

Sara's Courage

After a seemingly non-threatening fall from her pony, this determined young rider suffered months of healing before trekking forward to conquer her fears.

by Summer Best.

It was August 20, 2002.

A little girl lay very still in the Intensive Care Unit. Wires snaked around her body; little rhythmic beeps echoed throughout the room at Shands Children's Hospital in Gainesville, Florida.

"Riding accident," the doctors and medical staff whispered.

But there were no major bumps or bruises. No cracked bones or concussions to speak of. For 24 hours, experts monitored the 7-year-old's condition.

Finally, Sara Zufelt was released into a normal hospital room, where she would remain for the next two weeks. Her mother, Terri Lamerand, guilt-ridden and exhausted, worried and prayed over her only child. What had happened? How could she have missed the signs?

Two days earlier, Sara, a jolly, horse-crazy kid, was wearing her breeches, boots, purple safety helmet and a big smile as she cantered her palomino pony mare, "Goldie," in a riding lesson. The hour progressed perfectly. Sara and Goldie were beginning to understand each other's rhythms - they looked like a team.

But then, Sara gave the pony a cue to break down into a trot.

Goldie hit the brakes a little hard, jostling Sara loose from her tack and catapulting her over the pony's left shoulder.

When Sara's body thudded into the earth, it forced all air from her lungs. She gasped and wheezed, searching for oxygen.

"I landed on my left side," Sara remembers. "It felt scary because I couldn't breathe for a minute."

After a brief rest, she was back up on the pony. Sara took Goldie for a few spins around the ring, just to prove she could, and then they called it a day.

"I took the pony, washed her off, and put her away," Terri remembers. "We thought everything was OK."

Complaints of Pain

That night, Sara mentioned pain in her left shoulder.

"Nothing seemed broken or out of place, and it made sense that she would be a little sore, so I gave her some Tylenol and we went to bed," Terri says. "The next morning, her shoulder still hurt some, but she went to school."

Sara's school nurse called Terri at work the next day, saying that Sara was still complaining of shoulder pain. They immediately took her to a local hospital, where X-rays showed no fractures or broken bones. Doctors sent her home, advising her to stay on a liquid diet.

That night, Sara was in terrible pain and ran a high fever. At the hospital again, a CAT scan showed that Sara's spleen was ruptured, and she was bleeding internally.

An ambulance rushed the 7-year-old directly to Shands, an hour's drive north of their home in Summerfield, Florida.

"She had been bleeding internally from Thursday afternoon until Friday night," Terri explains. "I felt terrible. They immediately put her in ICU, and it took 12 hours to see if the bleeding would stop on its own."

Because Sara was so young, doctors hesitated to operate unless necessary. Their hope, according to Terri, was that by keeping Sara very still, the healing would begin. Photo Courtesy of Terri Lamerand
Sara and Terri had saved up for months to spend \$1,000 on the 12.2-hand palomino pony mare.

What Causes Ruptured Spleen?

Most spleen injuries occur during vehicle accidents or are the result of domestic violence or sports injuries. Football players are particularly prone to spleen damage.

Occasionally, we hear of less-common spleen issues. For example, in August 2005, Karen Wellmeyer, 37, of Boca Raton, Florida, was sitting behind the first-base dugout of a Marlins baseball game when she was hit by an airborne wooden bat. The bat jammed into her spleen, causing an

injury much like Sara's.

The spleen, an organ situated in the left upper quadrant of the abdomen, under the diaphragm and lateral to the stomach, is responsible for cleaning blood, destroying old red blood cells and fighting infection. When blood flows through the spleen, white blood cells attack and remove any foreign invaders - protecting the body against infection.

In Sara's case, the left shoulder pain she felt the first night after her injury, known as the Kehr sign, results when blood from an injured spleen irritates the diaphragm and creates referred pain.

It's possible to survive without a spleen, but because Sara was so young, doctors hoped to foster the healing without surgery. People living without spleens are more vulnerable to malaria, meningitis, and other infections.
Hospital Days

For 12 days, Sara was captive in the hospital bed of the fourth floor at Shands. Terri stayed at her daughter's side the entire time.

"She was kind of lethargic and she stayed very quiet on her own," Terri says. "We watched TV together, and mostly I was there to take care of her."

Terri, who for eight years has been assistant manager at J.J. Pletcher's Payton Training Center in Summerfield, called her office to explain the situation. J.J. and a friend drove Terri's car to Gainesville so she would have access to transportation.

Sara, in the meantime, kept a positive attitude, played cards, watched TV and saw visitors. Her only food source was an IV. Photo Courtesy of Terri Lamerand

Trainers Stacy Lane, Audrey Kitchens and Tanya Graef have been instrumental in helping Sara grow into a confident rider.

"I kept thinking, 'I hope I get out of here soon!' " she said.

Terri and Sara have no family in the North Central Florida area. Terri's parents are both deceased, and Sara's father lives in New York. Still, many visitors made the trip to Gainesville to see the positive little girl. Their farrier, their friend from Seminole Feed and their barn foreman stopped in to see her. Others sent flowers and called with their concerns.

After two weeks, Sara's body worked its way through the miraculous healing process, and she was given the nod to go home.

But first, the rite of passage.

Every child who stays at Shands Children's Hospital is given a plain, white ceiling tile to paint. Some children create simple designs - basic stick figures. Others are more ornate, with sailboats, palm trees, dolphin, dogs and horses. After the tile is decorated, hospital staff installs the tile somewhere within the hospital's ceiling structure for everyone to enjoy.

"When you walk through the door, it's beautiful," Terri says. "Even the ceilings of the doctor's offices are filled with decorated tiles."

The tens of thousands of children who come through the doors are literal Michelangelos.

On her tile, Sara chose to paint a cheery rainbow, with vibrant blues, yellows, reds and greens. The words, "I love God" were painted in red.

Sara was allowed to go home on the 12th day of her hospital stay, but only if she agreed to three days of additional bed rest, followed by two weeks of staying at home. When doctors gave her the final OK, Sara was allowed to attend school, but without running or playing.

"I wasn't allowed to ride for three months," Sara says.
Back in the Saddle

During the those inactive days, Sara kept thinking about her pony.

"She didn't want to ride Blondie," Terri remembers. "She wanted to ride other ponies, but she didn't trust Blondie yet."

Sara also stuck with a western saddle in the beginning, and she never rode faster than a trot.

"I was ready to sell Blondie because Sara wouldn't canter her," Terri says. "I didn't know what to do."

In the summer of 2004, nearly two years after the accident, Sara spent several weeks riding in a summer camp - still without cantering. Most of the riders befriended Sara, asking few questions about her fear. But one camper drew the line.

Photo Courtesy of Terri Lamerand

Sara's goal is to show at Horse Shows in the Sun (HITS) and to one day ride on the U.S. Olympic Team.

"One of the others was making fun of me," Sara says, her jaw getting a little resolute as she tells the story. "She was making fun of me because I wouldn't canter. It mad me so mad that I wanted to come home and canter

when they weren't watching."

Sara told her mom of her plan, and Terri ran to get the video camera.

"I was thinking, 'If she's going to canter, we'd better get this on record!' " Terri says. "My heart was going, 'da-dump-da-dump-da-dump-da-dump' really fast."

Sara cantered Goldie that day in a 20-meter circle. At one point, Goldie coughed, and Sara tipped forward in the saddle a bit. Terri stepped in before her daughter could get scared again.

The next day at camp, Sara cantered in front of everybody.

"I went up to that person who was giving me a hard time, and I told her," Sara says. "And she just walked away."

Mothers & Daughters

Behind most great young female riders, stands a proud mom. Usually, it's a mom who loves horses, too. The three-way bond that connects this mom-daughter-horse triangle is complicated, stronger than steel, more tumultuous than tsunamis.

Terri and Sara are no exception, and their relationship is anchored deeper than most. In addition to their scary time following Sara's accident, they have learned to lean on each other as they live on a single income and juggle life's random curve balls.

Sometimes, they don't see eye-to-eye. Terri, a certified riding instructor, isn't always the best person to coach her daughter, so they ask for help from outside trainers. Dabbling in dressage and other flat classes, Sara worked her way up to jumping, and now Terri is her main jumping coach. They work the ponies nearly every day of the week, except for Mondays. At their home in Summerfield, Terri and Sara have created a dynamic practice jump course and dressage ring. Their three dogs, Precious, Bubbles, and Tater Tot, are also part of the family, running around, enjoying the perfect life. Photo by Summer Best

Terri and Sara feed the ponies Seminole Blue Ribbon High Efficiency twice daily, coupled with quality orchard/alfalfa hay. They add one ounce of ground flax seed once daily for added coat condition.

Sara has begun jumping not only Goldie, whose show name is "Up in the Clouds," but also two other ponies, Buster, "High in the Sky," and Sparkles, "Sparkle in the Snow."

"I'm trying to move up to 18", " Sara says, of the jump height. "I'd probably be up to 2' now, if it weren't for me falling off."

Sara, a fourth-grader at Belleview Santos Elementary School, has a theory about falling off.

"I think it made me more advanced (the accident in 2002), because you have to fall off 100 times before you can be a good rider," she says.

Terri, who strongly supports her daughter without adding too much pressure, chuckles at Sara's determination. It's a feeling she knows well.

"We have each other, don't we?" Terri says to Sara, wrapping an arm around her daughter and walking in step with the 10-year-old.

The smile on Sara's face, a big grin with adorable dimples, says it all.