

Bushfire Resilience Inc.

Black Saturday, 2009. Horses

Interview with Jonna McLean, equestrian

Interviewer: Malcolm Hackett OAM



Malcolm

My name's Malcolm Hackett and I'm here with Jonna McLean who is a highly regarded and well-known horseman with a lot of experience in the horse world. Jonna has agreed to share some of his experiences and his observations from Black Saturday and we're really grateful for that. Jonna can you tell me a little bit what sort of property preparations had you undertaken before Black Saturday?

Jonna

Being a 130 acre property in fairly undulating terrain the property has quite high parts of elevation with a creek going through it. So there's some bushland associated with that. More than half of the property's boundaries are on the bush to the State Forest. The preparations involved in that are really varied. First of all you're obviously trying to reduce the amount of potential fuel around buildings and all the areas where we have our animals. Because we have stables, arenas, yards, machinery sheds and we have the house.

So keeping the fuel load down was obviously helped by the animals but obviously mowing and making sure our gardens, primarily an English garden was ready. It turned out to be fortuitous that we did that. And the other preparation was probably as we always do every year is making sure we have sufficient water catchment and sufficient water storage to be able to call upon for those emergencies. Because we don't wish to be drawing upon our stock water because if the stock water is low we have no water. So we needed to have a reserve of water.

So one of the things we did very early on was build a special dam that was only ever used for fire fighting. The other preparation that we did was making sure that we had really good fire fighting equipment and hoses on reels and sprinkler systems that would do the whole lot. So we were capable of wetting down appropriate areas. We were capable of defending the grass and the lawn and some of the areas that would catch alight later on with relative ease and not having to rush and cart pumps around or start pumps.

In saying that, our property is completely off grid. So I'm obviously not dependent upon reticulated power. We have our own power source. And that was a very fortuitous thing because obviously one of the first things that went down other than the phones was the power source. And so it meant that our fire fighters are constantly being used not just for fire fighting but also being used to be able to transfer water from one place to another and the garden.

So we knew the pumps would work. We knew everything was going to be fine. And the other part of the preparation was really making sure the stock were available and their locations known. So that was basically the overall preparation of the property.

Malcolm

And how many how many animals are on the property?

Jonna

We had 13 steers that had been given to us prior to that and they weren't very friendly and very user friendly so we had to tiptoe our way around them so that they didn't put too much pressure on our

fencing but graze the property nonetheless. And then on top of that I had 13 outside horses that I was breaking in and training at that time for other people. So some of those horses were racehorses, I think half were racehorses and the other half were equestrian horses that I was working on for their further education, and the remainder were my own. So I think at that time I had probably five or six of my own. So I was looking at between 15 and 18 horses at the time on the farm. It was a lot of horses.

Malcolm

And how many people were you able to call on the day on the phone?

Jonna

My wife at the time was the only person on the property, but I was fortunate that I had a very good friend that dropped by on the day and asked if he would be able to help. And the big question is probably you'd like to ask me why I wasn't at home.

Malcolm

So how did that unfold then on the day?

Jonna

We talk about the things we did right than the things that we did wrong. This was probably one of the biggest blunders that I've made during that time. I was hell bent on really making sure that I can keep my equestrian performances up throughout the year so I had a really good benchmark to be able to go to the state national championships. My ambition was to take two horses to the nationals which I'd done before without success. So I was striving to achieve something I hadn't done before. And at that time there was a little event at Smythesdale and I thought I'd like to take my horses to that, a nice quiet little run and have a look and see how they go with it. In the days prior to that I was warned by more than enough people, including my wife, that I shouldn't go to that event because it was a bad day to go. But ego got in the way of better judgment.

Malcolm

Sounds pretty serious. So how did the fire event unfold then on your property?

Jonna

For me it unfolded when I first found out when my brother Andrew rang me from Sydney. In fact that's how I found out about the fire starting in the pine forest on the plantation in the Clonbinane area, which is where Black Saturday started. I immediately packed up everything in the truck. Of course I couldn't get home because the highway was closed. So I had to go to a friend's house and park my truck at Kinglake West. So I packed the truck and the horses at Kinglake West jumped in their car that they gave me and then drove all the way around through Strath Creek to come home. I was warned by everybody that was on the farm at the time not to come. That was a bad idea. Another silly decision was made.

But I did make it home. So the fire event really started the moment I drove down Clonbinane Road which is a road essentially goes from west to east. And as I was driving down that road the fire was then moving between the freeway and Clonbinane road in a fast moving flank fire that was beside me as I was driving home. So there was no time for me to have any preparations done because the people who were on the farm at the time, my wife and a friend of mine had already done those preparations for what they thought was a big event.

Malcolm

So you'd be one of those people that could say almost what speed that fire was travelling along. You were actually travelling right alongside it.

Jonna

I would say from my judgment probably 65 to 70 kilometres an hour which is the speed limit of our road.

Malcolm

So you've arrived at home with the fire front about to arrive at the same time.

Jonna

More the flank of the fire. So it was coming down the hill. So I had a bit of time by the time I got home because it was almost departing me and then creeping on the side of the flank. So I had a bit of time for that. And when I got there my wife and a friend of mine and also there was a man I wish I could remember his name. Anyway he was to do with the forestry department. He was in the forest and he decided would not go there. Our place was much safer. Fortunately he was there. And then he gave me probably the best advice you could probably get. And that is "Look this is a fast moving flank fire. We would like to fight it come as close as we can and burn out as much as we can while we can control it." And I cannot thank him enough for that sensible advice because that was our insurance policy for what was going to happen next.

Malcolm

So the fires moving away from you, but burning across from that flank towards you at the same time.

Jonna

Correct.

Malcolm

So how far did you let it come before you started attacking?

Jonna

Okay I let it come probably 13m to the house and within probably 10m of the water tanks. Didn't worry about the fencing. Only worried about all the immediate infrastructure – buildings, stables which had all my horses in there. The horses were all tied up so my wife decided she would put all the horses in a stable. It's a double brick building so it's got pretty good thermal mass. Still got a tin roof nonetheless but pretty well sealed, internal sprinkling systems. External hoses and sprinklers as well. Pretty defensible and in the open with big earth bank probably just about facing where the next big fire front was going to come from. So it was good planning and we had the solid timber doors wetted down. But the horses were in the stable.

Malcolm

So you attack that flank fire first when it got that close and then what happened?

Jonna

And then we had a break. The break was all about preparing ourselves for the next wind change which we knew was coming within an hour or two. And we could tell that the wind change was upon us because now it was dead still. There was no wind at all. And then it completely changed. So we had probably an hour and a half's preparation. It is really hard to gauge time in these circumstances I'm guessing here.

There wasn't a huge amount of time. In that time though I remember that the flank fire did crawl up and start to catch fire to the 32 round bales that I had stored on the big flat area. Fortunately I have a dozer or a drott, so I got in the dozer and pushed all the hay bales off the cliff and let them burn in the valley. Then I did an earth break all around the house. That was one place I thought I have to use less vigilance because it was coming out of the relatively green valley floor up to the English garden which is where the house was. So that was my insurance policy for the house.

Malcolm

Those round bales could have produced a lot of embers.

Jonna

And it was right in front of us so exactly. It was not going to go well.

Malcolm

That's fortunate that you had the machinery to actually do all this. So then you've got about an hour. Were there strong winds at that stage?

Jonna

It went still. When the strong winds started was when the fire front started to arrive and the wind started becoming ridiculously furious. Then I mean during the fire itself the wind was not in any single direction. It was in every direction all at once. It was ridiculous.

Malcolm

So that second front on the wind change then that's coming towards the house and the stables as well?

Jonna

To the stables first. The flank fire just clipped past the house and up towards the water tanks up on the hill. The stables were more easterly facing.

Malcolm

So how did you defend against that second front?

Jonna

Obviously sealed the whole building up and we had a person in the stables talking to the horses with a hose trying to keep the horses calm. That is a job that I admire anybody who's able to do that. Because their young horses. Having the wind, smoke and all that sort of thing. And they were sealed up in the building. We can still get to them if we needed to but we wanted to try and close the air down in the building as much as we could if we couldn't get everything wet down. I was outside underneath a wet down round bale with a fire hose up my jumper waiting for the fire front to hit. I was under two round bales with the hose. So when the major fire front passed I was hoping I'd be able to pop out and then defend any of the bits and pieces that were going to be a threat to the building and the horses and the people inside.

Malcolm

How were the horses coping inside with the smoke?

Jonna

Lots of smoke. It was dark with smoke. We're all wearing wet down bandanas and it was that dark you almost needed a head torch. But I wasn't sure whether a head torch would even work. Because you know like a fog when you have torches in a fog you don't actually see much but just the beam's only about a metre long. So they're really hard to see making your eyes water.

Malcolm

So the horses are distressed.

Jonna

Yes, calling out.

Malcolm

But not banging themselves around. So being in the enclosed area is working?

Jonna

Just talking to them all. I think that if I had the choice again what I would do is I would just have all the horses in the building loose together so they could be together touching one another.

Malcolm

Rather than inside.

Jonna

Rather than saying No. "You here". "You there". "You there". And then you having to monitor this horse because he's broken his string. You don't need more jobs. You need less jobs.

Malcolm

Well what happened next? How did it unfold from there?

Jonna

The biggest fear was when the fire front came. It sounded to me as if it was a flock of 747s coming down at about 200 feet off the ground. The noise was ridiculous. I've never heard a noise like it. It was enough sound to make the ground shake. People don't understand that but that's what seemed to happen. And the wind now wasn't going in a particular direction. It was actually before the fire front. I remember all the rocks, little rocks on the ground, and leaves thrown straight up in the air.

So everything was going up. So the roof of the building was trying to lift off and then the fire front came and then obviously was in a particular direction which was really quite ferocious. Our task was to go around and make sure that all the buildings weren't having little spot fires breakout near them. And at this stage the cattle were completely undefended. I had to choose and I chose the horses over the cattle who were in the valley.

Malcolm

So the embers are attacking the house and you're defending that. How did you do that? How did it go?

Jonna

That went well. I learned a lot about the sprinkler system that I had on the stables at the time which was up under the eaves. I had these brass sprinkler heads that actually shoot a fan down. No moving parts. Shoot down a 45-degree angle. I didn't have those in the house so I had to do everything manually. So I spent the whole time running around the house hosing and then I'd get round and then I'd have to start again. It was a circus, a complete circus.

Malcolm

So the wind is just drying out

Jonna

The other thing that failed was that we had the man from DSE. I can't remember his name. But he fainted during the second (major) fire front. So we had to attend to him and do basic first aid with him and get him hydrated and take him to a safe location etc. And he wasn't completely unconscious but he just blacked out through lack of oxygen. And at exactly the same time the fire pumps went down. So now I didn't have any fire pumps.

So again I was fortunate. In the beginning when you asked me about what my preparations were and I had that special dam set up. That's when I engaged that dam because all I had to do was turn down a single valve and now I had gravity fed water from up the hill that was stored for this very reason. So while we had power, we had petrol, then we would pull that water until it was all spent. And then if we

needed to we could draw up on the second reserve and that's when I had to do it. So what saved the house was having that top dam available where we could just turn a valve and then let the water go through again.

Malcolm

And from what you said earlier about the setup on your stables. Then you'd have those fan sprinkler heads on your house?

Jonna

On my house now, everywhere, invaluable. And if I have the fire pump going and I know that a particular building is under threat I can just designate high pressure to that so I can really punch into the wind and then all the water can get blown back onto the house by the fire front which was the idea.

Malcolm

So a lot of people I know they have their sprinklers up high and the water just blows away. So these are really forcing down.

Jonna

Underneath the eave of the house at 45 degrees.

Malcolm

Sounds like a great system. And presumably copper or galvanized pipes?

Jonna

No. 12mm plastic garden hose.

Malcolm

So you've managed to defend the house with the gravity fed water. What happened after that?

Jonna

After that it was just mopping up. And the mopping up went on for 10 days in various forms. So then the next thing was really making sure what am I going to do with all these horses now I don't have paddocks anymore? There's no such thing as paddocks. So then I had to get them obviously out of the stables. They hadn't had a drink of water or anything to eat for ages so we had to attend to them from that point of view. But then we had to put them somewhere and build temporary fences for them and make a lot of phone calls to a lot of owners saying "Excuse me. When it's safe to do so would you mind coming to pick up your horse because we don't have any fences left?" Which a lot of people did. It was great.

But the whole time we're trying to deal with animals. Stray animals, injured and burned wildlife coming through the property. I remember the time between the two fire fronts we had mobs of kangaroos and wombats. It was a highway of animals. Largely native animals just coming through the property making their way to what they thought was a safe place. So lots of burnt animals. Lots of burnt deer. After we ran out of fuel so we had to then try and make a beeline to the nearest town which is Broadford to get some fuel. And that is maybe 10-12km away. But the roads were completely blocked. We needed chainsaws, 4WDs and person with you to be able to take the trip into Broadford.

And at that time the news had come on, obviously around the world presumably. But certainly in Australia and my son who was at college in the time had been told by some news source that Clonbinane had been wiped out and there were no survivors. So he presumed that we had been burned and that they didn't know where his parents were. And we didn't contact him until otherwise because the phones were down. So driving into Broadford we still weren't able to get any reception because the phone towers were still down. So we went and got fuel and then came back.

On our way to Broadford the freeway crossing from Clonbinane into Broadford was completely covered in dead animals completely intact. Sheep, kangaroos, deer and a horse all on the freeway that we had to manually move out of the way. They weren't burned. They were dead. I've never seen anything like that before in my life. I thought that was really unusual.

Malcolm

Suffocated presumably or superheat or something. Shocking. Now I know people watching they are thinking to themselves what happened to those cows?

Jonna

Oh what happened to the cows. Well the cows. I had to make a decision on them and I said that I would look after the horses or we would all look after the horses which we were able to do at that point. And then my brother's property, Andrews property, he had a very capable lady in charge of the property Elsa. And she could see that all the cattle, all my cows, were pressed up against the fence. And she came down in the quad bike had her fencing pliers with her as always. Snip snip and let the cattle into my valley. And all the cattle then assembled in the valley and they were still there after we're doing the mopping up. All I had to do was go down and give them hay. And they just started eating hay. I didn't even need fences for them. They were quite happy just to be there I suppose altogether and unburned.

So I didn't lose a single animal on the property that we owned or outside horses.

Malcolm

Fantastic result. Tell me then, we've heard a bit today about things like respiratory illnesses in horses afterwards and even a bit of psychological stress disorders. What did you observe there?

Jonna

Well as I was saying that at the time on the day I went to a one day event to the Smythesdale to compete so I could qualify later in the year. One of the horses that I took to that ended up going through the fires at Kinglake West because I couldn't get him home. After that he had no hope of being able to cope with a cross country. His aerobic capacity and his anaerobic capacity was poor. He would cough a whole lot more in his warm up now. He would cough for ages and then periodically he would do a bit of work and then he'd have another coughing bout and then he'd come good again. But that persisted all the way through. To this day he does that. He's retired and he's a lovely horse.

But that really did damage him. But for some of the others it didn't have any effect. From a psychological point of view it'd be interesting. I don't know that the fires had any net effect on the performance of my horses as a result of the fires. I can remember two days after the fires I had some people coming down to collect their young horses to be broken in, only three years old, and my dressage arena was still smouldering and I had SEC poles all the way around the arena and they were like a cigarette, they were just burning, there was smoke.

I rode those horses out of the stables down to the dressage arena and gave them a demonstration on walk, trot and canter. Left rein and right rein and had controllable horses while my dressage arena was still burning down. They had no problems with it.

Malcolm

That's surprising.

Jonna

I in a way think that the more clearly you train the animal the more reliable they are under duress. So if we can have a horse that is that responsive and that controllable through being well trained then you're probably more likely to be able to do things with that animal when there's huge environmental pressures such as Black Saturday. I still strongly believe that.

Malcolm

And you've told us that you've installed those fan sprinkler heads on the house. Are there any other things you've instituted since as a result of that experience? Any other changes that you made?

Jonna

Yes. The biggest change that I made is that every single drop of water that lands on my property is mine until it leaves. So I try to make every drop of water spend as much time on my property doing various functions for as long as I possibly can now. So I've become a lot more of a water miser and I'm quite well known for that. For that reason you can't function without water.

Malcolm

And I'm assuming from what you said earlier you'll be much more careful about leaving the property on an extreme day or a catastrophic day?

Jonna

Yes. That still is tough.

Malcolm

Yes. I can see that. And I appreciate enormously you sharing these experiences with us. Are there any things that you think people watching should know particularly about caring for their horses in preparation or during? Any things you really want to drive home to them?

Jonna

Absolutely. If you have a farm and you have animals of any sort, whether it be dogs or horses but we'll just talk about horses. The most effective thing that you can do for the horses' preservation your safety and the horses' safety and making sure that predictable outcomes can be achieved under duress is have your horse well trained. So from the moment that they're born we can do little bits of training just by having the foal maybe in a little cradle position so it understands that when you apply pressure here the way to remove that pressure is to step away quietly and move away quietly. That all then becomes translatable into halter training which then means that when we have the horse or the foal in this case or weaning being halter trained.

In a fire none of us had much warning on that day so we had to load up our horses. So we had to load up mares and foals only to load up yearlings and two year olds and all the rest of it. How well practised and how well verse or how well trained they are is going to determine whether you should attempt to move them or not. Because so many stories I've heard, and you've probably heard many more than me, that people attempted to move their horses but because they hadn't been practising loading and transporting the horses they nearly got caught and some people probably did. And that's not something that I had an issue with because I wasn't taking my horses anywhere. That was always the plan. So we already knew what the plan was. And the other thing was that I made a routine, and still to this day I do that is that. I drive the car or the feed wagon or whatever it is and I have a whistle. And this whistle will travel. I got a very loud whistle and it will whistle. That tells the horses "feeds on". So it means that for the cattle as well.

And you probably do that as well. The animal sense switch on to what's going on with those precursors to feeding. Those little noises and sounds and visual effects that you can do. And still to this day I can whistle up on the horses and if I carry they'll be the same. So then I know where they

are and I can say Right. You all in this paddock or “You stay here and here's a lot of feed.” So that was probably one of the best things that I accidentally did that I didn't realize how good it would be is to have the horses so that they're so well trained that they would be able to stay and handle being tied up during a bushfire in a stable and having them being able to be called upon to come up for feed so we could catch them and put them in a safe place.

Malcolm

We have heard a little bit that horses are pretty smart if they're outside of stable and the gates are open they will be able to move around. And if it's not super severe they'll find ways to move to the less threatening areas. Is that how you've experienced it? Do you think they have that kind of sense to move to?

Jonna

I think maybe. I think they would have some sense to move into safer areas. I mean for example all the native animals that were on the highway past the house during the fire they were all definitely moving downhill towards water. I never saw anything going the other way. They were all going the same direction. So maybe horses are a little bit the same if they don't have obstructions in their way. But the only problems I have with that is that there is some frightening event during the fire and explosion and they take flight. Then we're starting to say that maybe those horses they're now a hazard a public hazard. And they're a hazard to emergency services as well as like people.

Malcolm

Well yes we certainly wouldn't advocate opening gates onto the main roads or anything. But there's been a number of people talk about horses moving to ground that's already been burned for example and having the sense to do that.

Jonna

I haven't had that experience, but I would certainly believe it. I mean three days after, maybe it was the following day, I got called up to a property that was under threat to go and try and extract some horses out of a valley. And I went down the valley and I could see the fire front was coming. And I didn't have a whole lot of time. But these horses were relatively inexperienced and they weren't that easy to handle. They got flighty when I approached them and I thought this is a silly idea. One person, five horses this is not going to go well. So I walked out of there and I thought let's leave the horses where they are and we'll defend them to the best we can. And they were just tucked in their valleys. So they did what you described. They went into the safest area and they were there and they were fairly settled. And those horses survived as well.

Malcolm

But a good result nevertheless.

Jonna

Good result.

Malcolm

Thanks Jonna, I really appreciate your sharing that with us and certainly given that horrific day the experiences you've shared. Appreciate it.

Jonna

Thank you very much. I appreciate the time.