



Junior CMSA Spotlight Kelsie Kicks Up Her Heels

CMSA Member with Special Needs excels due to Riding Horses

By Amy Gardner

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You never know what someone's life is like, until you have walked in their shoes...or boots. Even then, each of us truly marches to the beat of our own drummer. But, in a spectacular story of inspiration and beating the odds, 18-year old cowgirl Kelsie Coalter, challenged by Down's Syndrome, bravely presses through life's experiences, trailblazing her own path to victory in the CMSA.

Despite functioning on an elementary school level, Kelsie's climb through her disability spurs on everyone who learns of this amazing equestrian, to cheer her on—in person or in prayer. Through a heartfelt account of Kelsie's courage in working through her challenges, this special teen was thrilled to recently represent CMSA at the World Championships in Las Vegas.

As Kelsie's father, Joe Coalter put it, "talking about her disability is a positive thing, and so is her involvement in riding." Although Joe, 48, grew up with horses, he and his wife Bobbie hadn't been around horses for 25 years. That is, until learning that their only child (then age 10) would benefit from riding a horse.

While researching Kelsie's diagnosis, the family from Lodi, Ohio (45 minutes south of Cleveland) discovered that horseback riding would directly improve Kelsie's impaired stomach muscles (people with Down's Syndrome typically have problems with stomach muscles which don't fully support the torso.) Further, Joe explained that horseback riding involves stomach muscle management; strengthening muscles around the main stomach area (the hip flexor, lower abdomen and obliques.) With this knowledge, the Coalters immediately put Kelsie on a saddle, and ever since, her developments on the horse, (and in her high school and special education classes) have been dramatic.

"Oh, the riding has helped Kelsie's posture in the saddle, and also how she sits in a chair at school," Joe animatedly explained, adding, "What it's also done emotionally...is immeasurable," he whispered, choking up.

Shortly after observing Kelsie's improvements, the family talked about getting a horse of their own. So, as Joe laughingly explained, "I went to bed one night and didn't own a horse, and the next day I owned 2!" (One was a gift, for which Joe and Bobbie are eternally grateful, and emotionally appreciative.)

In fact, emotions are part of the ride...for Kelsie's family, and for anyone in her presence witnessing her stellar strides through winding challenges in daily life and in the arena. Joe clearly remembers the first year he competed as a cowboy mounted shooter. It was with the 1st Ohio CMSA Club in Miamitown, Ohio during the summer of 2003. Fellow shooters encouraged him to let Kelsie ride too.

"So I did," he said, "and I don't know how long I cried after that," a misty-eyed Joe shared. Reminiscing, he recalled being taken aback when, unexpectedly over the loud speaker, the announcer requested that volunteers come forward and assist Kelsie in the arena. A dozen people immediately responded to the call to help "sidewalk" her (walk alongside Kelsie on a horse.) Heartened by the outpouring from CMSA members who didn't even know them, Joe and Bobbie still vividly remember that moment.

Soaked in emotion, Joe recalled yet another event when Kelsie's joy overcame him with tears. As the CMSA course ended and Kelsie was coming down the rundown, and nearing the finish line, the crowd stood and cheered her on. At that point, Joe lost it.

"I'm 6 feet and 250 pounds, but I'm bawlin' at this point," Joe declared. "I guess what I'm saying is...how do you describe the caring from these great people?"

Joe, a business manager for a pharmaceutical company, also recalls how supportive his wife was about his growing interest in cowboy mounted shooting. And then, a year later, Bobbie asked him, "Well, do you think I could do this?" To him, it was a tremendous step to have Bobbie on his riding team.

"We've been married 27 years now," Joe relayed, "and I'm still madly in love with that woman." Bobbie, who works full time for the Department of Defense, is thoroughly enjoying cowboy mounted shooting. She learned to ride and shoot a gun at the same time, and loves the pre-1890 period dress worn by mounted shooters.

But, even with both husband and wife in CMSA, something was missing—family unity.

So, in 2004, Joe carefully composed a letter to Bobby Ruwe, President of the 1st Ohio CMSA Club, explaining, "We'd like to join CMSA as a family, but how would we classify Kelsie's abilities?" he wrote. Bobby then forwarded the letter to Frank Turben; President of CMSA, who immediately issued an astonishing response arriving in the Coalter's mailbox that read, "Kelsie will ride Wrangler," and her card; #3374 was on its way, Joe relayed excitedly. (Although Wranglers are typically under the age of twelve, this classification of young equestrians enables them to ride the same courses as adults, but without discharging firearms.) Kelsie was the first person offered such an exception due to her life challenges.

Joe was floored. "Frank is the President of a huge national organization, and we're in Ohio; where he doesn't know us from boo," Joe declared, "but he cares...immensely!"

Also amazing is the fact that while the sport is getting bigger, it's still grounded in a family-friendly atmosphere. Kelsie was able to join two CMSA clubs in the Buckeye state; the 1st Ohio CMSA Club, and a newer club closer to home, called the Northern Ohio Outlaws.

Many of Kelsie's greatest joys in life are centered around her horse. When she hits the arena, her enthusiasm flies along with the dirt. "You can see the pride in her face," beamed Joe. He also found it remarkable to receive such a grand welcome from the CMSA "family," encouraging the Coalters to attend cowboy church and potluck suppers, and even offering riding tips while bonding over campfires.

"Tell me another sport where my family can participate together...where you have a wanna-be cowboy, a city girl and a special-needs teenager," Joe rationalized, "and no-one cares about all that!" he exclaimed.

An especially poignant moment for Kelsie and her parents came a year ago in April 2006 when the teen was riding in a CMSA event in Columbus, Ohio. Joe had gotten word that the celebrated wild mustang "Nevada Joe" (adopted in 2002 by the Federal Bureau of Land Management in a Wild Horse Project,) would be appearing at the same location as Kelsie's CMSA ride that day. Trying to calm his own excitement about introducing Kelsie to this famous horse, Joe was keenly aware that Nevada Joe was the Ambassador of the North American Handicapped Riding Association (NAHRA,) traveling across the country to educate people about therapeutic riding.

While it was a big treat to see Nevada Joe up close and personal and meet his owners Diane and Ernie Purcelli, the biggest thrill came later. Diane had asked Kelsie to ride Nevada Joe in her NAHRA clinic, and Kelsie meanwhile developed a special bond with Nevada Joe.

Then, in a stunning development, Diane bestowed Kelsie with an incredible honor, inviting her to join cowboys and cowgirls from around the world at the CMSA World Championships in Las Vegas. She asked Kelsie to lead over a dozen NAHRA riders in opening the CMSA Championship.

"And when Kelsie kicked it off, everyone at CMSA just erupted because she's part of their family," relayed her proud dad. The heartwarming spotlight featured a shootout CMSA-style with therapeutic riding, and each participant got the chance to ride Nevada Joe.

Kelsie returned home from Las Vegas with several prizes, including a special World Championship jacket embroidered with her name and CMSA nickname, "The Petticoat Kid." Also, Kelsie's teachers have recommended her for an Ohio achievement award, attributed in part to her involvement with CMSA.

So what's the next big goal for this special teenager? Her dad, whose passion for cowboy mounted shooting resulted in his recent election as President of the Northern Ohio Outlaws, was quick to answer. "One of our greatest hopes is that someday, Kelsie will enter the arena all by herself," Joe said. "I believe that through the grace of God and our CMSA family, it may be possible."

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