



Joy Rediscovered

by Glenye Cain Oakford

With the help of family, friends, and coaches, Sharlena Sarmast overcame fear and made a successful return to the saddle. Now she hopes others will find inspiration from her experience and put their nerves behind them.

When she was seven, Sharlena Sarmast was a horse-crazy young girl with two years of riding experience. But when she fell off a spooking horse that year and got injured, everything changed.

While she was on a ride, the horse in front of hers reared and threw its rider, and Sharlena's mount made a quick jump to the right to avoid the rider who had come off. Sharlena fell, too, and X-rays later revealed that in the confusion her horse had stepped on her back, Sharlena's mother Karen Sarmast recalled. "Luckily, there were no broken bones, but she had a severe swelling of the spine and a very bruised hoof mark imprinted on her back," Karen said. "She was on bed rest for a month and kept home from school. All in all, she was very, very lucky, but she was terrified of ever getting back on a horse again."

Today, 13-year-old Sharlena is once again a confident and competitive young rider, thanks to her own determination to return to a sport she loves, and thanks to a supportive equestrian community whose patient, thoughtful strategies helped her regain the joy of riding. She hopes her story will help other equestrians find ways to overcome any fear they might have and get back to enjoying their passion for horses and horse sports.

"Before I fell off, I was fascinated with horses," Sharlena said. "I wanted to be there with them every day for the whole, entire day. But once the fall happened, I was just terrified of what had



Above: Sharlena Sarmast, 13, became afraid of horses after a fall but is happily riding and competing again on her horses, including The Gambler, shown here with Sharlena at the Blenheim Summer Classic in San Juan Capistrano, Calif., in August.

Left: Miniature horse Misty was a first step in helping Sharlena regain her confidence around horses.

happened and that it had happened to me all of a sudden. It was frightening. I would think about it every day when I was home instead of attending school. I'd think, 'How did this happen? Why don't I like this anymore?' I loved horses, but I was very skeptical about it."

Starting Small

A year after Sharlena's 2012 accident, Karen—who also grew up riding—decided to try reintroducing her daughter to horses in a small way, literally: she bought her a miniature horse named Misty.

"My mom brought me there every day so I could be near Misty," Sharlena said. "I got more and more comfortable with her and groomed her. After a while, one

of my friends who rode horses wanted so badly for me to ride, too, and my mom finally convinced me to try riding a pony. She said, 'Come on, don't give up. You have to give it a try.' The first time I rode again, I had this burst of joy—I just felt that feeling again."

Sharlena's first ride back, at age nine on that pony named Bubbles, instantly rekindled her love for riding, but building her confidence back to pre-fall levels took time. She was helped in that journey by coaches Alden Giacobuzzi and Erin Isom—and by Niki Macleod, who helped school Sharlena's horses and also worked with her on the flat—at her new barn, Alderin Sporthorses in Palos Verdes Estates, Calif.



“She never stopped her passion for loving horses, but it was the confidence she gained back through her trainers and finding the right horses for her personality after the fall that brought her back,” mom Karen said.

“I did still have nerves, but over time I overcame that fear,” she said. “I rode Bubbles for a while. He behaved very well, and after a while, I started to say, ‘Okay, this is not that bad.’ So I moved on to another horse, Smarty, who was a little bigger. In the beginning, I took private lessons. But once I got on Smarty and he was very good, I started riding with the other children, and they just gave me more confidence.

“My coaches tried to keep me happy and make sure that I was enjoying it, not stressed and nervous,” she added. “They would ask me, ‘Is it okay if we do this?’ and I could say, ‘Sure, just slowly.’ After a while, I got to a point where I said, ‘Okay, we can start going

Top left: “Just being around the barn, the horses, and nature—I think that’s very healing,” said Sharlena’s mom, Karen (right), shown here with Sharlena.

Top right: Sharlena and Caretani 2, who “boosted my confidence so much,” Sharlena said.

Bottom: Sharlena and The Gambler were reserve champions in the .90-meter jumper division at the Blenheim Summer Classic in San Juan Capistrano, Calif., in August.

faster now!’ That was the point when I really started getting back into it. That took about three months.”

Into the Show Ring

Debuting in the show ring made Sharlena “quite nervous,” she said. “But all my friends were also doing the show, so I thought, ‘Why not give it a try?’”

As Sharlena continued to progress, graduating from a smaller, leased horse named Tintin to a bigger, more advanced mount named Jack, she also has started asking for her own horse. “I really wanted one at that point, because I’d gotten so far and I thought, ‘Okay, I do *not* want to quit now!’” Sharlena remembered.

Today, the family owns three horses: Crossing Blue, whom Sharlena and her mom have both shown, Caretani 2, and, most recently, The Gambler.

“Caretani was a big deal for me, because he boosted my confidence so much,” Sharlena said. She and the eight-year-old Holsteiner partnered for quite a few ribbons, whetting her competitive appetite. “When I did my first few lessons with him he was slow and very cautious with me, because I think he knew I needed that. After a couple of months, we really had a bond, and eventually we started doing bigger jumps. Today we can do 3’6” and 4’ jumps.”

To help her nerves stay steady and her outlook positive for competitions, Sharlena reads two books her mother gave her: “How To Be Mindful” and “How to Be Calm” by Anna Barnes. And she keeps in mind some advice a friend of her dad Ali once gave her: “He gave me a whole conversation about, when I get into the ring, just focus and have fun, not to think about all the other people watching. He said I should go in there and just enjoy it while it lasts.”

Looking back on her return to riding, Sharlena says her advice to other juniors facing confidence issues is to persevere.

“Don’t give up,” she said. “If you love what you do, don’t quit. If you’re scared, don’t be afraid to ask for help. If you’re nervous, just take your time, and you’ll get to that point where you know why you love your sport.”

“If they were around horses before and had that passion, a great thing to do is take them to the barn, even if they don’t own a horse themselves,” Karen said. “Just letting them feed the horses and maybe grooming a horse—just being around the barn, the horses, and nature—I think that’s very healing.”