

# Aim **High!**



Attitude is everything, and I focus on gratitude. I appreciate every run I'm able to make now and all the things that are right in my life.



**This mounted shooting world champion has learned to gun down obstacles in her path, inspiring others along the way.**

**By Tammy Sronce**

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EACH MORNING, I WONDER WHAT KIND OF DAY IT'S GOING TO be. Is it going to be a bad migraine day? Is it going to be a day I can't find my truck keys? It has been more than two years since my traumatic brain injury, and every day is still a struggle.

In a life filled with adversity, sometimes it's hard to remain strong but the most important lesson I have learned is to never underestimate the power of the mind or the horse.

### **A Less Than Perfect Start**

BORN AND RAISED IN PERTH, AUSTRALIA, MY CHILDHOOD WAS forever changed when my father was killed by a drunk driver when I was 4 years old. I struggled through a difficult childhood and never felt that I actually belonged anywhere.

By the age of 15, I found myself alone and struggling to fit in the demands of high school, while working a part-time job driving Standardbred pacing horses to pay the rent.

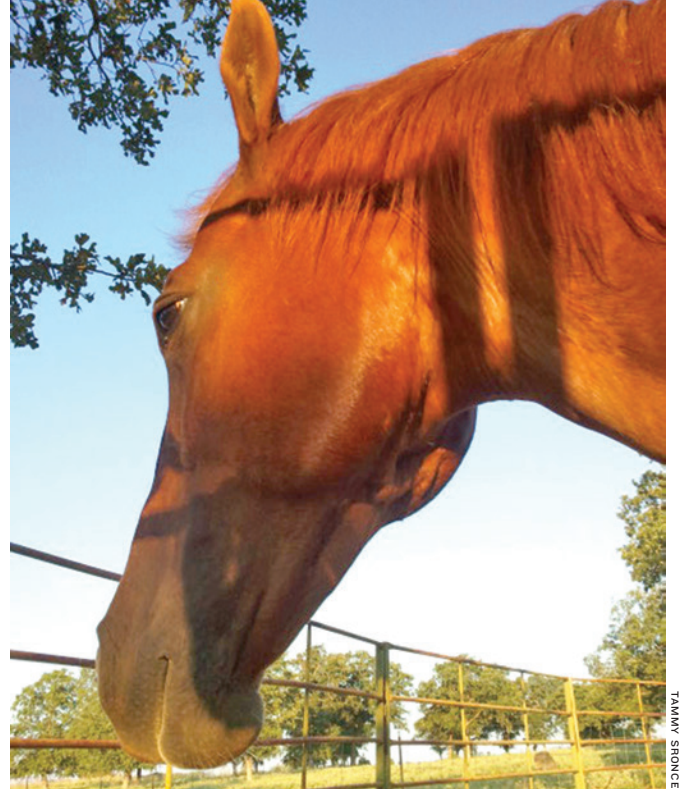
As I moved toward college, I decided to pursue a career in psychology at Curtin University of Technology, with the goal of helping children like me who had come from difficult childhoods. But with the combined stress of life, work and study, I found myself fighting anorexia, a disease that took me four years to overcome. I was so young, but life had already left me so empty.

Throughout my childhood, horses had always been a big part of my life. My father was an avid rider. He had a huge passion for horses and was a riding instructor when he wasn't working as an electrician. After he passed, my mother carried on his love for horses, and they were always a part of my life. I found peace and solitude in the horse. In a world that had been so hurtful and chaotic, the horse was an honest and peaceful creature who gave me hope on my darkest days.

### **New Beginnings**

I LONGED FOR A NEW BEGINNING, A FRESH START. I JUST HAD NO idea what that would be.

While reading the classified section of a national Australian equestrian magazine, I saw an advertisement that stated



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**As I sat in the pasture, weakened after my accident, "Handsome" came and stood over me like a guardian angel. I took this cell phone picture looking up at him, loving him more at that moment than I ever had.**

"Employment: Cutting Horse Ranch in Weatherford, Texas." At first glance, I sat and daydreamed about a new life in Texas, and then I told myself to return to reality. After a few days of contemplating, I thought, "Why couldn't that be me?"

Within a few weeks, I found myself in Weatherford, Texas. I arrived with a suitcase filled with dreams and whatever clothes I could pack into one bag.

My travels led me to Oxbow Ranch where I worked under the guidance of former National Cutting Horse Association president and National Cowgirl Hall of Fame member Lindy Burch. I credit Lindy with everything I learned about horses; her passion and her standards of care were unsurpassed. I worked hard and was rewarded with knowledge that in later years helped me earn multiple Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association world championships.

It may seem strange for an Australian who had never seen a gun before to find a niche in mounted shooting, but to me, the sport wasn't about firearms; it was about building a relationship with your horse that would allow you to compete at the highest levels. That was the attraction of the sport for me.

### **Inspiring Others**

AFTER SUCCESSFULLY CAPTURING MULTIPLE CMSA WORLD AND national championships, I wanted to give survivors of violence hope. I understood the power of the horse to heal. In 2012, my dear friend Betsi Bixby and I started our own nonprofit in Weatherford, Texas, called Freedom Horses.

Working in conjunction with a local shelter called Freedom House, we provided therapy sessions for survivors of interpersonal violence. We simply provided the women with an opportunity to learn the basics of horsemanship, and we let the power of the horse provide the healing. It was amazing to see my personal shooting horses, who were used to running fast-paced timed events, slow back down and teach novices to ride. It was

a testament of the versatility of the American Quarter Horse.

I contemplated writing a book detailing my journey, but I really didn't know when the journey was complete. I felt like my life had come full circle with the creation of Freedom Horses, but I had no idea of the next chapter in my life.

## January 2012

ON JANUARY 14, 2012, I WAS INVITED BY RIDERS4HELMETS TO BE a guest speaker at the third annual Helmet Safety Symposium. It was my goal as a guest speaker to shed insight into different incentives and programs that might be created in the western world to encourage riders to wear helmets.

I had not worn a helmet since I was a child, but I accepted the offer to join a panel of speakers to help the cause. At the symposium, I was deeply touched by Olympic dressage rider Courtney King-Dye. I listened to her journey after sustaining a traumatic brain injury, not knowing that within the next two weeks, I would be battling many of those same symptoms.

Driving back from the Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo on January 21, I was hit by a drunk driver who had more than 2.5 times the legal blood-alcohol content. The driver had disregarded a red light and plowed into my small car, pushing it sideways down the road and smashing my head against the side window.

The accident set me back tremendously, and the horses that had been my whole life were now out of reach. From not knowing when to take a breath with lessons, clinics and shooting competitions, I found myself house-bound with chronic migraines. The bleed in my brain healed on its own in time, but I was left with occipital neuralgia. I was so light- and sound-sensitive that the smallest tasks, like brushing my teeth were torture.

My search for a cure led me to Memorial Hermann Northwest Hospital's Headache Center in Houston, and in January 2013, I underwent surgery to fix the dysfunctional nerves in my head. The surgery was successful but called for a long and slow recovery. As I recovered, I found myself able to leave the house for the first time in a long while. I attended physical therapy to work on my strength, balance and flexibility.

One day during my recovery, I woke and felt the need to sneak in a visit to the barn. My dear world champion horse, SF Marking Time (aka "Handsome"), and I always had an amazing partnership but it reached a whole new level that day.

I turned him out of his stall to graze that morning. Weak from the walk, I sat on the ground in the pasture to gather my strength before I returned to the house. Handsome saw me on the ground, and he walked over to where I was and stood over me, like a guardian angel.

I sat cross legged in the dirt with my arms wrapped around his left front leg. He waited with me until I had the strength to rise. He could have left me to go graze that morning, but he didn't and I loved that horse more that very day than when he won our first world championship buckle. He is my once-in-a-lifetime horse.

## Back in the Saddle

IN MAY 2013, I WAS CLEARED TO RIDE MY HORSE FOR FIVE MINUTES, every second day.

I remember my very first ride. I had saddled Handsome, my most gentle horse, strapped on my helmet and sat on him for 10 minutes. I used to think he was a very short horse at 14.2 hands, but that day, he felt like he was 18 hands high.



V. BEWLEY

As an AQHA member, I'm so proud of my horse, registered as SF Marking Time, and appreciative of the partnership we share.



V. BEWLEY



V. BEWLEY

**My world champion mounted shooting horse, Handsome, is sired by Colonel Tycoon and is out of Partana by Partee Doc. He's about to turn 18.**

Walks led to trail rides, and trail rides led us back to the competition arena.

To me, going back to a sport where I was once at my peak was one of the hardest things I have ever done. When they say getting started is the hardest part, they're right. I am a very competitive person – I think top riders need that almost-addictive personality – and it was hard to go back into a sport, knowing that even though you're a world champion, you just didn't have "it" any more.

Completing my first run in a competition setting felt like

I had to learn to be comfortable being one of the few western riders in a helmet. But I chose to become a role model and enjoy the added confidence it gave me

climbing Mount Everest. My heart was racing, and I just told myself, "Take it easy, slow and easy." My favorite photo was taken as we left the arena. I was so proud of my horse, and I was proud of myself for taking the first step.

I know that to stay focused on my recovery, I had to set reasonable goals. Setting unrealistic goals would only result in disappointment. I also had to learn to be at peace with my riding helmet.

My helmet and I had a love-hate relationship in the beginning. I hated to be the odd western rider in a helmet, but it gave me confidence by protecting my head that had been so damaged. I had ridden without my helmet a time or two in personal retaliation, but I found that I rode with much more confidence when I had it on.

I looked at it like I had two options. My first was to sit and cry over my situation. My second option was to be a role

model by being the odd western rider in a helmet. I chose to be a role model, and I discovered that you have to be at peace with yourself if you're going to be a trail blazer. I was honored to be awarded the Craig Ferrell M.D Equestrian Safety Award for my promotion of riding helmets by Riders4Helmets.

It was my goal to qualify for the CMSA World Championships in October 2013 in Amarillo, and qualify I did. I purchased a 2013 qualifiers jacket as a gift to myself for reaching that milestone, and I cautiously reminded myself not to set expectations too high during the competition.

My new goal was to finish penalty free. I surpassed my wildest expectations by not only finishing penalty free but also finishing only 0.4 second away from a reserve world championship title in 2013. After my last run at the end of the competition, I walked my horse back to his stall, hugged his neck and cried with joy in his mane. Here was a horse who had taken me to the winners circle, assisted my nonprofit riders, helped in my recovery from a brain injury and then carried me back into the top of my sport. Whatever I needed him to do, he did it without question.

Although my confidence was coming back in the shooting arena, I had to work hard to continue to improve. I found riding in my English saddle at home helped me improve my balance and posture. Although it was not a saddle well suited for mounted shooting, or even remotely designed to suit that purpose, there were days I used it for shooting practice.

In December 2013, while shutting a young horse down at the end of the arena, the saddle broke at the most inopportune time. I came off and unfortunately landed on my gun, breaking three ribs and puncturing my right lung. I discovered that saying "I landed on my gun" in the emergency room is probably not the most common cause of injury.

After three days in the intensive care unit at Texas Health Harris Methodist Hospital in Fort Worth, I was discharged on Christmas Eve. I couldn't believe my luck; I had just recovered from my head injury and now this. Making the best of a bad situation, I covered my walker with tinsel and celebrated Christmas.

By February 2014, I was back in the saddle, winning and doing what I love. I was determined that nothing would stop me. Many national, regional and state championship titles followed, and my list of recent accomplishments on my website continues to grow.

## Each Day Is a Blessing

I HAD ALWAYS CONSIDERED MYSELF A VERY GRATEFUL PERSON, but after my brain injury, I felt like I have reached a deeper level of appreciation. Now I am grateful for the most basic of things like a headache-free day or a song on the radio. On the darkest days, my horses gave me the strength to carry on.

Recovering from a traumatic brain injury is difficult. Every day is still a struggle for me. It's not an injury like a broken leg or a scar on your skin that someone can see; it is a hidden injury.

I have learned to compensate for my weaknesses, and although there are some things that I will never be able to do again, I am grateful for every day and most grateful for the horses in my life who have made this journey possible.

My life is now everything I have ever dreamed of. During the day, I am the director of operations for Road to the Horse, and on the weekend, you can find me in the mounted shooting arena, sporting my Troxel helmet and grateful for every run I get to make. 🐾

Follow Texas Shooting Horses on Facebook or visit [www.texasshootinghorses.com](http://www.texasshootinghorses.com) to get my latest updates.



## Life Lessons

THESE SIMPLE TIPS GAVE ME CONFIDENCE TO GET BACK INTO the saddle and into the competition area:

- **Surround yourself with positive people** who support you and believe in you.
- **Know what gives you confidence.** Have a clear understanding of what gives you confidence in the arena. Be prepared, be organized and do your homework.
- Say "I can" and not "I can't." Use that positive energy to your advantage.
- **Set realistic goals** that are challenging yet achievable so you are not easily discouraged. Write down your goals and share them with people around you.
- **Visualize your goals** so you have a clear understanding and let your friends know your goals. At each competition prior to entering the arena, visualize in your mind exactly how you wish to perform.
- **Use mistakes for growth.** I once read a quote that said, "Don't get caught up in winning or losing because neither lasts very long." Do not beat yourself up over your mistakes; each mistake is a chance to learn. Enjoy the journey.

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