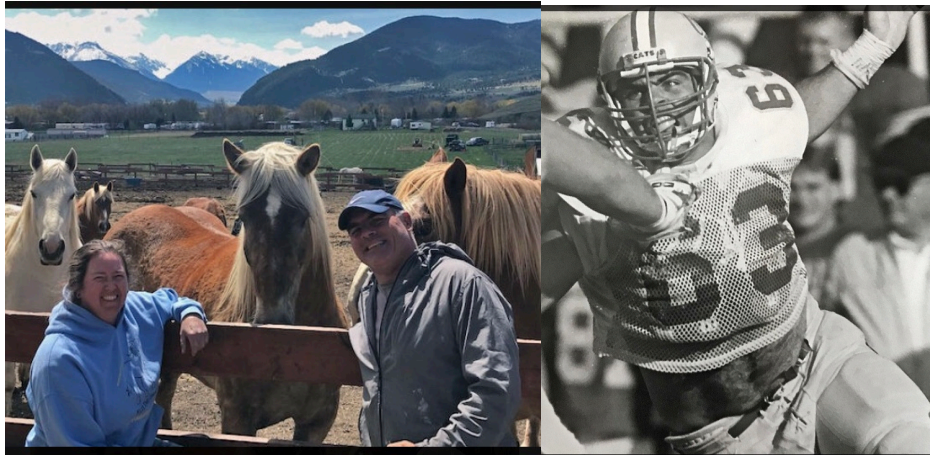


Former NFL linebacker Corey Widmer finds sanctuary from CTE symptoms with rescued draft horses



- JEFF WELSCH 406mtsports.com
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LIVINGSTON — Barely a year after solemnly declining his induction into the Montana Football Hall of Fame in hopes of delivering a message to parents about concussions, Corey Widmer is like an oversized kid in an ice cream parlor as he grabs a handful of apples and reaches from an observation deck toward an advancing brigade of equally burly draft horses.

This day, like more days than not since Widmer discovered the United In Light Draft Horse Sanctuary two years ago, is a good day.

The 50-year-old former Bozeman High and Montana State football standout — who played eight cranium-jarring seasons in the NFL — chuckles as he studies the juicy mess on the bear paw serving as his right hand “Applesauce,” he says, feigning disgust at the mix of crushed fruit and horse slobber.

A few feet away, a half-dozen of his newest friends stand at the wood rail and wait for another handout. In a lush 22-acre pasture below, two United In Light volunteers pound fence posts while another small pod constructs a pavilion in prep for next month’s Mane Event fundraiser, each periodically pausing to gaze at the sunny and snow-capped Absaroka Mountains rising in the distance.

Widmer absorbs the scene and shifts to a more somber tone as he reflects on his [ongoing battle with symptoms of chronic traumatic encephalopathy](#), the horse sanctuary that has become a sanctuary for an old football war horse, and a 100-year vision that has given him laser focus because that, he says, is “how you kick CTE’s ass.”

CTE is a degenerative disease of the brain associated with trauma. Ever since 2002, when a Nigerian doctor named Bennet Omalu performed an autopsy on former Pittsburgh Steelers standout Mike Webster, who died at age 50, the NFL has been at the center of a CTE storm.

“When I came out here I really didn’t have anything positive going on in my life and I was really sequestering myself from society,” he said, recalling the day two summers ago when his father and stepmother coaxed him into meeting with New Age-y chiropractor Deborah Derr and her 12 rescued draft horses.

“I was so skeptical of this place. That’s how jaded I was,” he said. “No place was going to get me out of this (funk). Well, horses were hanging out, it was a gorgeous day, there were tons of volunteers, it was just ... Montana. You couldn’t beat it on planet Earth. You really couldn’t. That’s when I knew this is a place where I

can be a part of something. I started coming out here and started realizing the depressing days weren't as intense and they weren't happening as many times. I started realizing, "This is like ammunition against CTE."

Widmer retired from the NFL in 1999 after eight years as a middle linebacker and, as he recalls it, some 400-500 blows to his head, each exacting a toll. The worst was a third-degree concussion in 1998 that "changed everything across the board."

Corey Widmer was an All-American at Montana State.
DEAN HENDRICKSON, For 406mtsports.com

For nearly two decades after quitting, he traveled the globe, engaging in increasingly dangerous endeavors that culminated in a 2007 paragliding accident in Chile that nearly paralyzed him. Widmer was hanging out solo in Australia — withdrawal from society is a CTE hallmark — when he [flew to Bozeman some 14 months ago to proffer a statement directed mostly at moms](#) to coincide with the Hall of Fame ceremonies.

"The problem with CTE is people don't have an understanding of what's going on," he said. "You're trying to figure out why, why, why, why ... because you're so desperate and you're willing to look under every rock. "And then you find something like this under one of those rocks." Widmer nods toward the horses and postcard-perfect Absaroka backdrop. His connection with Derr and her horses, he said, was instant, symbiotic and kindred, and he has thrown his weight behind them ever since.

Draft horses are the offensive linemen of the equine world — burly utilitarian commodities driven hard, fattened up and then cast away like livestock when their usefulness expires. All of Derr's animals, including one quarter horse and another Clydesdale mix in addition to the draft horses, were earmarked for the slaughterhouse; most were abused, and some have indentations on their muzzles from halters that were never removed until the horses were abandoned.

"She's an angel," Widmer said of Derr. "An absolute angel." Derr, originally from Chicago, was a chiropractor in southern California, treating humans and animals alike, when patients told her of a Percheron draft horse they'd rescued from a feedlot and asked her to help heal him. When Derr met the horse, it was so sore it flinched sharply when she tried to stroke its withers.



United In Light founder Deborah Derr lends a helping hand to Bentley, one of her 12 rescued draft horses.
JEFF WELSCH, 406mtsports.com

Over time, she worked on the animal, named Knight of Dreams, and learned more about draft horses, gentle giants she calls "Earth keepers" because they're "so grounded." In the process, Derr said, she began having visions — one of a healthy Knight of Dreams in her stewardship and another of her standing with her arms extended surrounded by some 20 draft horses in a large pasture. The former occurred almost immediately. Her patients decided they couldn't care for Knight of Dreams.

“I said, ‘I’ll take him,’ and that changed my life,” Derr said. “I honestly think I had a calling.” The latter scenario played out over time, first with Knight of Dreams in southern California, then with a few more horses on small acreage in the Chino Valley of northern Arizona and, for the past 12 years, an eight-acre parcel just off Interstate 90 southwest of Livingston that recently grew to 30.

Widmer’s parents had been supporters for more than four years, journeying over Bozeman Pass to muck pastures and brush the horses. While there one day two years ago, it occurred to them Derr had never met Corey. “He came out and loved it,” Derr recalled. “He was so happy.” Derr said she’s attentive to football only in passing and knew nothing of Widmer, an All-American at MSU. Soon after they met, he showed her a documentary about concussions, a topic she understood as a chiropractor but didn’t fully grapple with until she saw the parallels to Widmer and observed the daily challenges he began to share openly.

“I was like, ‘Oh my God, that is so Corey!’” she said of the film. “It’s heart-breaking. So at that point, as a chiropractor and a healer you want to do whatever you can to help him. Some of those guys, it’s horrible what they go through. “They don’t deserve that — just like draft horses.”

Widmer likens CTE symptoms to a pack of wolves seeking out the weak in a herd, isolating a victim and ultimately consuming it. The traditional pushback has been drugs, and Widmer has tried that route, noting he’s fortunate his circle of football friends avoided narcotics and thus he never was introduced to Oxycontin, or, “I could’ve very easily been a tragedy.”

“You can’t beat CTE with drugs,” he added as Derr nodded nearby. “You can hold it away a little bit, but you can’t get in front of it with drugs. Drugs will push it aside, but it’s for a different feeling. It’s a masking feeling. It’s not a true fight. “The only way to fight it is two ways: People do it with drugs, or you can do it this way.”

In Widmer's case, that means United In Light, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that has become his anchor. He is so impassioned by the two-way rescue experience — people healing horses, horses healing people — that he has created a trust called Gentle Giants he’ll fund through his Montana rental properties. He plans a \$10,000 annual scholarship for an MSU student in the name of one of Derr’s draft horses; in return, students will be required to spend eight hours a week nurturing their animals.

Derr and Widmer also see more growth for the sanctuary, which is open to the public from 10 a.m. to noon every Saturday in the summer and the first Saturday of each month the remainder of the year. Their annual Mane Event fundraiser is set for 1-6 p.m. June 15.

Widmer says he draws inspiration from a variety of fronts, most notably the other volunteers. Bess Harris, who has lived in Bozeman for 30 years and is a two-time cancer survivor, was, like Widmer, doubtful when her curiosity was aroused by a newspaper ad for an open house. Her skepticism lasted one visit. Now Harris is one of the nonprofit’s five board members. “You know, it’s a terrible analogy, but it’s like a drug,” she said. “You just keep coming back. It never gets old and it’s always uplifting.”

A recent crowning moment was the purchase, with Widmer's backing, of 22 acres to expand the rescue operation for more horses, which arrive from around the country. He envisions cars one day lining the gravel lane leading to the sanctuary when music is echoing from the pavilion.

“I was thinking the other day, I can buy 10 houses, buy 50 cars and buy 70 yachts and not feel as good as being a part of something like this,” he said. For Widmer, the healing is twin-pronged.

He points to the picturesque setting, the volunteers and the horses and says, “Now I’ve got a whole bunch of friends to help me through CTE.” He’s also regularly receiving low-level laser therapy, or cold laser, from Derr, who also uses the technology to reduce pain in her horses.

Arizona Chiropractic Neurology describes cold laser as “an exciting application of light therapy that has been shown to decrease inflammation ... improve blood flow, improve pain levels, and improve neurological function.” “It’s definitely not traditional, at least not here in the States,” said Derr, a shaman and devotee of alternative healing called “Reiki” that focuses on the physical, emotional and spiritual equally.

“For Corey, we take it a day at a time. Anybody who has (CTE), it’s a day-to-day thing. He’s got good days, he’s got bad days. But he’s got more good days now, that’s for sure.”

With United In Light as his primary lure, Widmer splits his time between his properties in the Gallatin Valley and a winter retreat in the Desert Southwest. Widmer and Derr have become best of friends, and he was there when the Percheron that led to the organization’s creation 16 years ago, Knight of Dreams, “crossed over.”

Widmer has considered investing time in advocating for tackle-free youth football leagues. But the thought that just one athlete from one of his programs playing at a higher level and eventually developing CTE is an outcome he can’t reconcile.

“He’s the most compassionate man I’ve ever met,” Derr said. “He overwhelms me with his compassion for what we’re doing. And I know he really wanted to create a legacy for himself because of his condition. It just seems like a perfect match.”

As Derr said, there are good days and bad days. Widmer never knows when he awakens each morning whether he’ll be in darkness or light, an outcome that can be dictated by the positioning of his head on a pillow. Widmer also is acutely aware that at 50 he is entering a decade in which symptoms of CTE can strengthen their stranglehold on its football victims. The temptation to flee, perhaps to New Zealand or Chile or Switzerland, is never far from his thoughts. But then ...

“Every time I’ve had thoughts about going overseas, I’d think about this place and think about giving up something that’s giving me so much,” he said. “And it’s also kind of like giving up on your prescription. When push comes to shove I can get on an airplane, come up here and throw a couple hundred apples out there and at least have a part of my life that’s mine.

“It’s not CTE’s.”

This article originally ran on 406mtsports.com.

United In Light site: www.draftrescue.com

Annual Fundriaser THE MANE EVENT site: www.gotdraft.net

Open house June and July- Every Saturday 10-Noon