kayla

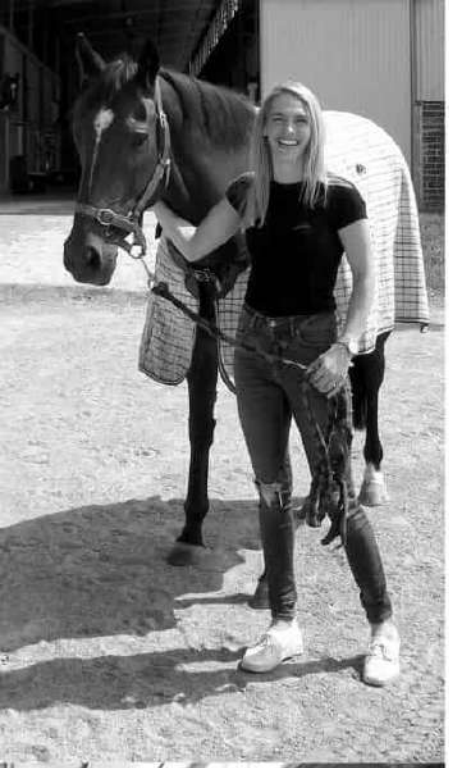
Imagine yourself astride a large and powerful animal moving at break-neck speed, almost flank-to-flank with any number of other similarly focused horses and riders. And then imagine that while engaging in this adrenaline-charged activity, you've been diagnosed with epilepsy.

Horse-racing is a tough gig in its own right. To be a female jockey in the unusual situation of a sport where men and women compete equally on the same playing field is a particular challenge. Add to that a condition with the potential to heighten the risk in an industry where serious injury is common and Canberran Kayla Nisbet has achieved the trifecta.

Not that the inspiring 24-year-old has any intention of letting these things slow her down.

"When you're so young, it can be a pretty intense occupation, but it's what I've always wanted to do. I was never scared or afraid about coming back – if anything, it made me hungrier, realising it could all be taken away so quickly."

One of six girls, Kayla followed her dad, John, a former jockey turned trainer, into the racing game. Apprenticing from the age of 16, in just three years, her star was on the rise with an ever-growing number of wins. Then in June, 2016, only three days after claiming the Apprentice Jockey's Premiership for Canberra and Goulburn, Kayla had her first – and to date, only – seizure.



"I hadn't eaten a lot, and I felt like I was going to faint. Mum said I kept holding my head, and then I collapsed," says Kayla of the day it happened.

"I don't remember anything about it, but my mum and sister who were with my at the shops, were obviously pretty frantic. They told me I was fitting for about 30 seconds or so."

While there was no history of epilepsy in Kayla's family, neurologists suggest it may have been the result of a head trauma she experienced in a car accident when she was four. She also says that in hindsight, there were signals.

"I think I was a bit run-down. Over a few weeks before, I'd ridden 12 out of 14 days, and although I felt fine, I was probably more tired than I thought. The specialists have said that fatigue is most likely my trigger."

The young jockey says the first days after the seizure, in the absence of any clear knowledge of what had happened to her, were some of the most difficult of her life.

"They ran tests and all was normal. They kept asking me if I'd taken anything and I made it very clear I've never touched a drug in my life. I honestly believe that's what they thought it was."

"It was hardest not knowing what caused it, whether it might happen again. Epilepsy hadn't even been mentioned."

Kayla reveals she cried when the condition was confirmed. Her emotions were further thrown into turmoil when told she wouldn't race again.

"I thought my whole life was coming to an end."

As it transpired, there was one other Sydney-based jockey in Kayla's position, although Racing NSW didn't then have a protocol in place on how to deal with such a situation.

"It was decided I'd have six months off to see if I had another seizure and if not, ensuring my medications were at the right levels, I could ride again."

"It took eight months but when I got the go-ahead I was straight back into it the next morning. I've never been more excited to sit on a horse."

Almost immediately Kayla achieved another milestone by securing a ride in the prestigious Canberra Black Opal Stakes.

"After injury or illness, it's hard to get going again - racing moves on. Canberra though is great for supporting local riders, and everyone was terrific."

Prior to her epileptic incident, Kayla had suffered broken bones on a number of occasions and a period of questioning her ongoing involvement in the industry.

Three years on though, she is well and truly back in the saddle, notching up 41 wins over the season so far. Also currently vying for the Canberra Jockey's Premiership, Kayla's sights are set firmly on the prize.

"It's common to have a second seizure straight after a first, but I didn't, so that's a good sign. I may never have one again - I just have to stay on medication and manage fatigue. As long as I do all that I'm fine to keep riding," she says.

"There's been ups and downs but I've had a great career as a jockey. Whatever comes next, I'd love to stay in racing one way or another. All I'd say is that whatever your passion, don't let anything stop you."

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