



JUNIOR CMSA SPOTLIGHT

Kelsie Kicks Up Her Heels

CMSA MEMBER WITH SPECIAL NEEDS EXCELS DUE TO RIDING HORSES

by Amy Gardner

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



Kelsie on Nevada Joe, with Ernie Purcelli, left, Diane Purcelli and Michelle Long at the 2006 CMSA World Championship in Las Vegas.