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PBEC Success Story: A Chemical Cardioversion Gives Pontecini a Boost

Trainer Patti Harnois of Holly Hill Farm spends winters in Wellington, FL, with her group of clients and is very familiar with how heat can affect horses.

When student Francesca Giarrusso's 19-year-old warmblood gelding Pontecini started exhibiting signs of fatigue in the 3'3" jumper and equitation rings, Harnois assumed it was the Florida weather.

"I was getting 100 percent performance, but then it would drop to about 60 percent performance as the day went on when he had to come out again. He still performed and did his job; it was just the amount of energy was lower," she said.



Pontecini competing with Francesca Giarrusso. Photo by [Shawn McMillen Photography](#).

During a routine insurance health check, it was discovered that "Poncho" had atrial fibrillation, the most common type of cardiac arrhythmia in horses, and suddenly the gelding's unusual fatigue made sense.

Harnois took Poncho to nearby Palm Beach Equine Clinic (PBEC) where Internal Medicine Specialist Dr. Fernando J. Marqués, DVM, Diplomate ACVIM, Diplomate ACVSMR, conducted several tests on Poncho.

Dr. Marqués said that poor performance is the most common clinical sign of atrial fibrillation in horses. Poncho showed no other signs of discomfort or pain, he was just "running out of gas."



"Poncho" recuperating with Dr. Marqués. Photo courtesy of Dr. Marqués

"During exercise, they just can't do anymore because they don't get enough oxygen into the muscles," he said. "The heart is inefficient to supply the amount of oxygen at a high level of intensity of exercise. It's just, boom, they cannot go anymore."

Atrial contraction of the heart is important, said Dr. Marqués. "In an atrial fibrillation, the atria just fibrillates [rapid rhythm] instead of having a nice organized contraction pumping blood from the atria to the ventricles. That contraction is needed under strenuous exercise."

The first step was to confirm that the horse had atrial fibrillation by an electrocardiographic study (ECG). Then it was important to rule out why this was happening to Poncho — was it a primary cardiac problem or was it secondary to other issues like an electrolyte imbalance? If it was a secondary issue, the arrhythmia could possibly be fixed without cardiac intervention.

[Read More on The Plaid Horse](#)

Severe Weather Equine Preparedness Checklist

- Make sure farm is clear of debris that may take flight
- Know your evacuation and stay-put plans
- Have halter tags with contact info ready
- Have medications filled
- Prepare a first aid kit
- Ensure you can have enough vehicles and trailers for evacuation
- Have your horse microchipped
- Store all horse information in a watertight envelope
- Practice loading on a trailer
- Ensure barn door locks are operational and easily opened

With this checklist, you can be prepared before inclement weather arrives. Be safe!

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Hurricane season has begun, but for horse owners it's always the season to be prepared for severe weather. Palm Beach Equine Clinic is available for all emergencies 24/7. In case of an emergency, please call the main line at 561-793-1599. PBEC also suggests some important steps for owners to take for their horse's well being before a storm hits.

Suggestions for safety include:

- Prepare evacuation and stay-put plans
- Call local animal control to flag your property so it's on the radar of emergency officials for assistance
- Clean up around the barn for debris that may take flight
- Prepare halter tags stating the horse's name/contact number in case they get loose for the duration of the storm
- Ensure locks on barn doors are operational and easily opened in an emergency
- Ensure you have enough vehicles and trailers to move horses
- Microchip your horses and include information about your horse along with photos in your important papers -- including Coggins tests, medical history, and emergency phone numbers -- in a watertight envelope and keep the envelope in a safe place that is easy to access
- Practice lading your horse on a trailer so they are comfortable with the procedure
- Prepare a basic first aid kit with medications filled

HOW MICROCHIPPING WORKS AND WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Microchip implanting is safe, quick, and relatively simple. The chip is about the size of a grain of rice and is coated with silicon to help secure it underneath the skin midway down on the left side of the neck in the vicinity of the nuchal ligament. Licensed veterinarians implant microchips, thoroughly sterilizing the area of implantation before administering a local anesthetic at the insertion site. A 14-gauge needle is then inserted under the skin and into the ligament to inject the chip, which has been assigned a 15-digit number. The procedure usually takes under 15 minutes and costs less than \$100.

In addition to competition requirements, microchipping is an important part of equine management and can be helpful in the following situations:

Theft – If a horse has been lost and is suspected to be stolen, a microchip will be useful in quickly identifying the horse and returning it to its rightful owner.

Disaster – Natural disasters such as fires, floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, and hurricanes often displace horses. If those horses are rescued by emergency shelters, scans for microchips will almost always be performed.

Loose Horse – Loose horses that are retrieved by animal services will be scanned upon intake and can be quickly returned to their owner if microchipped.

In the event of natural disasters, include microchip information about your horse along with identifying photos in your important papers, including Coggins tests, medical history, and emergency phone numbers, in a watertight envelope and keep the envelope in a safe place that is easy to access.

Palm Beach Equine Clinic: Make Us a Part of Your Team

