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“My Brain Feels Better When I’m With Horses”

by Lexi Rohner

Lexi Rohner’s daughter Genevieve has been transformed by horses. Now she’s determined to make it to the Paralympics.

She is a triplet, born at 28 weeks. They were considered micro-preemies. As a premature infant, Genevieve’s underdeveloped nervous system led to a diagnosis of cerebral palsy, sensory integration disorder, as well as her right leg bones being in the wrong position. Later she was also diagnosed with amblyopia. One of her brothers, Cole, had a stroke at birth, also resulting in cerebral palsy and seven other diagnoses. They spent nearly three months in two different hospitals.

In 2011, Cole participated in a 12-week hippotherapy clinical trial with Ride On Therapeutic Horsemanship, a USEF/United States Para-Equestrian Association Para Dressage Center of Excellence. Hippotherapy was so impactful for Cole that I decided to have Genevieve ride as well. Riding wasn’t their first sport, though. I have coached figure skating for 25 years and am a former competitor. I chose to put the triplets on the

ice at age two, being in a unique position to aid them with a therapeutic activity. As a skating coach, I knew the special look when a little one stepped on the ice—evident that skating was in their soul.

Seeing the way that Genevieve connected with the horses was the same. It hit my gut and my heart instantly. It was a privilege watching her fall in love, immediately owning it as though she had been wandering on earth, patiently waiting for us to realize this was her place.

When she was a small child, we painfully watched her struggle to digest any and all emotions and her surroundings. With horses, she went from daily screaming fits and physical difficulties to a child who would begin to consider being social. We had tried all manner of traditional therapy (physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, even sensory-specific occupational



therapy), with minor results. Then, one day, this beautiful little girl we couldn't figure out how to help, sat on a horse. At 13, she is now articulate and focused.

My husband and I were both competitive athletes and are still active in our respective sports. While we encourage our children to finish what they begin, we have never pushed competition. We were thus surprised at Genevieve's drive for riding. At age five, we were watching the U.S. Figure Skating Championships and she suddenly stated, "Mommy, I am going to the Olympics." I told her she would have to spend more time on the ice, miss a few parties and play dates, etc., to which she stomped her foot and emphatically declared, "No, Mommy, HORSES."

In the past nine years, she progressed from hippotherapy to therapeutic riding to para dressage, discovering not only a love of horses, but a love of competing. I understood the possibility of competition but had not considered her level of attraction to it. In her first foray

at Ride On's annual show, she entered seven events and was thrilled with any and all ribbons she received. I recognized that energy and questioned where this might go.

She rode every horse in the barn while I dreaded the day she would fall off for the first time. In any sport, there is a breaking line a participant might not cross. Those who do are often proven to be committed. Would she get back on? That first fall came at a Ride On camp when she was five. They assured me she had fallen, cried, and climbed right back on. That solidified that this was no mere hobby.

Her excitement could not be contained. Her connection with all the horses she rode provided calmness and a freedom of movement that fed her system in a way nothing else had. It was life-changing for our family dynamic. This little girl who had once said "friends are bad" began developing into an accomplished rider.

As Genevieve progressed, we sadly moved away from Ride On and coach Megan

"Seeing the way that Genevieve connected with the horses hit my gut and my heart instantly," her mother, Lexi Rohner, says.



PHOTO: DEBORAH HICKEY PHOTOGRAPHY



"In watching Genevieve develop into a proficient rider, passionate and intuitive with horses, we see her living her commitment and drive daily," writes mom Lexi Rohner.

McQueeney, though we had clinic opportunities with her and others, including several with U.S. Para Dressage Chef d'Equipe Michel Assouline, USEF's Head of Para-Equestrian Coach Development and High-Performance Consultant. Under the hot California sun in 2017, Genevieve dutifully performed whatever maneuvers Assouline requested of her, prompting his surprise when he assumed she was a small 14-year-old and discovered she was only nine. She was then allowed to be classified as a para-equestrian and began a more focused pursuit of her goals. For the past four years, she has remained the youngest U.S. classified para-equestrian.

A year after we moved to Utah, Genevieve competed in California in her first recognized shows. She was the only para rider and two to five years younger than all her competitors. She trained on an older quarter horse in Utah and competed on a Prix St. Georges Morgan in California, qualifying for the California Junior Championships, California Dressage Society Regionals, and United States Dressage Federation Regionals at Training level. She placed fifth and sixth overall in each competition, earning a CDS Top 10 placement.

The following year, under coach Sydni Peterson, Genevieve progressed from Training to Second level, competing in her first FEI grade level para tests, and scoring a high of 69% on Chelsea Sharer's generously donated 19-year-old Arabian/Saddlebred cross, Fame's Rising Star. She quickly outgrew Star and moved on to Peterson's Warmblood/Arabian mare Tamar Royal Arrival, showing at First level, test three.

Recently, we have been fortunate to find an incredible friend and mentor in fellow Grade IV para equestrian and FEI World Equestrian Games™ silver medalist (and now 2020 U.S. Para Dressage Paralympic Team member) Kate Shoemaker. Highly accomplished as well as being an equine veterinarian, Shoemaker lends to us her expertise and kindness in a way often not seen in competitive sports.

As Genevieve's parent, I've learned that sticker shock is, of course, part of this equestrian world. The cost to allow her to follow her dreams prompted me to seek out appropriate sponsors where possible. To

say we are grateful for the support offered thus far is a gross understatement.

Genevieve has never wavered from her goals, and I often ruminate about parents that push their children into a sport or activity. It's work enough when your child is truly desirous. It seems beyond me to insist. I have always upheld that I will not want this more than she does. My job is to open doors she is unable to and support her through them. With an overarching purpose of her own making, Genevieve is determined to become the youngest Paralympic equestrian in 2024. Her assertion to me is always, "There's no guarantee I'll make the team or medal, but someone will, so why not try?"

In watching Genevieve develop into a proficient rider, passionate and intuitive with horses, we see her living her commitment and drive daily. In 2020, Genevieve was named to the USEF Para Emerging Athletes list with two horses and earned 69% at the 2020 Adequan® USEF Para Dressage National Championship at the Tryon International Equestrian Center in Mill Spring, N.C., on a catch ride she had spent three hours on prior to showing.

Currently the only competitive para rider in Utah, she is also usually the only child at shows. With sparse dressage in Utah and no high-level equestrian athletes, she is determined to make everyone proud and become the next one. Grateful for having horses in her life, she sums it up best with this: "My brain feels better when I'm with horses."

To say my daughter's life in the equestrian world has been a journey is not correct, as this implies that something has ended. In fact, the journey is just beginning to unfold.

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United States Para-Equestrian Association
uspea.org

US Equestrian's para-equestrian page
usef.org/compete/disciplines/para-equestrian

Genevieve Rohner on Instagram
instagram.com/gr_paraequestrian/