

RIDING *high*

► By Sara Chatwin

It's the stuff of a Hollywood tear-jerker. A beautiful young horsewoman suffers a horrendous riding accident. She nearly dies, endures multiple operations and two years of intensive rehabilitation to regain her health. With the love and support of her family and friends she defies the doctors' predictions by getting back on the horse...

In true Hollywood fashion, the heroine then fights her way back to top-level competition where she wins prestigious national titles... But even in the make-believe world of movies, surely no producer would be prepared to push the boundaries of reality to the stage where the horsewoman sets her sights on competing at the 2016 Olympic Games, in Rio de Janeiro?

However, this is no movie, it's the true life story of Auckland equestrienne Britta Pedersen and her fight back from the injuries she suffered in a riding accident which could easily have taken her life.

THE ACCIDENT

The horrific accident happened in a split second. One moment the top equestrienne was urging her mount over a head-high jump; the next she was on the ground and 500 kilograms of horse, after somersaulting in the air, landed rump first on top of her.

Whilst lucky to survive the initial impact, Britta's injuries were life-threatening in the extreme. They included: a shattered skull – 'it was like a broken eggshell' – a shattered jaw, severed nerves to her right eye, a broken back, broken neck and broken ribs. Bleeding from the eyes, nose, mouth and ears by the time the ambulance got to her, Britta was conscious throughout the ordeal. In fact, the adrenaline was still surging through her to such an extent that she had to be held down to prevent her from trying to get back on her horse.



In the neuro ward of Auckland Hospital the true extent of her head injuries became apparent. Britta eventually endured six cranial surgeries to repair a serious CSF leak – that's the fluid that runs around your brain – through a major crack in her skull.


Initially unsure whether she would ever walk again, the doctors told Britta that it would take at least two years before she would start to feel that she was back on track. They also broke the bad news that she would never ride again.

All up, Britta was in hospital for six months and the numerous operations to repair her broken body extended over a year.

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

The accident "changed my world" says Britta, but right from the start she was determined that it was not going to rob her of her passion – horses.

Released from hospital weighing just 32kgs and not strong enough to walk up stairs, Britta attacked rehabilitation with

A photograph of a woman with blonde hair tied back, wearing a black long-sleeved top and brown riding pants, smiling and holding a white lead rope attached to a dark brown horse. The background is a soft-focus green landscape with trees.

“If there’s anything that you might want to do in your life, don’t hold back – just go and do it.”

the same determination she had brought to her competitive riding: “When the doctors told me I’d never ride again, my attitude was: ‘I’m going to prove you all wrong.’”

For the qualified physio and previously super-fit sportswoman, what followed was two years of relearning many of the everyday things that most of us take for granted.

She remembers lying in the neuro ward, and the wall of her hospital room feeling like a vision board. “The whole wall was covered with pictures of horses, and of me and my family and friends competing,” Britta says. When your whole life is based around something, to have all those goals completely shattered felt devastating. But I’m such a goal setter that I quickly realised there was only one option: I so was going to get back on that horse’.”

A mere eight months after the accident, Britta achieved that goal. And only another four months later – at about the time when she had her last operation – she was back competing in the dressage arena.

BRITTA'S SUPPORT

While Britta’s friends, her family and partner have been incredibly supportive of her recovery and comeback, health professionals such as psychologist Sara Chatwin and podiatrist Jo Walker have helped put some ‘finishing touches’ on Britta’s strong mindset and physiological wellbeing at various stages of the process.

Throughout her rehabilitation, Britta had dreamed about one day taking out a New Zealand title. This year it all came together at the Bates New Zealand Dressage Championships in Feilding, with Britta and her horse Upendo winning the Level 6 title. A few weeks later, the pair won the Advanced Level 6/7 Dressage Horse of the Year title.

Despite achieving a level of success that would have seemed impossible just a few short years ago, Britta wants more: her ultimate goal is to represent New Zealand on the international stage – at the equestrian world championships and the 2016 Olympic Games, in Rio de Janeiro.

► INSPIRATIONAL PEOPLE

BRITTA'S LIFE LESSONS

Looking back on her accident and all that's happened since, Britta says she wouldn't change a thing: "It was a terrible experience to go through, but I think it moulded me into who I am today. And from a physio point of view it's definitely given me a better understanding of what my clients with severe injuries are going through."

Asked what else the experience has taught her, Britta's response is: "Just give everything a go. If there's anything that you might want to do in your life, don't hold back – just go and do it. And if you have a dream and get knocked back (for whatever reason) never give up."

Photograph courtesy of Lisa Potter



THE DUTCH CONNECTION

Upendo (or Uby as he is known) is the handsome 'Dutchman' who has played a big part in Britta's life over the past two years. When she first returned to dressage – initially starting at the bottom, relearning the basics – Britta used one of her eventing horses. However, as she rose through the ranks it became clear that she needed a mount with more potential. Her search for the right horse ended during a trip to Europe to check out the equine talent. Here she met Uby and was instantly smitten.

Big, strong, smart but raw, he was just what Britta was looking for to take her dressage career to the next level. Over the past two years the pair has spent countless hours working together on the finer points of dressage. It's a partnership that has given her huge satisfaction – and played a significant role in her own healing process. "It's what drives me," Britta says.



Photograph of Sara and Britta, courtesy of Frances Oliver.

SARA'S VIEW BY SARA CHATWIN

As part of the team assisting in Britta Pedersen's recovery, psychologist Sara Chatwin, has had a close-up view of just how much she has had to overcome. This is what Sara has to say about her remarkable story...

For those who have suffered major injury like brain trauma, it's a case of sink or swim. Finding the motivation to move through and trying to get back to normality requires commitment and a lot of work. However, there seem to be common factors that shine through when you look at people like Britta, who have successfully navigated their way back to full health after excruciatingly hard times. They include:

- **DETERMINATION:** The survivors appear to have a level of determination or self-belief that just doesn't falter. Even in their darkest moments, they can muster a little bit of resolve to go on with their journey.
- **FOCUS:** People who achieve against the odds, appear to be able to minimise distractions and focus on the goal.
- **ENERGY:** It's necessary to follow a nutrition and wellbeing plan so that you have the energy needed to invest in your 'comeback'.
- **COMMITMENT:** Being able to focus and muster the energy required depends on the level of commitment that is needed to keep you on task.
- **SUPPORT:** It's great to have people around you who believe in you and support your effort. The 'power of one' is essential. Having said that: support can give you an extra lift that propels you to go just that little bit further!

The encouraging news about brain injury is that more and more research is now pointing to the fact that the brain can heal, and continues to grow and learn every day – even as we age. Therefore, there is a real chance that people can resume a normal life, even after horrific injuries that may require intensive rehabilitation and time out of a regular routine.

However, for people who have experienced trauma, over and above the huge desire to get back to normality, there seems to be an inherent 'love of life' – the drive to 'get back on that horse' and see where life's journey will take you next! ◀