

Champion Barrel Racer

A Pinnacle of Resilience In and Out of the Saddle

by Anna Sochocky

Lisa Murray knows a thing or two about resilience. As a twenty-three-year law enforcement officer and a two-time National Barrel Horse Association Senior 2D World Champion, Murray faced formidable opponents on the job and in the arena. Yet, weeks before her highest point of success, a far more daunting foe threatened to not only unravel her victories in the saddle, but also in her life.

The Making of a Barrel Race Champion

Bitten by the bug early, Murray's parents bought her a Paint pony at an auction. Bucking her off at every opportunity, she participated in gymkhanas with Western riding speed events before her family moved to a small community in Massachusetts. Murray's early years wrangling her pony paved the way for her accomplishments in hunter-jumper competitions, as well as three-day event trials and fox hunting, where riders followed a scent rather than the animal.

After her parents developed a love of Arabians, Murray began showing the breed in both English and Western pleasure classes under saddle. After her father's death when Murray was eleven years old, she found solace in the barn brushing her

Left: Champion Lisa Murray poses with her blossoming partner, Commandery.

Photo courtesy of National Barrel Horse Racing Association



Photo by David Rosenthal

Lisa Murray and her six-year-old Commandery were reserve champions at the National Barrel Racing World Championships two years ago.

horse, smelling its coat, and cleaning stalls. Quiet, solitary times in the barn taught Murray the power of a horse to carry a person through difficult times, a lesson that, even in her darkest moments later in life, no human could teach.

A Four-Legged Tempest

When Murray bought her off-the-track Quarter Horse as a four-year-old, she wondered whether she had made the right decision. A blur of muscle

and motion, the horse was a spectacle of raw power and potential, and would become her champion barrel racing partner.

Bred for speed, Spit Curl Brown—whose barn name is Diesel—had a record on the track almost as stellar as his later reputation rounding barrels. Murray's introduction to barrel racing, courtesy of a friend, piqued her curiosity. Convinced to try barrel racing with a mare she had planned to sell, Murray was hooked

from the start.

"It was so much fun with the adrenaline, and the connection between me and my horse was something I had never felt before. It was different than going over fences, a different feeling. Being a jumper gave me a good seat, although I had to learn to ride more Western and not so forward. Diesel and I went to our first world championship in 2017."

The following year, Murray and Diesel became the barrel racing pair to beat. Collecting buckles and championships like bees mine nectar, Murray looked forward with anticipation and hard work to the 2018 World Championships.

Yet, Murray's dizzying heights of victory would plummet into a health crisis, one that spun out of control, threatening her life both on and off the saddle.

The Day the World Tilted

Not having the means to hire people to train Diesel and her other horses, Murray takes pride in her work, transitioning her horses from racing to competing in barrel racing. She cites her years in Pony Club as providing her with a solid foundation in equestrian skills.

"Leading up to the World Championships, I was living in the barn. I was working full-time as a sheriff at the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office and worked a lot of hours. We installed lights on my property so I could work my horse, Diesel."

However, six weeks

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Seasoned in the championship arena, Lisa Murray's horse, Diesel knows his job.



Lisa Murray and her horse Spit Curl Brown, aka Diesel clocking another win.



New to barrel racing but not to speed, Lisa Murray's horse Commandery pauses for his rider's cue.

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before the opening of the championships, Murray began experiencing aggressive neurological symptoms at work. As Murray describes it, she was sitting at her desk, typing and chatting with co-workers when her body started to shake. In a matter of seconds, her body exploded into a torrent of involuntary spasms. A tide of sickness erupted from her stomach into an uncontrollable wave of vomiting that broke without warning.

Overcome by dizziness,

walk or talk on her own, Murray found herself on a medical merry-go-round, insisting that her symptoms were real. For months, her life was a blur of scans, blood draws, and dead-end conversations.

The terrifying episode at Murray's desk marked the beginning of what would become a medical odyssey.

"I was constantly dismissed to the point where I was having anxiety attacks. I was slurring my speech. I couldn't even walk a straight line properly. I was like a drunken sailor at eight

an answer when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Beside herself with the news and fearing that the diagnosis would end her dream of traveling to the world championship that year or any year, it would be Murray's deep bond with her horse, Diesel, that would prove the doctors wrong.

Crafting a plan centered on her horses, Murray's determination to return to the barn, not just to ride but to fight for the life she wanted, congealed. Murray knew her horses were more than partners

ride seemed like climbing a mountain in the clouds.

"When I had the episode that landed me in the hospital, all I could think was, oh, my God, we're training so hard. This is what I want. And I'm telling you, when I got home from the hospital, I was so upset and frustrated that I would go down to the barn and pet Diesel. My son was riding him for me. I didn't know what to do. I was scheduled to go to the world championship, but I could barely walk a straight line."

When Murray finally decided to try to mount her horse, she had reduced feeling in her left leg and used a block on Diesel's right side to get on his back. Murray found herself contending with optic neuritis, a symptom of multiple sclerosis where inflammation of the optic nerve results in pain and vision loss. Losing her peripheral vision, Murray compensated by rotating her head to see approaching obstacles.

"He was so patient with me. He took such good care of me. He was amazing. Horses are smart. He knew something was wrong with me. There was a local barrel race, like a local show, and I attended it. I decided then and there that I would go to the world championships. My doctors said I shouldn't drive because it was a nine-hour trip, and the stress

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her head spun like a wheel, and Murray lost her ability to speak, stand, walk, or hold a pen. Professionally trained to respond in an emergency, her colleagues rushed to her aid and called 911.

Emergency room doctors ordered a battery of tests that proved inconclusive, although a stroke was ruled out. After a three-day hospitalization and no closer to an answer, Murray was discharged. Still unable to

in the morning. It was very frustrating. Doctors told me I probably wouldn't be able to ride again."

Murray, refusing to walk away from her horses or trying to receive an accurate diagnosis, scheduled a meeting with a neurologist at the Weston, Florida outpost of the Cleveland Clinic. After months of feeling like a lone coyote crying into the wind and more thorough testing, Murray finally had

in the arena. They were her partners in a battle for her life.

A Fire Refusing to be Extinguished

Ruminating in the hospital and later bedridden, Murray recovered from the MS symptom flare with a dose of steroids to tamp down the inflammation in her central nervous system. Beside herself, Murray's balance was still off, and the prospect of being strong enough to saddle her horse and



"I think horses are the best therapists in the world. I genuinely believe that horses possess a remarkable sense of kindness and empathy. They come to you with kindness, with grace."

wasn't good for me. There were many questions about where I was going and how debilitating the competition would be. I thought if there was any cure for MS, it would be in my damn barn, because horses are my drug."

Murray and Diesel's crowning moment of success arrived contrary to medical opinion when the team won the National Barrel Horse Association's Senior 2D Championship and the open 3D division. The following year, in 2019, Murray repeated her wins in both divisions.

Finding a New Finish Line

Murray acknowledges that she still wrestles with her balance, noting that at the Florida State Championships last June, she lost feeling in her left leg while riding her new horse, Commander, who had recently come off the racetrack.

"That was a tough ride. My new horse is a baby, so he's not ready to take care of me. He's still learning. We made it through, though. These horses give me such a reason not to give up. Even when I don't have feeling in my left leg, it's like there's a fire inside of me. I want to be with them because they make me feel better. After all the world championships with Diesel, my son has grown, and I gave him my champion horse. I had a couple of other horses that I was trying, but we didn't click. Then, three years ago, I got a gray horse named Commander. He was also off the track and out of Texas. He's even more of a fire-breathing dragon than Diesel! Still, he's coming along and gives me a new reason to keep trying and to not give up, even on my worst days. They give me a reason to not think about my multiple sclerosis and a reason to get out of bed."

Murray notes that horses live in the present and acknowledges their perception



Lisa Murray and Diesel bask in a well-deserved victory claiming the 2D World and 3D National Barrel Horse Association's World Championship wins in the open finals in Perry, Georgia.

as a gift. While people tend to worry about the future and obsess over the past, Murray believes her horses keep her grounded.

"I made the same mistakes, but I live in the 'now' these days. I'm happier. I think I'm healthier because I don't have all the nonsense in my head all the time. My alarm goes off

she might be bedridden, or she could just as easily be walking. Multiple sclerosis is a game of chance, and people living with the disease don't always draw a full house.

"I think horses are the best therapists in the world. I genuinely believe that horses possess a remarkable sense of kindness and empathy. They

have stress. My anxiety is gone, even when I'm at the biggest horse show competition. There's something about these horses. They don't know what will happen tomorrow. They don't know that I spent half my salary on the next horse show, or that I'm going to eat Ramen noodles because they are eating their thirty-five-dollar bag of grain. All they know is that I love them and that they depend on me. I rely on them even more. My horses give me the purpose I want and need to have a future."

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at 6:30 a.m. My horses need me. They're waiting for me to get down to the barn. They're waiting for their grain and hay. Stalls have to be cleaned. My horses give me a purpose that even my job didn't give me."

Murray concedes that her future might not always be filled with championship wins and days training horses. A day may come when Murray says

come to you with kindness, with grace. Even the biggest horses I've seen bring out a calmness in a person.

Horses are very empathetic, and they're forgiving. They live in the moment and take everything in, like when you're hurting or anxious.

Sometimes I feel like I'm normal, but I feel most at ease when I'm with my horses. I don't

Anna Sochocky earned her Master of Arts degree in Creative Writing and graduated Magna Cum Laude. As an equine writer, Sochocky specializes in articles on Horses, Health, and History. With this unique brand, she has carved a successful niche in the professional equine writing community as the sole proprietor of Equi-Libris LLC. Her writing has appeared in Equus Magazine, Western Horseman, Horse Illustrated, The Chronicle of the Horse Untacked, Sidelines Magazine, Horse and Style Magazine, and The Horse Magazine. She has received awards from the American Horse Publications, the New Mexico Press Women, and the National Federation of Press Women.