

Taylor Battles Back From Breast Cancer For A Blenheim Derby Win

Two years after her diagnosis, she's feeling stronger than ever aboard L'Con Reyes.

By **Tori Repole**

Photo By **Amy McCool Photography**

Horses have played a starring role in Katie Taylor's life from her first pony ride around the age of 4. They kept her focused in her junior years at the Karazissis family's Far West Farms in Calabasas, California, and they guided her when she rode for Liz Reilly and Chris Iwasaki's Makato Farms. They made the journey with her to Arizona when she took a break from professional riding. And they remained by her side when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2017.

"Going through treatment, you definitely get some dark days and some depressing days, and I would make myself go out to the barn and just hang out with them," said Taylor, 32. "Something about them just keeps you going, and it keeps you happy. Just riding them when I was sick, they took care of me knowing that I was not 100 percent and that sort of thing."

Taylor rode as an amateur while she was at Chapman University (California) earning an educational studies degree, and after turning professional, she wavered on whether show circuit life was the right fit for her. So in July 2015, she moved to Arizona to teach fifth grade at the Academy of Tucson Middle School. Before she left, David Bustillos, owner and head trainer of Durango Farms in Trabuco

Canyon, California, told her he'd have a job waiting for her if she decided to return.

So when she found herself yearning to return to the show ring, she took him up on his offer in May of 2017. That was when she first met Bravado LLC's L'Con Reyes.

"It was three years ago that I rode him for the first

\$10,000 USHJA INTERNATIONAL HUNTER DERBY San Juan Capistrano, Calif.—June 15					
<i>Judges: Panel 1: Scott Williamson, George Wallace; Panel 2: Diane Carney, Constance Hunt</i>					
HORSE/RIDER	1st Round		2nd Round		Total
	Panel 1 Score/ Height Option	Panel 2 Score/ Height Option	Panel 1 Score/ Bonus/ Height Option	Panel 2 Score/ Bonus/ Height Option	
1. L'Con Reyes/Katie Taylor	83/4	86/4	89/9/4	87/9/4	379
2. Really/Jenny Karazissis	87/4	83/4	85/8/4	83.5/6/4	368.5
3. Cajeton/Katie Taylor	85/4	85.25/4	87.5/6/4	83.25/5/4	368
4. Hulla-Balou/Michael Dennehy	88/0	82.5/0	88/6/2	89/9/2	366.5
5. Vanderpump/Augusta Iwasaki	81.5/4	78.5/4	87/7/4	83/8/4	361
6. Cornelensky/Jamie Taylor	84.5/4	78.75/4	78/7/4	84/7/4	355.25
7. Hopeful/Jamie Sailor	80.5/4	81.5/4	83/7/4	78/7/4	353
8. Shadowfax/Erin Duffy	83.5/4	79/4	84/6/4	79/3/4	350.5
9. Beach Boy/Emily Williams	83.5/3	79.75/3	81/6/4	80/4/4	348.25
10. Small Occasion/Nick Haness	86/4	85/4	70/7/4	70/5/4	339
11. Small Kingdom/Augusta Iwasaki	86.5/4	81/4	46/7/4	45/7/4	288.5
12. Lord Calador/Nick Haness	81/4	82/4	40/0/4	40/5/4	264

28 horses competed.



Cancer treatment kept Katie Taylor out of the show ring for eight months, but it only made her desire to win stronger, and she jumped to the top of the \$10,000 USHJA International Hunter Derby aboard L'Con Reyes at Blenheim June Classic II.

time, and he was a little tough," said Taylor. "When he was younger, he would try to get away with things here and there. In the past year or so he's really come into himself and [has become] an amazing hunter."

But just a few months after she started getting to know the 10-year-old Oldenburg gelding (Lord Pezi—Manjola) and was settling in at Durango Farms, she received a devastating diagnosis: late stage 2 triple negative breast cancer. This type of cancer makes up about 10-20 percent

of breast cancers and means the three most common types of receptors that fuel most breast cancer growth aren't present in the tumor. Common treatments like hormone therapy and drugs that target these receptors are ineffective, and it can be aggressive, difficult to treat and likely to reoccur.

"[Doctors] told me that I had a good chance of curing it when I went into it if I did chemo and the radiation and the surgery and all that," said Taylor. "They do chemo

first now because they want to shrink it up and take out [a] minimal amount. I had a lumpectomy done, so they just went in and removed the tissue and then the lymph nodes that had been involved. The only thing with triple negative is that they don't have continuous treatment like they do for the hormonal type of breast cancer."

Her surgeon removed six lymph nodes, so now Taylor wears a compression sleeve during riding to prevent lymphedema. She also goes to the doctor every three months and undergoes scans every six months. Last August, she entered remission.

"When I got the [cancer] diagnosis, I had just gotten back to riding, so I was five months back into doing it professionally, and I thought I was strong," said Taylor. "I was competing in small grand prix on a horse."

"It was definitely hard," she added. "Chemo, the first five days were the toughest. It kind of hits you where you don't want to do anything, and you kind of want to stay at home and sit there and lay there. By the fifth or sixth day, I'd find myself wanting to go to the barn and wanting to help."

Taylor's sister Jamie Taylor had moved to the East Coast to work for Lindsay Maxwell, and she'd planned to stay in Florida after that job, but she came straight back to California to support Katie.

With everything that happened to me last year I've just worked harder."

—Katie Taylor

"My sister helped at the barn when I was sick, and [I] just watched her ride my horses; [I learned] a lot just by watching what she did with them," said Katie. "It was hard sitting on the sidelines, but I've always supported my sister, and I've always looked up to her. I felt like I was part of it, so that was nice."

Jamie did well with "Theo," claiming good ribbons in the high performance hunters and finishing fifth in the USHJA International Hunter Derby at the Blenheim June Classic II in San Juan Capistrano, California, in June of 2018. But once Katie was cancer-free, she took the ride back and enjoyed immediate success, winning reserve champion in the high performance division at the Blenheim Fall Tournament in September. The pair went from strength to strength and finished second in the West Coast Hunter Spectacular on June 9 at the Blenheim June Classic I.

Six days later, Katie rode the 10-year-old Oldenburg gelding to the top of the \$10,000 USHJA International Hunter Derby at Blenheim June Classic II.


"It's unbelievable; we've worked really hard to get him

where he is," said Katie. "I just think with everything that happened to me last year I've just worked harder. I feel like I do things outside of the ring to make myself stronger, and it's really paid off."

Katie credited her sister's help as well as more arena time for her victory with Theo.

"Coming back into riding after all of the treatment was a little frustrating," said Katie. "I felt really strong; my head was ready to do it all, but I had no legs, no stamina, so that got frustrating. David would say, 'We're not in a rush. Take your time.' I just [had] a good support system, and I took my time, and I feel stronger than I did even before I was diagnosed."

"I've always gotten so upset with myself or put so much pressure on myself, and now I just ride for myself and don't stress about things," she added. "[I] just go in there and do what I can and don't worry about what this person's thinking or that person's thinking. Knowing that these horses I think [healed] me in my time, I do what I can to let them shine because they did a lot for me." 🐾



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