

Heat Stress - Texas Style

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We live in Texas - to me, the greatest state in the entire universe. However a few problems come with the incredibly mild Texas winters. A typical winter usually consists of 1 - 3 days of snow and one month of under 50 degree temperatures. That means l-o-n-g, *HOT* summers.

I love the heat but I think Texan camelids do not share in my adoration of the 90 to 100 degree days of sun. I have one camelid in particular that went to such great lengths to make his point that he put us in a tailspin last summer. Would you care to learn more about our wonderful WOW Sk8er Boi?



WOW Sk8er Boi (Skater Boy for those who don't read 'teenager') was born September 6, 2002; a healthy bouncing boy who wore us out completely. He was first noticed in the field literally running circles around his Mama. He was beautiful and looked so much like White Heat that we immediately saw blue ribbons in his future.

We started campaigning and showing him as soon as we could. The first year he travelled all over the United States. Never placing under 4th, he raked in the ribbons and his trophy wall was soon

decorated with a string of blue, red, white and pink ribbons. What we didn't realize was travelling throughout Colorado, Michigan, Oklahoma etc. was wearing this little boy out. By June, at not quite one year old, Sk8er was tired so we decided to let him hang with the boys in the yearling pen.

We had sheared his belly in May, a bit late by Texas standards, but his fleece was so nice and silky we thought a month wouldn't make much difference. Our temperatures soared - so like Texas - which meant the yearlings romped only in the evenings as they were sluggishly over-hot during the day. During our 15 days of 100+ degree temperatures we were constantly busy hosing bellies, adding ice to their water and setting up fans in their lean tos.

August was a scorcher but we watched them all like a hawk, especially my black ones; Knight and Moonshadow (fondly called Shady) who were friends of Sk8er. We visited their pen more often than the others to keep a closer eye on the dark wools as we had heard they absorb more heat and can suffer more problems. Sk8er is white with a fancy colored face so, having sheared his belly, we were not at all concerned with him and the heat.

Boys play and pretend fight and so it was with this group. All That Jazz (Jazzy), the instigator of play fights (and play breed), chased Sk8er in the eves while we watched with amusement. They all came running to get hosed off in the mid-afternoon of August 19th, but Sk8er was slow in getting to the fence line. "Very unusual", I thought at the time. He had been acting really tired recently so I made a mental note to call the vet during the week and ask what I could do to increase the pep in this young lad.

The next morning my daughter called me to her room where she was looking out at the yearlings. "Look, Mom... Sk8er is sunning himself!" We agreed he was silly indeed as he lay in the sun while the others huddled in the shade provided by the lean to. Even the mornings that August were hot - it was already a steamy 97°F.

Around 1p.m. that afternoon I called to my son, Lukas, and daughter, Desiree, and told them it was definitely time to 'go hose bellies' (35 llamas do take a while) and off they went. Two minutes later Desiree came bursting through the door yelling,

"Mom, quick..... Sk8er isn't moving!"

Not to break the suspense for you but, as I write this, all the feelings of fear and panic come back to me and my eyes again well up with tears. Llamas mean the world to me and here was this little boy - only eleven months old - in trouble, and I didn't see it coming. Time is of the essence in a situation like this and I have since learned that when your gut feeling is that something may be wrong, call the vet right away. We may have spared Sk8er all this if I had listened to my Inner Spirit.

Anyway, I jumped up, rushed out with her and found Sk8er exactly where he had been 'sunning' himself that morning - hours ago. Stretched out on his side, he lifted his head when we approached but then sighed and lay his head back down on the ground. We pushed him to a cushed position and let go, thinking he would stand but he flopped back over on his side. Panic rose in my heart.

Desiree, ever the calm and cool one, was talking to him and reassuring him we were going to help him and he would be fine. We scooped him up (thank the Lord he was not full grown!), Desiree in front while I held him under his hips, and together we carried him into the lean to. My 'first aid' brain jump started during the carry so we both knew we needed to get him cooled down immediately. We first dragged the hose right up to him and started flooding his underside. Then we filled a feed bucket with cool water, lifted his head and, miracle of miracles, that boy drank it all. We refilled the bucket and he drank and drank again.

As far as I'm concerned, Sk8er let me know, with no uncertainty, he intended on living and it was up to us to get him through it all. His eyes showed not fear but gratitude as we worked with him during those first hours.

We took his temperature and got a reading of 106.8°, and all this after drinking water and being hosed down for about an hour. He was in horrible heat stress and we were dumbfounded as to how to pull him out of this horrible spiral to death.

I called my vet but she was out on a farm call so I left a message, but not an urgent one, not yet. I called another vet - supposedly a great llama vet in Texas - only to receive the response, "Sorry...I have never been able to save a heat stressed

llama yet, especially when they are that far along. Make him as comfortable as you can and I am so sorry for your loss."

I was horrified! How can this be? This vet is highly revered and I am given a doomsday prognosis. I was mad! Have you ever insulted a mother about her child saying he/she is a failure? The parent gets right indignant and that is exactly what I did. Here is my little star showboy and I'm told 'tough luck'? No Way! I then called Texas A&M; the Ohio State; then every darn vet in the country I had ever heard of. I could save him, maybe, they all said. And they were very helpful telling me to 'keep him cool'.

Wait now. It was 100+ degrees outside. I do not have an air conditioned barn. The fans in the lean to can bring the temperature down only to the mid-90's. Then and there I made the decision that, I believe, made the real difference: We brought Sk8er into the house. He was placed on the cold tile floor in the breakfast room with ice packs in his arm (leg) pits, fans blowing on three sides of him, cold water in a bucket by his head and a pat of sweet hay to munch, should he so desire.

Dr. Aime Johnson, my veterinarian, arrived several hours later and was amazed to see him in front of the TV, in a cushed position, watching the evening news. His temperature was still ridiculously high and he was totally unable to change position on his own but he seemed alert and rather pleased he had earned 'In Home' status! Dr. Aime evaluated him at length, drew blood for a complete panel and CBC, gave him an injection of antibiotic (Acepromazine), Banamine and Dexamethasone. All of this was making Sk8er feel better, you could see it in his eyes, but his long road back was just beginning.

Fortunately we have a very sturdy chute by Wyoming Llamas that we were able to bring up to the back door of the house. Every day, for 15 minutes at a

time, Sk8er was suspended from the straps on it. A kind of physical therapy. We would stretch and massage his legs and back and brush him out so his wool would 'breathe'. By the time he returned inside his temperature would be back up around 105 degrees. It was so frustrating to take one step forward and three steps back every day.

We hand sheared his beautiful fiber, in a rather choppy design, to aid in keeping him cool. No show cut for sure, but a cut that would help in saving his life. I spent the first 5 nights checking on him so often that he probably didn't get any sleep. I would see his head down, immediately assume the worst, and my heart would leap in my chest. The words of the one particular vet kept sneaking in my head - the one who had never saved a heat stressed llama. For me those words were the worst part of the entire ordeal. Deep inside I had felt Sk8er wouldn't make it and every day my heart broke at that possibility.

One evening, after Sk8er had been in the house for about a week, we had just gone to bed when we heard a crashing and clattering noise downstairs. We rushed down just in time to see him cush from a standing (sort of) position - bottom high in the air, face on the floor. He had tried to stand! Yay!!!

This was the turning point. From then on whenever we took his temperature he spat at us. When we gave him a shot he spat at us. He was no longer an interesting ornament in my home. He was a llama, and he wanted to be left alone. Sk8er was a survivor of the worst Texas affliction.....Heat Stress-Texas style.

His treatment had consisted of constant temperature monitoring, fans, ice packs, penicillin, Benamine, Dexamethasone, grain laced with Red Cell (his blood work showed he had no red blood cells), cool fresh water and hay all the time. We did physical therapy every 4 hours and took him inside when

his temperature started rising. We walked his llama buddies up to the window to visit and gave him an enormous amount of love.

Once Sk8er became more mobile, but still not able to stand the heat, he moved to the veterinarian's office for five days. There he had a yard to go to and a cool office to rest in until he was able to make it outside. He came home on his birthday. One year old and he had already seen more of life and death than most llamas are exposed to in years.

In Texas there is a very real risk of Heat Stress. If it happens to one of yours, immediately begin cooling your llama down, stay calm and use the prayer chain I used within our llama community. So many people prayed for Sk8er he had no option but to survive.

Today he is 100%. He no longer walks like a camel and there is no muscle damage from being cushed for days on end. He is bright eyed, bushy tailed and a gentler llama you will not find. I have been more than blessed with him and he has taught me two very important lessons:

***-Never assume that white
is immune to heat
-Every day is a good day if there
is a llama in the house***

CQ

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