

AFTER DEVASTATING INJURY, OLES FINDS NATIONAL ABILITY CENTER

THERAPEUTIC RIDING MAKES WORLD OF DIFFERENCE FOR HER



Lara Oles has set her sights on the Para Olympics.

By Ben Bannister
STAFF WRITER

The work of the National Ability Center in Park City, Utah, has made a difference in the life of wildlife biologist Lara Oles.

"I would not be where I am today without NAC," Oles said.

Oles, a wildlife biologist for the Kemmerer Ranger District, found her life forever changed by a skiing accident April 4, 2006.

"It was icy and I was going fast," Oles recalls. "There was nothing and then there was a post. It was a freak accident."

The accident caused massive injuries and left Oles paralyzed on the right side of her body.

"When I hit the post, it instantly unplugged the three main nerves from my spinal cord that run my arm," Oles explained. "I got three evulsions and it never comes back. They can't put that back into your spinal cord."

And these weren't the only injuries

Oles suffered.

"I also broke five ribs, three vertebrae, my clavicle and punctured a lung," Oles said, "and I got a spinal cord injury that caused stroke-like symptoms in my right leg."

The rare condition that Oles is referring to is called a spinal stroke.

"It's a very rare condition that happens because of damage to one side of your spinal cord," Oles explained. "By the time they noticed it, I had a death in part of my spinal cord and I couldn't walk."

So Oles had to learn to walk again, just like a stroke victim.

"There's still a lot of things I can't do," Oles commented. "I can't run. My right leg is still very weak, and when I get stressed it'll start bouncing like somebody with cerebral palsy."

It was not long after the accident that Oles learned of the National Ability Center.

"I just rode my own horses for years, and then I went to the world equestrian games in Kentucky and saw the Para Equestrian classes," Oles said. "It made me say 'You know, I spend seven months sitting in this town not riding my own horses.'"

The athletes at the Para Equestrian games inspired Oles to try dressage again.

"Since riding outdoors is almost impossible in Wyoming in the winter," Oles remarked, "and the small town where we live doesn't have an indoor arena, I called up the National Ability Center in Park City. That's how it all started."

After a year of riding at the NAC, Oles was nominated for an award with the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horse-

manship International.

"Amazingly, I was selected as the PATH International Independent Adult Equestrian of the Year," Oles continued, "and was lucky enough to get an all-expenses paid trip back to Lexington, Ky., to accept my award at the awards ceremony."

After the ceremony, a woman from the Carlyse Academy in Maine approached Oles and encouraged her to attend the U.S. Para Equestrian Training Camp.

"I thanked her, and told her that I was not even close to being that good of a rider," Oles said. "But she was adamant that the 'Para' world needed me. So, in April, my therapeutic riding instructor at NAC and I will be spending a week in Maine training with some of the biggest names in para-dressage. After this 'boot camp,' as it is called, we should find out if I have what it takes."

According to Oles, para-equestrians are classified by the level of their impairment. Riders are ranked into grades, which have been created to allow riders with the same abilities to challenge each other.

"The five grades include Ia, Ib, II, III, and IV," Oles explained. "One-A represents the more severely impaired riders, and grade IV represents the least impaired riders. I will be classified in Maine, but I believe I will be a grade III rider."

According to Oles, grade III is the equiva-

lent of the United States Dressage Federation's first level.

"My goal is to hopefully be good enough to go to the Para Olympics in Rio De Janeiro in 2016," she said.

Oles has come a long way, and she credits the National Abilities Center for her success and wants everyone to know about the work that's done at the center.

"Therapeutic riding is focused on teaching somebody riding skills and helping them to be as independent as possible riding a horse," Equestrian Program Manager Abby Serrin said. "We work on other goals that they might have. For example, we have some people that are here working on social skills or other physical goals, but they are also working on riding. We teach all levels, novice through advanced."

And how does the center help people with disabilities?

"A lot of it is building confidence," Serrin said, "but also work on some physical goals as well. For example, maybe someone with a cognitive disability needs to follow multi-step directions or have appropriate social confrontations with a peer. We can work on those while they are learning to ride."

The National Ability center is open 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Saturday. They can be reached at (435) 649-3991.



Oles enjoys a mountain ride.