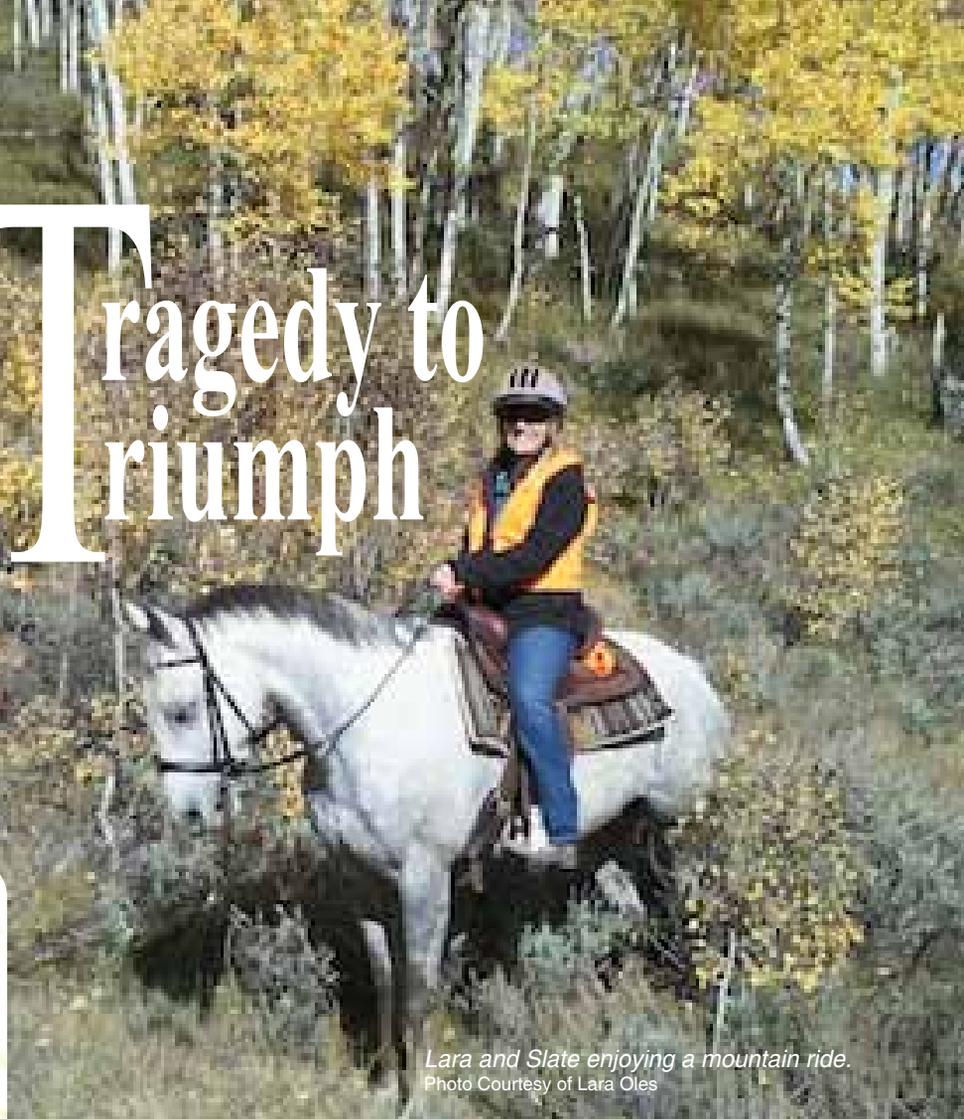


From Skiing Tragedy to Dressage Triumph



Lara and Slate enjoying a mountain ride.
Photo Courtesy of Lara Oles



Lara and Slate at the 2013 U.S. Para-Equestrian Dressage Symposium.

Photo by Lindsay Y. McCall

By Lindsay Y. McCall

In April 2006, dressage rider Lara Oles went to Breckenridge Colorado for a skiing vacation with her friends. She had been a skier for 28 years and had minimal falls within that time, but this day was different. The conditions were icy and Lara had fat powder skis, which proved to be a bad combination.

Within a moment, Lara fell and as she tried to stop she kept sliding down the hill until her shoulder hit a fence post that was emerging from the melting snowpack. Only 10 inches of the post was exposed, flipping her over when she hit instead of stopping her dead. "I had been a ski patrol at our local mountain for a few years and because of my training I knew instantly that I had sustained a spinal cord injury," recalled Lara.

Her bodily injuries included a punctured lung, a bleed on the back of her brain, three broken vertebrae, five broken ribs, a broken clavicle and scapula. "If that was all," remembered Lara, "I would have healed and not had permanent injuries. However, I also had three brachial plexus avulsions leaving my right arm permanently paralyzed with excruciating lifelong phantom pains. Then three days after the accident I had a blood clot on my spinal cord causing stroke-like symptoms in my right leg. I had to re-learn to walk, and still suffer from permanent spasticity and weakness in that leg which affects everything I do."

The road to recovery after Lara's horrific accident would be long, excruciating, and it would test her both mentally and physically. Her first thought while lying in the hospital was to sell her horses. However, her husband Dan knew the horses were an incentive to Lara, they were her passion and they would be the key to her recovering both physically and emotionally.

Born in Detroit, Lara had a love for horses from the time she was a toddler. She remembers riding on a bouncy horse until she was too big to fit. At four years of age her mother enrolled her in riding lessons and the rest was history.

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Lara was the horse crazy girl who participated in summer camps, pony rides and took formal English lessons as often as possible. Lara explained, "My whole school experience was distracted by dreaming about horses, and sketching them in the margins of my notebooks. I used to pour over horse magazines, catalogs and photo books. I read every Black Stallion book, every Marguerite Henry book and anything at the library that had a horse on the cover. I spent every penny I had on Breyer horses, until eventually I had over 100. Everyone said it was a phase and I would get over it, but I never did."

Lara rode as often as she could, cleaning stalls for lessons at a local barn and eventually riding for people who didn't have time to ride their own horses. In 1978, she met a woman named Jackie Thompson who allowed Lara to ride her four horses as often as she liked. "I rode those horses all over Northern Michigan where my family had a lake cottage. I often rode alone, but sometimes I took a friend and we would ride through the woods, orchards, dunes and beaches. My favorite was to take the horses swimming in Lake Michigan and then go galloping down the beach bareback. I rode Jackie's horses from 1978 until she gave them to me in 1997. My favorite horse, Bitty, died in 2007 when he was 27 years old. I started riding him when he was two, and we were together from my 15th year until my 40th year."

Around the same time that Lara and Jackie connected, Lara decided to try her hand at eventing. She took both dressage and show jumping lessons and participated in local shows. Her equestrian career was put on hold for four years while she attended the University of Michigan. After graduating with a degree in Natural Resources and meeting her now husband Dan, Lara got back into eventing.

Tragedy would strike while jumping a course as a thunderstorm approached. Lara explained, "As the winds kicked up and the horse tried to duck out of a seven-stride jump line, I corrected him and made him jump. When we landed, the horse ducked his head between his legs and started bucking like a bronco. The last thing I remember was my instructor saying, "Hold on!" before I went flying off and landed in a sitting position on the ground. I thought I had broken my back and ended up taking an ambulance ride



Lara and Slate with Steffen Peters at a clinic. Photo Courtesy of Lara Oles

"It took me several years before I could really embrace the fact of how lucky it was that I could even walk at all."

a "floppy dead weight." Even though her arm could no longer really feel anything, the phantom pains were unbearable 100% of the day.

When Dan and Lara returned home to Wyoming, Dan started researching treatments for brachial plexis avulsions. Even though there is nothing they can do to reattach the nerves back into the spinal cord, there were other options. They decided to go with a highly recommended surgeon at the University of Utah named

Dr. Angela Wang, who performed a very complicated nerve transfer surgery.

The surgery had to be done before six months had passed or it would be too

late for the muscle to recover. On August 3, 2006, Lara had an eight hour radical surgery that transferred one end of a trapezius nerve to the top of her arm by the shoulder so that she could lift it up and out away from her body. Then they peeled away one end of an intercostal nerve (between her ribs), then stretched it up to an incision through her armpit and down her arm to attach to her bicep muscle. Because of the tearing of the nerve wall during this process, it took nine months for the nerves to heal enough to tell

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to the hospital. Fortunately, I only broke my left wrist and my pelvis in three places. I was on crutches for about a month with a funny apparatus attached that let me put the weight on my elbow instead of on my broken wrist. That was my first experience with being disabled."

Lara would continue riding after her eventing accident and in 2002 she moved with her husband, son and her horses from Jackie Thompson to a remote part of Wyoming – unknowing of a life-altering event in her future.

Hours after that 2006 skiing accident in Denver, Lara remembers how she felt. "It was awful, like a really bad dream. You think these kind of things only happen to other people or in the movies. I had to go through the grieving process over the loss of my right arm and my walking abilities."

Lara spent 24 days in the hospital in Denver before she could go home to Wyoming. While there, she went through intensive physical therapy to learn how to walk again. She also had to go through occupational therapy to learn how to function with only one hand. After five weeks her bones and lung were healed, but her arm still hung off her shoulder like



Lara and Slate at the 2013 U.S. Para-Equestrian Dressage Symposium.

Photo by Lindsay Y. McCall

Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH). When I was selected as PATH's "Independent Adult Equestrian of the Year" I got an all-expenses paid trip back to Lexington, Kentucky to accept my award in November 2011. After the ceremony, a woman from the Carlisle Academy in Maine invited me to attend their U.S. Para-Equestrian Dressage Training Camp in April 2012.

When Lara started training to compete at the FEI Para-Dressage level in 2012, she had to drive two hours each way for her lessons with trainer Annie Sweet in Heber City, Utah. "I used to drive down Friday afternoon, take a lesson, stay overnight at a friend's house, take a lesson on Saturday, and drive home," Lara said. Knowing that wasn't sustainable, Dan and Lara applied and were offered jobs

in Salt Lake City. The husband and wife duo and their horses moved within three miles of her dressage barn in June 2012, giving Lara a chance to train five days a week.

While riding a friend's horse with trainer Annie Sweet, Annie explained to Lara that if she wanted to be competitive at the national level and eventually the international level she would need a competitive horse. Annie and Lara found uniqueness in a registered AQHA Quarter Horse at their farm. The horse was a great mover, easy on the bit, and could collect with a push of a button. Since he had neck-reining training from years ago, Lara found this horse perfect for her one-handed riding while being sensitive enough to listen to her individual fingers, her seat and leg for steering.

Team Lara began to progress at a rapid rate and in May 2013, Lara and Slate entered a USEF/USDF recognized show where they earned multiple scores between 64-70%. For Lara and Annie this was the validation they needed to continue their training. In June 2013, Team Lara headed to California for their first CPE-DI3*, which was also a World Equestrian Games qualifier. At the FEI jog, which occurs the day before competition, a stone bruise would curtail their plans of competing over the weekend. "It was very disheartening and very expensive," noted Lara. "If Slate had behaved as well during the show as he did that day, I believe we would have gotten a qualifying score for the World Equestrian Games. We drove home very sad, tired and broke. On the bright

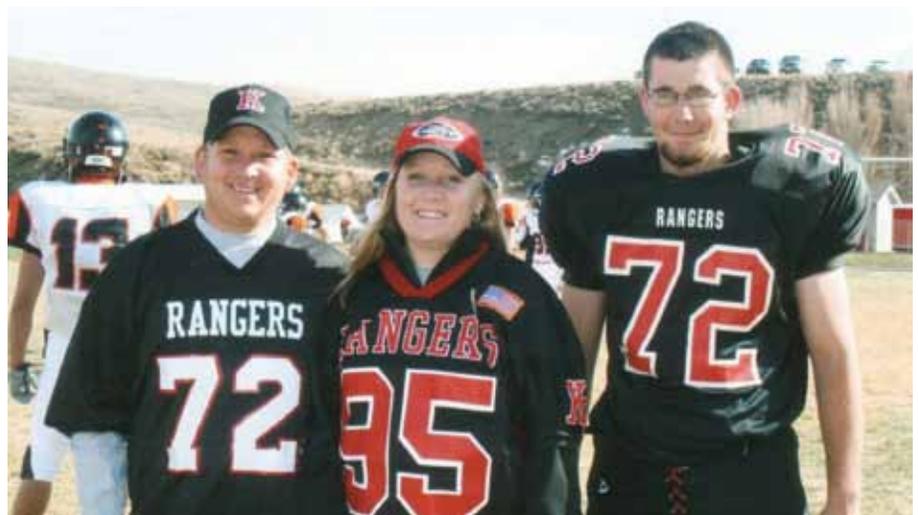
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if the surgery had worked. In the meantime, she had to keep her arm immobilized against her torso with an elastic stabilizer around her waist.

"The surgery had been so hard on my body and my nervous system, that it set off my leg spasticity again and I had to learn to walk for a second time," said Lara. "When I could finally let my arm down in April 2007, I had therapy to train the nerve by breathing in or bearing down. When it moved a little bit, it was like a miracle. For a long time after I regretted the surgery but now that I can lift my arm up to the side about as high as my shoulder, and I can bend my arm at the elbow, it was worth it. Even that reduced range of motion is better than having a floppy uncontrollable arm hanging out of my shoulder socket. I can now lift my arm up to put my seatbelt on, put my own jacket on, carry small things up against my body, shut my car door, and use it to help bridle my horse. My hand is still completely paralyzed and floppy and gets in the way, but I wear a wrist brace to stabilize it. Often strangers start a conversation asking me if I have carpal tunnel, and I just say, 'I wish!'"

After a year, Lara returned to work while continuing to go to physical therapy. "It took me several years before I could really embrace the fact of how lucky it was that I could even walk at all. Just an inch either way, and I could have been a paraplegic, quadriplegic or even dead," expressed Lara. She also continued to ride and found a therapeutic riding instructor to help her with her goals.

In 2010, Lara attended the World Equestrian Games in Lexington, Kentucky where she watched the para-dressage freestyle competition. "Those amazing athletes inspired me to try dressage again," said Lara. Unfortunately, the town she lived in had no indoor arena and no local dressage instructors. As luck would have it, the closest barn that offered dressage lessons was the National Ability Center (NAC) in Park City, Utah. Since they specialize in adaptive riding, it was a perfect place for Lara to begin riding dressage again. After a year of riding at the NAC, Lara was nominated for an award with the Professional



Lara and Dan and their son at Senior Appreciation Day.

Photo Courtesy of Lara Oles.



Lara, Slate, British gold medal Coach Clive Milkins, and Lara's trainer Annie Peavy at the 2013 U.S. Para-Equestrian Dressage Symposium.
 Photo by Lindsay Y. McCall

side, Slate was sound the very next week."

After the show, Lara and Slate went back into training and back onto the show circuit where they showed their Grade III FEI tests (equivalent to Second Level movements).

In October 2014, Lara headed to Del Mar, California to train with Steffen Peters and assistant Dawn White-O'Connor for a month. "I was privileged to watch Steffen ride all his horses, seven of the mornings while I was there," smiled Lara. "He is so balanced and uses the quietest of aids to cue his horses. It is beautiful to watch him ride and his horses don't hurt your eyes either. Steffen really liked Slate and said that he thought I could be competitive with him in the para-dressage classes if I work hard on accuracy. He said, 'He is forward, responsive to your aids, and more consistent on the bit than many horses that have riders with two hands.' Steffen was a very gracious host, he never forgot to introduce me to anybody and he made me feel included even though I was only there for a short while. I am eternally grateful for my time with Team Peters."

After her trip to Southern California, Lara headed to Winters, California, for the U.S. Para-Equestrian Dressage Symposium. There she trained with British para-dressage coach Clive Milkins who coaches gold medal winning rider Sophie Christensen.

Lara's journey as a para-equestrian has taken lots of hard work, time and a great deal of finances. Lara and Slate work daily preparing their Grade III FEI Para-Dressage tests for the international ring. She has attended multiple clinics, she has showed at every show

she could travel to, and she plans on attending as many CPEDI3* shows as she can afford so she can qualify for the 2014 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games and the 2016 Paralympics.

After a few years of training in the para-dressage discipline Lara is excited for her future. She added, "I know Slate is not much to look at while standing still but he really surprises people when he starts moving. I think people like him so much because he is an underdog and people love to root for an underdog."

The biggest obstacle for Lara, like many international athletes, is funding. Even with two full-time incomes, the international dressage competition world requires a great deal of money. "We have dipped into our retirement funds four times to pay for Slate's expenses, our dressage training and competitions," said Lara.

When Lara isn't riding she is educating the public, the equestrian industry and her local community about the para-equestrian discipline. She is passionate about the Paralympic movement and enjoys being an ambassador for the Utah para-dressage community. "I do get embarrassed sometimes when people say I am inspiring, but when I was younger I might say the same thing to disabled people," said Lara. "You don't know how strong you are until there is no other choice. There are many people with physical challenges worse than mine, people that have mental or emotional issues that nobody can see from the outside, and then people with terminal illness, or tragic loss of family members."

She continued, "My injury is limited, not getting progressively worse, and while frustrating sometimes, is definitely not life threatening. I am lucky to be able to go back to work full-time, to a job that they left open for me, and I am fortunate to be as physically independent as I am. I thank heavens for my husband who has been so patient, and supportive and caring throughout our whole marriage."

About the writer: Lindsay McCall is a lifelong hunter/jumper rider, originally from Ohio. She is a talented photographer and makes it her career to advocate for the equestrian sport, especially the Para-Equestrian discipline, through photojournalism. Lindsay and her family own many horses in multiple disciplines and she enjoys spending her free time with her husband, horses and Labrador Retrievers.



Slate and Lara showing in April 2012.

Photo courtesy of Lara Oles