

Unstoppable Stephanie Putman

Driving gives equestrian freedom following tragic accident

■ JANEANE REAGAN

"I get to feel competent, and I feel beautiful again."

These are the words about carriage driving which came from a special spectator attending this year's Live Oak Combined Driving Event. This is a spectator who can light up not only a room with her smile, enthusiasm and energy but an entire field, which is where, between marathon obstacles, I caught up with 29-year-old quadriplegic carriage driver Stephanie Putman.

Stephanie, her parents, a close girl friend, and the most recent part of her support team, Kaz, a three-year-old yellow lab assist dog, had all traveled from California to Florida. They made the trip to see one of the top CDE competitions in the country, to watch Stephanie's trainers compete and to test Stephanie's ability to handle the long flight and climate change.

Stephanie is a full quadriplegic who has no sensation or functionality in her limbs below the level of her collar bones. Nonetheless, in 2011, Stephanie completed her first combined driving event at Shady Oak, CA, and has since participated in several more.

Stephanie had grown up riding hunters and jumpers and became the captain of the Cal Poly Tech polo team while working on her degree in graphic communications.

Horses were a passion she shared with her mother and a core part of her life. On August 23, 2009, at age 24, an injury (that she does not choose to describe, but is quick to note was not horse- or car-related) left her with a spinal fracture at C4-C5.

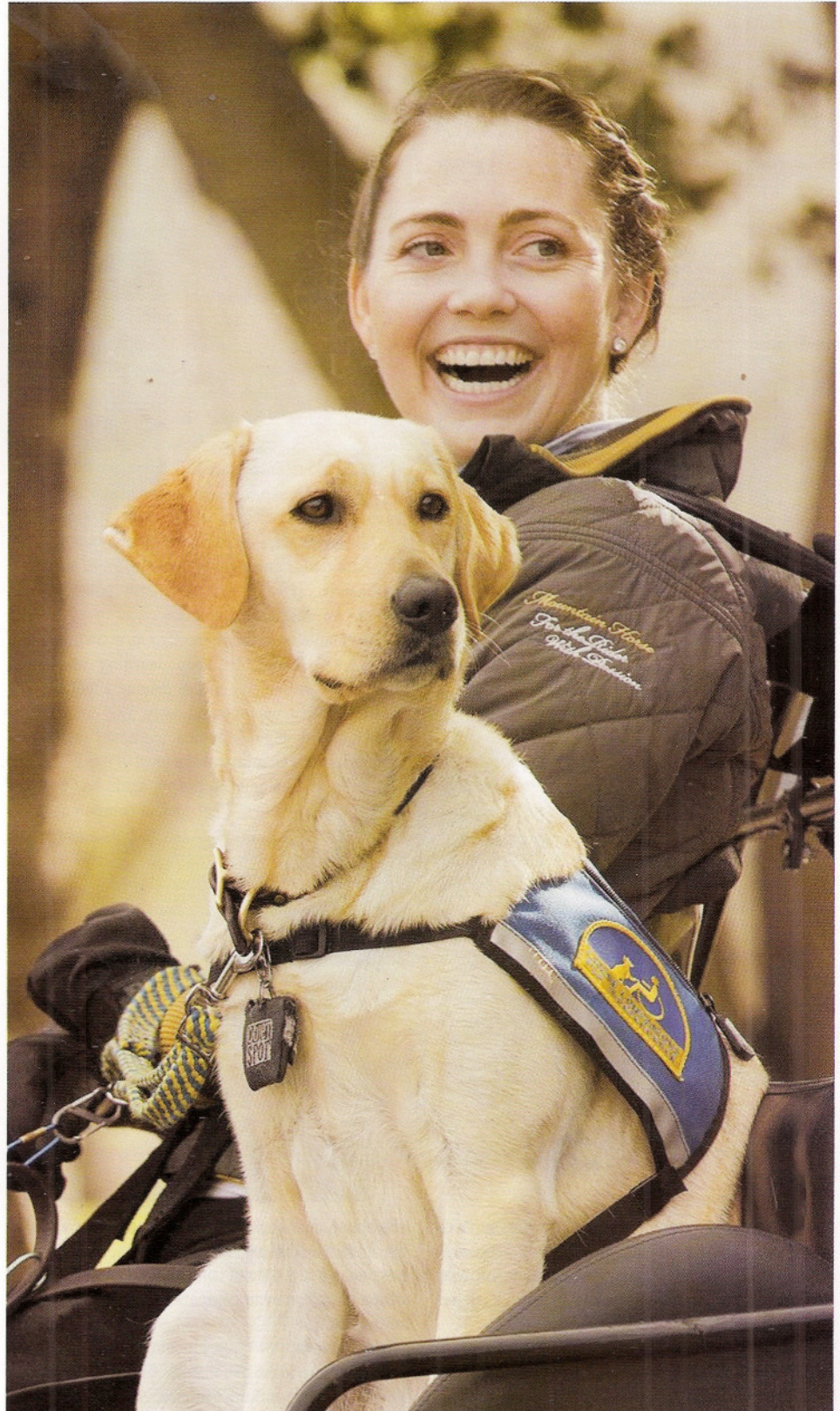
After months of intensive and grueling rehabilitation therapy Stephanie returned home determined to continue work on her masters in advertising even if it was only one class at a time.

"My mother knew horses had to be in my life," she said. "Mom did the research to find a way to make that happen."

Riding horses was not an option because of Stephanie's lack of core muscle strength and having only the use of her biceps and shoulder muscles. Driving horses, however, did offer a possibility.

To pursue that option Stephanie and her parents became involved with Access Adventures at Rush Ranch in Fairfield, California, a program specializing in carriage driving for wheelchair-bound individuals. Stephanie soon found that driving a horse gave her back a part of the freedom she had lost and reconnected her to the animals she loved. Because she is a quadriplegic, more ingenuity and creativity was required to give her control of the reins and the best use of the muscles she still had.

A wheelchair with a narrowed back similar to the ones used by paralytic skiers freed Stephanie to move her shoulders forward and backward. This action moved her arms which were braced by leather wrist cuffs equipped with hooks that allow her to "hold the reins."



Stephanie Putman and Kaz, her assist dog. Stephanie uses a system of clips in order to hold the reins while driving. Photos courtesy of Stephanie Putman.



Christie B Photography '13



Top: Stephanie began competing in CDEs after an accident left her a quadriplegic. Bottom: Stephanie, Kaz and Shadow, the champion Morgan gelding she is currently borrowing.

Among the many people who rallied to make Stephanie's goal of driving competitively come true was Jacque Poppin, World Champion Disabled Driver from the Netherlands.

Jacque and his wife, Eve, flew to California and spent a week coaching Stephanie and helping her work out the challenges she faced just before she entered her first CDE.

In carriage driving the voice and whip are the aids that replace the seat bones and legs used in riding. One of the effects of Stephanie's injury was partial paralysis of her vocal cords. She could hardly be heard when she spoke.

In addition, she would also be unable to use the whip, so voice commands would be even more crucial. Stephanie attributes her burning desire to communicate with the horses as the drive that helped her gain back her voice.

Today her voice is clear, strong and full of energy. As a disabled driver she is allowed to have a passenger who operates the whip at her request.

Stephanie describes her connection with the horses she drives as "communication that comes directly from the horse's mouth to my heart."

In 2012, Stephanie started working with one of the US's top international singles drivers, Leslie Berndle. Stephanie lights up even more when she describes her relationship with her mentor, Leslie.

"We just clicked. She gets me. We laugh so much but she challenges me as well," she said.

In addition to having Leslie as a coach, Stephanie also acquired the loan of Shadow, a three-time US singles champion Morgan gelding owned and internationally competed by Scott Monroe.

Shadow, now age 20 but still going strong, remains on lease with Stephanie.

Stephanie describes herself as an evolving driver.

"I'm so happy to keep learning and keep challenging myself. When I'm driving I feel like my medical issues disappear. I have the freedom to move forward. My doctors ask me how I can be this functional with an injury at the level of mine. The joy of driving and being with horses again has brought life back to my body. I get to feel competent again and when Leslie took me to try on hats and scarves for competition, I felt beautiful again."

Her advice for others dealing with life changing injuries is "Don't limit yourself or always accept what others tell you are your limits. Be willing to try new things. Surround yourself with good people who can help you go toward your goals. Don't give up your dreams."

One of the lessons that Stephanie says she has learned from living with her disabilities is that

she has to take care of her body and be accountable for it so she can pursue her passion. Part of that passion is her dream of competing at the Para-World CDE and maybe even competing in non-para driving competitions.

In the future she hopes to join her trainers, Leslie and Scott here in Florida to take advantage of the high quality of competitions in this area and on the East Coast. Stephanie's favorite quote by JRR Tolkien sums up her vision for the future: "A single dream is more powerful than a thousand realities."

“...THE JOY OF DRIVING AND BEING WITH HORSES AGAIN HAS BROUGHT LIFE BACK TO MY BODY.”

BETTER PROS
Better Experiences

Rate My Horse PRO
SET THE STANDARD™

*Rate & Review Horse Professionals,
Equine Court Documents,
News & More*

www.ratemyhorsepro.com

Like us on

JOE SCOZZAFAVA
Professional Farrier Service

Corrective & Hot Shoeing Available

(352) 754-2740
(352) 279-4199 (Cell)



FLORIDA
Sporthorse
SPRING 2014

Jumanji

(Vitalis x Freestyle x Equador)