. We would cut cabbage and stuff. As we jump up, we'd cut cabbage or we'd have them throw rings to us that we would catch. We'd run the horses between sticks or we'd pick up a spear out of the ground and throw it in a bale. Like, it was this whole sort of horse obstacle course that we would lay out and we would really compete with each other every day. A lot of guys do something similar like this but, in this particular show, just to make it fun for ourselves, we set up the script in a way that it didn't matter who would win this competition. So we'd be out there actually trying to get points and beat each other. It was a fun little thing we got to do. So, by and large, the first show is really a light-hearted show. We would end with a joust.

Everything's a good fun sport joust - not no serious. We didn't use any blood packs or any of that - that was all saved for later in the day.

So, in this particular show, we had this drag harness that we had made. What we would do is we would say, "Whoever lost this tournament just at the end of the first show would have to be dragged out of the field in shame," which is a cool stunt. We had a really nice deep sand field. So, we did a lot of testing with the different types of harnesses and stuff to get this to work to make sure no one's gonna get hurt. We've done this a bunch of times and everything was great. We're doing this first show one day. The way that it would work is we had 4 guys in the show. When the first few guys would come off, the squires would take our horses backstage, and then we would stick around on the ground to kind of just help - almost be, like, bonus squires. We'd be there to make sure everything went okay. So, for this particular show, it was my job after I did my saddle fall and whatever that I would hang out because it was ultimately my job to tie whoever lost the tournament. The jousting was going to be tied into the drag harness and hauled out and it was my job to do that.

So, I was standing off to the side of the field. My buddy - who I was just talking about, who's this fantastic horseman - started his last joust pass with the guy who's riding against and he does his saddle fall. It looks like a normal routine saddle fall. It actually looked a little, sort of, less theatrical than I was used to seeing him do. It looks like he was almost kind of just stuck in the sand like a lawn dart. It was, kind of, like, really anticlimactic. It just looked like a boring faller. So the master of arms of the show who's, like, the emcee - it's his horse that has the drag harness attached to it. So, after my buddy falls off his horse, the emcee kind of comes out and starts talking - what we call vamping. He was just talking to the crowd to keep them interested to buy time while we go ahead and get them tied into the harness and whatever.

So, he came up and he got his horse with a harness. I went over and I noticed that my buddy is not getting up yet. Normally, by this point in the show, he would be kind of standing up and giving the audience the whole, "Aw, shucks. I'm defeated. Whatever." Then about that time, we'd have the harness over there, set them up, get them tight, and drag them out. Well, he was just laying in the sand. He was not unconscious or anything. He looked fine, but he was not getting up. So, I walked over to him. My buddy who's the master of arms started buying time and talking to the crowd. I leaned down. The quick hand method that we used to get through shows and when injuries happen is just a stoplight system. Red is "I'm hurt, I can't do much of anything." That's the worst-case scenario. I've only heard that, maybe, twice in all my years doing these shows. Yellow is "I'm hurt." There's a lot of room in yellow. Yellow could mean, "Yeah, I'm cut, but just keep going," or it could mean like, "I'm pretty hurt, but I'm going to try to hack my way through the rest of what we got to do in the show and get through it." Then, obviously, green is "No big deal. I'm fine."

I walked up to him and the first thing he said to me without saying anything else was just "Red. I'm red." I was like, "What?!" I have no idea what to do because this is one of the toughest guys I've ever known in my life. I've seen this guy get, like - I would have been, like, "Red." I've seen him get hurt where he was just, like, not even yellow - just fine. I've seen swords glanced up, cuts or whatever - maybe it looked worse than it was. I've seen this guy get hurt and I didn't even know pain could affect this man - like, he's one of those guys. So, he said, "Red," and I was like, "What do we do? What's wrong?" He was like, "It's my leg." Again, I saw him do this fall and this fall just looked like he just kind of just land-darted into the sand. It didn't look like even the type of fall that - I was not thinking "injury" when I walked up to him because none of this looks severe. I've seen guys, plenty of times, take really bad falls and you run over there

right away, and like, "Uh-oh!" This was not a big deal. He was like, "It's my leg." I was like, "Well, shit, man. What do you want to do?" Because he's supposed to get tied into this drag harness now. I was like, "Can you stand?" He was feeling around his leg and he was like, "No, dude. I'm fucked." So, I was like, "Shit."

I looked up to my other friend who's the master of arms, who's kind of like giving glances over his shoulder every so often while he's trying to keep the crowd entertained talking to him while I and my buddy were having this conversation in the sand about what we're about to do here. So, I looked at it and I was like, "What do you want to do, man?" He was like, "Let's just do it. Time in." I was like, "Are you sure?" because now I was trying to deal with this fact of like, "Here's the dude I didn't even think felt pain, and he's so hurt. He physically can't stand." Now, he's telling me, "Just tie me in the harness." I was thinking if this guy tells me that he can't get up, there's something so wrong with him that I was worried about how we were even going to get him off the field in a safe way, let alone, now, you want me to tie you to the back of this horse and let my buddy do a full lap around the field and then drag you out the chute to around backstage.

Scott

The show must go on.

Brandon

Yeah, man. He was just like, "Do it." So, my friend and buddy, John, who was the master of arms, looked over his shoulder at me. Coincidentally, my other friend's name is also John. We both gave him the nod of, like, "We're doing this." At this point, my friend who's the master of arms, I think, has no idea what's going on. He just knows something's wrong. He's an old-school guy who knew how to deal with this shit, so he was just handling it with a crowd until we were ready. He still doesn't know what's up. So, I just brought his horse around and tied my friend into this harness - these sort of cuffs that we had rigged up that you would kind of hold onto - and he dragged him out on his belly and did a full lap around the field. He's rolling over and flopping around. Then, they dragged him all the way around and back out of the chute. Of course, the second he started to drag, I just left the field and ran backstage waiting for him.

The way the field was set up is we had openings at the end - it's sort of, like, a big oval hockey rink-shaped arena. In each of the corners that were upstage, which is away from the audience, we had gates that were like chutes that also had sand because we did a lot of crazy equestrian stuff in the show where we had guys who would ride on the back and stand on horses and stuff, so we would do a lot of looping through the field. So, we had this sort of chute set up so that you could go out of the arena around the back - behind the stage - and then back into the arena through the other way. So I ran back and waited in that chute as he did his lap and, then, came off and got disconnected. So, he came back and he was gonna be covered in sand, dirt, and stuff.

Now, everyone backstage is starting to panic because the tech people saw John didn't get up in the show. So, they radio to the medical people backstage and everything like something's wrong. Again, none of us have ever seen this guy injured, especially not like this. So, we got around backstage. All I could see was his thigh muscle just looked like a giant ball - it was just, like, rapidly swollen. Not a lot of time has passed and his leg was swelling up really bad. This fair had a great medical team and they were there quickly. They got an ambulance in there, put him on a board, and got him up out of there. It turned out what he had done was when he fell - I believe it's the thigh muscle - the tendon actually ripped off of the bone in his muscle like a shade on a window, kind of, rolled up in his leg. So when he tried to stand - like I said, pain does

not affect this guy. I'm sure he tried to stand, but his leg was just not functioning or working the way it was supposed to work. Then, he was out, not nearly as long as he should have been.

He was the lead of that show. So the guy who was the master of arms actually had to step into his position in that show because, at that particular fair, we did a full-on storyline that would go throughout the day. So, we would have plot-driven shows. Like, there's a human chess match that would have big plot elements and things. So we weren't just jousting out there. We had other obligations to be out there furthering the story and doing these other things. So, it was a huge deal. This happened early in the season too - I think it was in the first couple of weeks of a show that runs about 12 weeks - so it was a crazy scramble for my friend to get into his part. But he did a great job and he killed it.

It was a really great show. We had horses that would lay down. The Queen would ride in and the horse she was on would lay down on its own so that she could get off. We had a particular show that would end where we were going to act like we were going to burn a girl at the stake. We had this big pyrotechnic effect that would shoot this big 40-foot fireball up in the air when we rescued her and then rode through fire to escape. It was this crazy show that involves just a ton of moving parts and a lot of training, which my buddy really jumped in and crushed it

Scott

It sounds like a lot of fun. I've heard - not necessarily just equestrian stuntman - stuntman, in general, often have injuries that kind of plagued them through the rest of their life. Do you have anything like that?

Brandon

Yeah. I consider myself to be pretty lucky because a lot of the guys that worked with doing this type of stuff and guys that worked with doing some stunts for films and some other things - pretty much, all the what I would consider to be professional stunt guys - they're all hurt. I knew a lot of guys had arthritis in their hands and arms and stuff just from the amount of times they've broken their fingers and broken their hands. Most of the guys that I worked with - especially in the joust company - were always dealing with injuries. I've seen guys - one of my best friends - destroyed his right arm - broke both bones into I don't know how many pieces and just turned it into dust - and finished the show using that hand. So I got out pretty lucky.

I was dragged again in that show I was just talking about there - the craziest stunt show we did. I got dragged again. At that time, I tore some ligaments in my spine and I think I ruptured a disc. I have some issues with my neck for the same reason - because I've been thrown off of horses on and through fences and landed weirdly. The thing about doing saddle falls is, even when you do it the right way with armor, it hurts every time because you have a metal gorget on all around your collarbone, spaulders or pauldrons over your shoulders, and arms that are covered. So when you hit the ground - I mean, metal doesn't flex, so if you don't land right, something's jamming into somewhere.

So we all know dislocations, broken bones, torn ligaments, and concussions are common. Like I said, we're jousting. There are times when I got hit in the head, which was no one's fault. I mean, it's a life's done show. The time I'm thinking of, in particular, was during a rain show or it had just started raining, so my shield was really slick. When you're jousting against somebody theatrically, there are two different ways you can hold your lance. You can either do what's referred to as couching it where you tuck it under your armpit, fold your arm down along your side, and really hold it. What I would do - and most theatrical guys do - is called floating where

your arm is more out to your side - your elbows out and the lance is, like, floating under your elbow and you're poking more than you're, kind of, twisting your body to hit. Since we're doing a theatrical form of jousting, I always found that to be better because it allows you to still make a good hit. It sounds good. Then, I would kind of helicopter the lance over my head after the hit and then I could reset it easily that way. Plus, your arm is acting like a shock absorber. So, I can make it sound really great with a hit but I'm not drilling my buddy - I'm not really trying to take them off the horse.

Well, there are some old-school guys that we work with who really like to couch their lances and just lock it down on you, which is fine if they're accurate, but when they miss, the whole weight of their body and their horse is now behind them. So, there was one particular show where a buddy's hit skipped a little high off my shield and hit me in the head. The hit on my helm wasn't the problem because, like I said, we wore real helms. I mean, it took the hit but, because we weren't jousting in, like, 16th-century armor where we're not wearing a breast and backplate, so everything isn't locked together, my helmet was free floating and I can still turn my head, which is great when I'm trying to get around the field and do stuff, but not so great when you get hit in the head by lance because my head snapped back. I finished the show but, dude, I couldn't tell you— like, I've seen pictures of me finishing that show but I don't remember any of it. Stuff like that was really common where you just get your bell rung and your body just carries you through the rest of the show.

Scott

If there's a young person that wants to get into— of course, after hearing all the injuries, probably, they're going to say, "No way. I don't want to do that." But if somebody wanted to get into that business today, how easy is it? What would be the first step?

Brandon

Go to a Renaissance Fair. Ask to talk to some of the guys. I mean, in most of these places, the companies are accessible. Or contact them through their website. I know I know, the handlers are probably always looking for Squires because it's a tough job - it's a tough life - but it's also really cool. I mean, you get to travel around the country and perform in a lot of different places. Honestly, working for them is what led me into any other interesting performance thing I ever got to do in my life - from doing film work to choreography stuff for TV and things like that - that I only got because of the connections and the skills that the company had provided me with.

Scott

Right. performing is performing, right?

Brandon

Yeah. And a big, big shout out to those guys in the Handleys action theater. There are a few of the remaining founding members that are still there. I learned so much from each one of those guys from stage combat to acting, how to play on camera, and how to play when you're in the round versus stage setup. I mean, there's so much I learned from them that set me up for other performances and things I did in my life later that I don't think I would have gotten from working at some other company or learning just what they did. I mean, these guys taught me all kinds of stuff. I would just say reach out and say that you're interested, but just know that it's probably not going to be a lot of money - definitely, not at first - and it's hard work. I mean, you're going to be taking care of horses. If those horses don't mean as much to you as they mean to the guys in the company, they won't keep you around. I mean, they don't take people that don't love those animals as much as we all do. You gotta have a passion for it. I would say get into safer

stage combat stuff then you don't have to be at such a high risk. I can teach you how to sword fight - that's much safer out there. I'd say stick to that.

Scott

And for anyone that wants to ask Brandon any other questions - maybe ones that I didn't think of - he is in the Facebook group. So, if you haven't joined our private Facebook group for listeners to this podcast, that's where we go. We discuss specific episodes with other listeners there. A lot of the previous guests from other episodes are in that group as well and can answer questions. Brandon's in there and he's happy to answer any questions as well.

Brandon

Absolutely. Thank you so much, man. I really appreciate this. Thank you to anybody who has taken the time to listen to it. I really appreciate it.

Scott

And before we wrap up this episode, a couple of items –

First, I wanted to let you know how you can contact me or get more involved with the What Was That Like community. You can definitely get in our Facebook group, where we talk about podcast episodes and lots of other stuff. That's at [WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook).

I also post something interesting or unusual just about every day on Instagram, and you can follow me there [@WhatWasThatLike](https://www.instagram.com/WhatWasThatLike)

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