

New Kissing Spine Surgery Done; Hope for a Cure

By [Susan Salk](#)

OffTrackThoroughbreds.com



Olivia, who has Kissing Spine, is smooched by her first owner, Julianne Ragone

In a pioneering effort to alleviate the debilitating effects of Kissing Spine in horses, a surgical veterinarian in Ithaca, New York, performed a novel, minimally invasive surgery on an off-track Thoroughbred suffering with the condition.

Dr. Christy Cable, DVM, DACVS, performed surgery on [Heartly Smart](#), a beautiful gray mare, on Feb. 18. If it proves effective, it will offer a whole new world of possibilities for treating Kissing Spine, she says.

“Historically, the surgical treatment for Kissing Spine in Western Europe was to cut the dorsal spines out with a bone saw,” Cable says, noting that the procedure was both expensive and invasive. “The procedure could change the shape of the horse’s back and require an extensive recovery.”

But the minimally invasive procedure she performed during a two-and-a-half-hour operation last month could finally offer a far less costly and invasive option, if all goes well, she says.

The procedure, which was first tried in England on 35 horses diagnosed with Kissing Spine, was reported on recently in a paper published in [Veterinary Surgery](#). English veterinarian Richard Coomer, the lead author on a paper on the surgery reports that 95 percent of the equines who underwent the procedure recovered.

Race name: Heartly Smart

Sire: Lion Hearted

Dam: Refinedøsmart, by Dance Brightly

Foal date: March 9 2007øThe study intrigued me because (surgeons) had done a number of horses, 35 to be exact, and by making minimally invasive keyhole incisions í removed the pain and increased the horseø mobility,ö Cable says.

The surgery on Heartly Smart went as follows:

Radiographs of the mareø spine were taken, and four areas of kissing spine identified and marked with metal tags. An ultrasound was also used to pinpoint the exact location of the økissingö or touching spine.

After the mare was prepped and given a sedation regimen, similar to what is prescribed for a horse undergoing a dental procedure, incisions were made at the trouble spots, and an interspinous ligament desmotomy, or cutting of ligaments, was performed.

The theory behind the procedure, initially put forth by the British veterinarians, was that the small incisions cutting the ligaments would alleviate the pain, Cable explains.

But the results have been even more promising.



A quiet moment between Olivia (JC: Heartly Smart) and Ragone

Radiographs taken of European horses six weeks after surgery indicate that space, which was so lacking between points on the spine, was actually opening up, apparently reversing the “kissing” syndrome, Cable says.

If all goes well with the New York Thoroughbred, who has been donated to [ReRun, Inc.](#), the surgery could represent a break-through in the treatment of a syndrome that has often sidelined horses, she notes.

“If the surgery is a success, it will open doors for horses and owners facing the worst cases of Kissing Spine. It’s very promising.”

Small animal veterinarian Julianne Ragone originally purchased the mare as a cross-country and eventing prospect in October 2011.

The pair went to work right away, and all was well for about a year.

Then, in February 2012, Heartly Smart started exhibiting signs of acute soreness in her back.

“She was grumpy when I saddled her and when I mounted her, she would crumble to the ground as if I weighed 3,000 pounds,” Ragone says. “My weight was stable, so I knew there was another problem.”

After extensive diagnosis, followed by a regimen of acupuncture, chiropractic adjustments, medication and saddle fittings, Heartly Smart showed some improvement, but eventually worsened.

It got to the point that when she was ridden, she would invert her back, trying to escape pressure on her topline, Ragone adds.

Ragone connected with the fellow veterinarian and donated her lovely mare so that the novel procedure could be tried, and the possibility of a better treatment for Kissing Spine found.

It is too soon to say whether the procedure has worked, the mare’s surgeon says.



What a cutie!

After a regimen of hand walking for two weeks, Heartly Smart will be given physical therapy exercises to encourage her to stretch and mobilize her back. At the six-week point, new radiographs will be taken to determine whether the points in her back that were "kissing" have moved.

If they have, and if she continues to do well, the prognosis is that she will once again make an excellent riding horse!

And there to help her recuperate is Susan Swart, director of the [New York chapter of ReRun, Inc.](#)

Swart was understandably excited when she spoke of her decision to partner in an ongoing effort to help not just one Thoroughbred, but all who are severely affected by Kissing Spine.

"Dr. Cable is my vet as well as our ReRun chapter vet. When she was offered the opportunity to perform the surgery and found out that the horse was an OTTB, she contacted me immediately," Swart says. "She asked if I'd be willing to take the horse and rehabilitate her.

"I was honored she would ask."

Swart has a particular love of rehab work, and as a dressage rider, is attuned to nuanced horse movements; she knows what to look for as Heartly Smart recovers.

If the surgery proves successful, the low-risk, relatively inexpensive surgery — about \$1,000 — could mark the beginning of a very hopeful future for horses and owners grappling with Kissing Spine, she adds.

"I think this could be a very big deal," she says.

Off-TrackThoroughbreds.com will publish ongoing updates on this pioneering OTTB.