

Back on her horse, rider finds comfort after accident

By Brooke Eaton, NBCOlympics.com
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Eight months ago, Kate Levy was lying in a hospital bed wondering if she would ever ride a horse again. Today she is one of nine riders on the short list for the United States show jumping team.

Since her horse fell on top of Levy in a bone-crushing accident, the 28-year-old has endured brutal pain, depression and moments of self doubt. Still, she has persevered and stands a chance to compete for the U.S. at the summer Olympics.



Courtesy of USEF
Levy competing at the U.S. trials in March 2008, five months after her accident.

"That young lady willed herself back on that horse," said Ed Smith, her physical therapist. "It's confounding the amount of guts it takes to do what she's doing."

Levy said the accident, which took place while she was showing at an August 2007 event in the Netherlands, was "almost like getting stuck by lightning."

"It was a freak, freak thing. I was walking on a horse and it spooked and reared up," said Levy. "As it was on its hind legs, it fell straight backwards on me, literally crushing my whole body. It was really ugly."

The accident left her with her right femur fractured in eight places, a broken pelvis and a ruptured spleen. She underwent surgery that day: A rod was placed from her knee to her hip so her femur could heal around it. Her surgeon, Dr. Jan Bernard Sintenie, has treated many riders in the past and noted the scope of her injuries:

"She handled the surgery well, but the combination of Kate's injuries was very severe compared to most riding accidents," he said in an email.

Furthermore, the damage to her spleen prohibited her from flying, so she spent the following three months in the Netherlands living out of a hotel room and working on her recovery.

For four hours a day, she worked with her physical therapist, Patrick Martens, at a special sports center.

"When I first met her she could not put any weight on her right leg," said Martens. "We had to take it quite easy and work very carefully."

But Levy was eager to speed up the process. "The hardest thing for us was to slow her down. She would always ask, 'when can I ride again?' She wanted to do extra exercises in her hotel room," said Martens. "We

had to make it clear that her injuries were serious, not just at that moment, but possibly for the rest of her life."

As time went on, Levy was able to add more weight to her exercises, and started working in the pool at her hotel. But mentally, it was a struggle.

"I definitely wondered if I would ever be able to ride again," said Levy. "There were days where I didn't even know if I'd want to ride again. Having an accident like I did can be very depressing."

For her friends and family, it was difficult to see her constrained by her injuries.

"She would swing up and down, from 'when will I ride again?' to the realization of 'what will I do with my life?'" said Nadine Levy, Kate's mother. Nadine Levy flew to the Netherlands right away, despite Kate's father, who had undergone hip replacement surgery the day before Kate's accident.

"She looked the same, but she wasn't herself," said Vanessa Siede, Kate's good friend since childhood, who saw her for the first time when Kate came home for Thanksgiving. "It was hard; she thought about quitting, but she kept pushing herself a little each day."

Levy first got back on her horse in January.

"It was really hard," she said. "I was in a terrible amount of pain and I was only riding one horse for about five minutes a day."

Working with a new physical trainer at home, Levy stayed consistent with her therapy. "Before I met her, I fully expected her to be a lot worse off," says Ed Smith, her physical therapist at Athlete's Advantage in Wellington, Fla. "Most of her motion and flexibility had already been restored, so we are now dealing with functional strength, how to be consistent and how to be durable." Working six hours a week with Smith, Levy does exercises by herself everyday while maintaining her business of acquiring young horses and training them, as well as teaching students.

"She lives a very aggressive lifestyle," said Smith. "But she always finds time to work on her recovery."

Her will to find time speaks to her general personality. "If you tell Kate 'no,' she'll find a way to prove you wrong," said Siede. "She is very determined, and very focused," her mother added.

So was it a shock that Levy was named to the short list for the Olympic team in March, just seven months after the injury that almost paralyzed her? Well, yes.

"Though I thought her prognosis was good, she surprised me with such a fast recovery," said Dr. Sintenie.

"Surprised isn't even the word," said Siede. "Shocked, and proud, too. To go through what she went through and to be at this point; that's crazy to me."

For Levy, though, getting back to riding meant normalcy. "Horses are my life," she said. "Everyday, that's what makes me get up in the morning."

And while her passion for horses is what got her to this point, she is able to put everything in context:

"It's good to have goals and to work hard for things, but now I take life as it comes, and try not to determine my own path."

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