

# *The* **CHRONICLE** **CONNECTION**

**WAGING THE WAR ON BREAST CANCER  
HORSEWOMEN WHO  
LEAD THE CHARGE**



**+**  
**CUT DOWN  
ON WINTER  
COAT GROWTH**  
**SAY HELLO TO  
SPACE-AGE FABRICS**  
**KYRGYZSTAN:  
THE LONELIEST  
RIDE ON EARTH**

*Shannon  
Dueck and  
Sentimiento*

# PONIES, PINK RIBBONS AND PRIORITIES

*For these three women and the thousands more their lives have touched, horses have played a huge role in the fight against breast cancer.*

By MEGHAN BLACKBURN

**T**he partnership between horses and humans seems fertile ground for inspiring stories. We frequently hear them coming out of equine therapy programs for the disabled, convicted criminals or soldiers looking to return to civilian life after traumatic military experiences. But it's often been said that there's no stronger bond than the one between a woman and her horse.

Lifelong horsewomen like Shannon Dueck, Meredith Bullock and Mary Ross are living proof of that adage—and they've relied on that special bond to help them through personal battles with breast cancer or losing loved ones to the disease.

Susan G. Komen For The Cure estimates that in 2011, 230,480 new cases of invasive breast cancer will be diagnosed in the United States. And close to 1.4 million new cases of breast cancer occurred among women worldwide in 2008. The disease affects women (and men) of all ages, races and ethnicities, and studies show that over the course of a lifetime, one in eight women will be diagnosed with it.

So when you're surveying the predominantly female constituency of exhibitors, trainers and spectators at a horse show, it's highly likely many are battling, have battled or are close to someone affected by breast cancer. That's why horsewomen like Dueck, Bullock and Ross have turned to horses to cope, heal and inform others.





## STRONG, STRONG WOMEN

**F**or Shannon Dueck, a professional dressage rider based in Loxahatchee, Fla., 2009 was the year that changed her life. In the span of just a few months, her mother was diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer, her aunt with an advanced stage, and then, after a routine mammogram, doctors broke the news to Dueck as well. She was 46.

“It was devastating to get the diagnosis. [Cancer] is a scary, scary word,” she said. “To be fairly young and have that diagnosis, you have to deal with your own idea of what mortality is. But I was lucky, because I got diagnosed early—I knew that I had a very good chance of coming out the other side.”

Dueck went to get a second opinion, something she strongly suggests to other women. She also bought the three highest-recommended books on breast cancer she could find online and read them. She faced the problem, because that was all she had the power to do.

“I wasn’t lying at home crying or anything, but it was hard,” she admitted, adding that at times she felt the battle was even tougher for her husband, Lorne. “[A spouse or close family member] has to be strong all the time. I had to be strong [in public], but I could come home and turn into a

puddle—and my husband had to take care of that.”

Lorne, 47, disagreed. “She’s naturally tough—I don’t know if she was born that way, or it’s because of her three-day eventing background! But she was stoic about it.”

Before Shannon switched to riding and training dressage, she evented through the intermediate level, worked at a Thoroughbred racetrack and earned her A rating in Pony Club. Lorne, a builder and project manager for equestrian properties, admitted that though they both faced fear, especially in the beginning, communication helped them manage it.

“It’s tough to go through and hard to describe, but in the end, you get closer with the person because you have to be open about what’s happening,” Lorne said. “Talking about it helps the process. The fears will always be there, but you have to minimize the irrational ones. You’re fighting enough without all the ‘what ifs’ that you deal with.

“Having support and good doctors helps the fight,” he continued. “I would go to a job site, with a pink ribbon on

Breast cancer survivor **Shannon Dueck** competed her mare Ayscha at the Dancing Horse Challenge during the Potomac Valley Dressage Association’s Ride for Life, with proceeds benefiting the Johns Hopkins Avon Foundation Breast Cancer Center.

my car, and the toughest guys would come up and say, 'My mom had [breast cancer].' And there was a tenderness there. It really affects a lot of people; it helped knowing we weren't alone."

After weighing treatment options, Shannon decided to have a double mastectomy, even though the cancer was just in one breast. But there were other decisions to be made. She had to be sure that tissue from her stomach or back wouldn't be used for the breast reconstruction, because as a Grand Prix dressage rider, core muscles and strength are of the utmost importance.

The double mastectomy allowed Shannon to avoid chemotherapy and radiation.

"When you're younger, you can have a more aggressive treatment because your body can deal with it," she said. "The doctors wouldn't have let me do that if they thought there would be legitimate concerns. I didn't want the side effects of the chemo, and they didn't think it was necessary."

Though her doctors were stern about her staying off a horse for six to eight weeks, she did as most lifelong equestrians do—she got back in the saddle the moment she felt capable.

"I got on 17 days after surgery, but I would only ride horses that I knew were going to be, for the most part, safe," Shannon said, noting that after her 5½ hour surgery, she had a reaction to the antibiotics, ended up in anaphylactic shock and found herself right back in the hospital. "I was fit and strong going into [the surgery], so I came back faster. I wouldn't recommend people getting on that soon, but I needed it."

But it wasn't easy. Mounting and dismounting proved to be laborious, since her arms and pectorals were weakened by her surgery. And her strength wasn't what it had been weeks earlier.

"I felt good about [her getting back on early] because I know what that does for her mentally," Lorne said. "She's not good at sitting around. I knew the recovery would be tough for her, because you have to sit and let your body recover, but it turned out to be good for her head and physical recovery."

Shannon attributed the rapidity of her recovery to horses and goals—and support from friends and family.

"I had this goal of making it to the [Olympic Games in London in 2012]—it got me so much more committed to beating this and healing. Having my horses there got me

out of the house and helped me deal. Because every time I would stop, the breast cancer thing came crashing down on me. It enveloped me. When I would ride or teach, it was gone for a while. It helped me escape.

"While I was recovering, [six-time Olympian Robert Dover] came and rode my horses that were on the Grand Prix cusp. He saved my season," she added. "I rode my mare Ayscha in her first Grand Prix in January, after I'd had my surgery in October. That only happened because Robert rode her, plus the fact that Ayscha is very talented."

Shannon is now in remission, but because doctors couldn't remove all her breast tissue, she still has an ultrasound every six months and an MRI once a year, and she'll continue screening like that for the rest of her life. She also lost her mother to the cancer in December 2010, and her aunt is still fighting.

Beyond the tangible changes, there are also emotional differences in her lifestyle, which came as a result of breast cancer.

"I've learned not to sweat the small stuff," Shannon explained. "Now, when I forget—when I'm lucky enough to forget that I had this—and if I start to get silly about things that are inconsequential, my husband will say to me, 'It's not like it's breast cancer.'"

"The day-to-day stuff is more precious," he said. "We all have stresses of life and living and family and work, but now, after it all, when I get a chance to talk to her during the day, that becomes the most important thing. And the other stuff doesn't matter."

Spreading the word about breast cancer, and early detection in particular, is now a personal crusade for Shannon. She participates in as many breast cancer charity events, equine fundraisers (like the PVDA Ride For Life [Md.] or the Challenge of the Americas [Fla.]) and mainstream public awareness events (like the Susan G. Komen race, for which her team raised more than \$10,000 this year) as possible.

"If I can help some women just by finding it earlier, it will all be worthwhile," she said. "Honestly, my battle was difficult, but less so because they found the cancer early. I feel most other women who are faced with breast cancer have a harder battle than I did. But I'm continuously amazed how women go through all of this and come out the other end as strong, strong women."

**“When I’m lucky enough to forget that I had this—if I start to get silly about things that are inconsequential, my husband will say to me, ‘It’s not like it’s breast cancer!’”**

—Shannon Dueck

## THE POSITIVES OUTWEIGH THE NEGATIVES

**M**eredith Bullock won't tell you that being diagnosed with breast cancer was the best thing that ever happened to her, but she'll admit that more than three years later, she's a better person because of it.

Bullock teaches out of Sullivan Canyon Preservation Society in Los Angeles, where she's been based for 38 years. In April 2008, after a Well Women's Check and a mammogram, doctors diagnosed her with stage 2 breast cancer, involving two lymph nodes. Just a few weeks later, she went in for a lumpectomy.

"In the beginning, you're so devastated when you hear the news that you just want to get it out. So I think the surgery itself wasn't such a big deal—and I didn't have a mastectomy," added Bullock, 66. "But the chemo is very hard on you—I think that was probably the hardest part."

She underwent six sessions of chemotherapy until the end of the year, took a three-week hiatus, then started radiation five days a week for eight weeks.

"I had my chemo on a Tuesday," said Bullock, who worked full-time as a teacher of emotionally disturbed children until she retired a year ago and taught lessons several times a week at Sullivan Canyon. "I'd get sicker as the week went on. I would teach Saturday morning lessons, and then I'd hit the bed for the rest of the weekend. I'd start recovering on Monday and get to feeling pretty good before the next one."

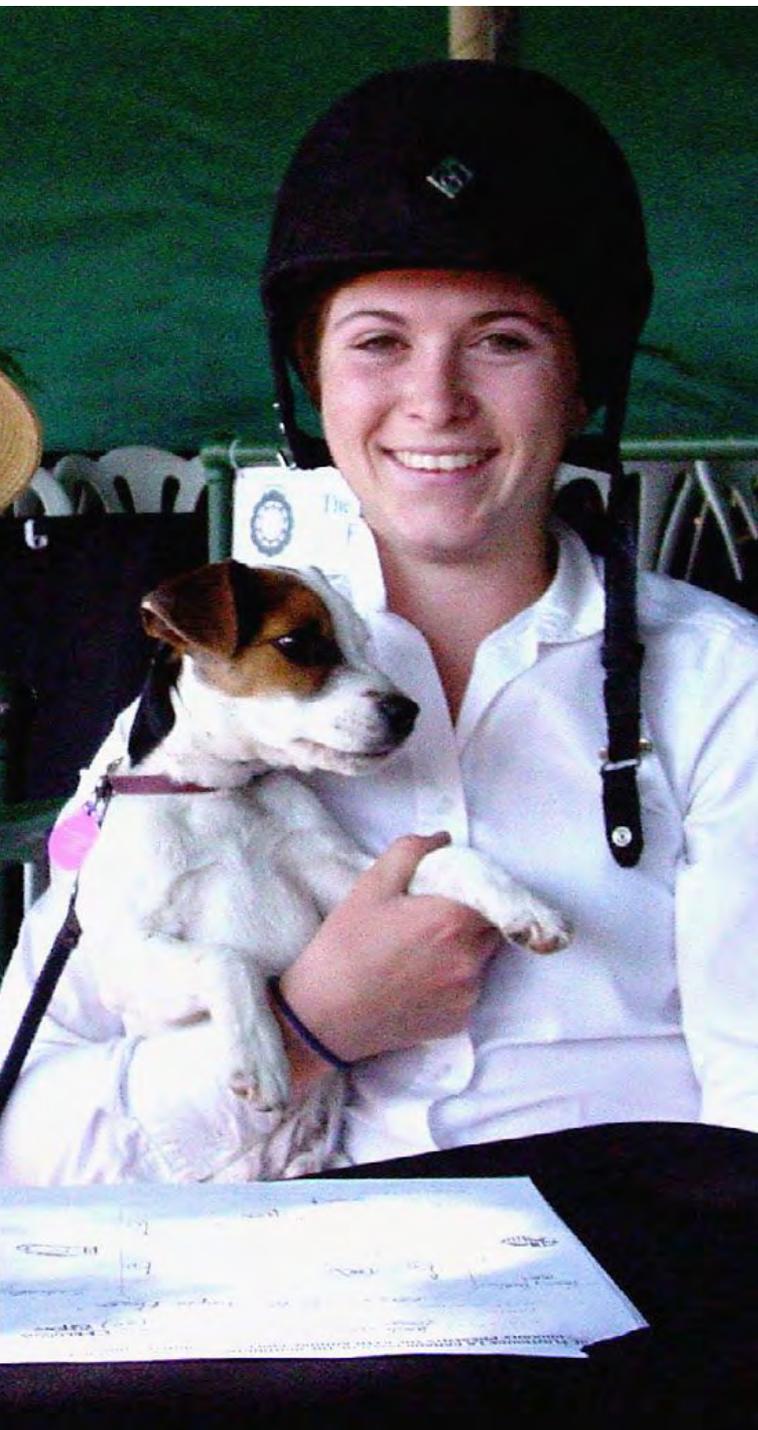
"For the radiation, I went in at 6:30 every morning, went back home, got cleaned up and went to work," she continued. "I never quit working—and I know it helped mentally."

Since the age of 6, Zazou Hoffman has been one of Bullock's star students. During Hoffman's junior career, she picked up accolades like the 2006 Ronnie Mutch Scholarship for up-and-coming young equitation riders, the 2009 ASPCA Maclay Final title at the Syracuse International Sporthorse Tournament (N.Y.) and top-10 finishes in the Pessoa/USEF Medal and USEF Show Jumping Talent Search Finals-East.

"I never doubted for a second that [Meredith] would be able to fight [breast cancer]. She's so strong-willed and tough-minded," said Hoffman, now 19 and a sophomore at the University of California-Los Angeles. "The treatment was hard on her, as it would be for anyone, but she stayed as upbeat as possible despite the factors that held her back physically. She tried to be as involved as possible in training her students."



Throughout her recovery from breast cancer, **Meredith Bullock** (left) has served as an inspiration to students like Zazou Hoffman, who trained with her since the age of 6.



**“There’s something about a horse’s eye that makes the insides of me feel better.”**

—Meredith Bullock

while I was working with the horses.”

Hoffman said Bullock has always been a “private” person, so she knew her relationship with horses was instrumental to her during the battle.

“I think Meredith connects with horses on a deeper level than most, and because of that they’re an inspiration to her life,” she said. “Horses were there for Meredith through the toughest times.”

The experience caused Bullock to reach out to fellow cancer patients, and through a weekly support group, she saw positive changes in her life.

“I think one of the most important places [cancer made a positive influence] was in relationships—as far as what was really important and wasn’t,” she said. “The support group also helped me get rid of the initial anger—the anger was interesting to me because if you asked me, I didn’t really realize I was angry, but I was having angry reactions to things I wouldn’t have normally had angry reactions to.”

Bullock has been cancer-free for more than three years, though she still takes a “cancer pill” daily. And since that day in 2008, she’s made some bigger changes in her life. Acknowledging that she was unhappy with her job in the education system and feeling unwilling to compromise any longer, she retired. She’s now working to become a court-appointed special advocate for foster kids.

“There were just a lot of good things that happened,” Bullock said. “I met a lot of good people; it was life-clarifying. It made me want to be more honest, want to be more ethical. I’ve always tended towards those traits anyway, but a lot of stuff you think really matters to you, just doesn’t matter as much.

“I’m much more forgiving, and I’m able just to let things drop and go on my way if things aren’t worth it to me, and let whatever happens happen,” she added. “I’m just more centered on what’s important in life.”

Bullock was moved at how the equestrian community reached out and offered support, and when a day was especially tough, she found solace in the horses.

“The horses help keep you centered,” she said. “I remember coming to teach lessons on Saturday mornings and not feeling all that great, but there’s something about a horse’s eye that makes the insides of me feel better. I always felt OK



**Mary Ross** (with Mason Phelps [left] and Brian O'Connor) established the Challenge of the Americas in 2002 in honor of her mother, breast cancer victim and a fellow horse lover, and the event has since raised nearly \$1.8 million to benefit breast cancer research.

“Mom wasn’t involved in horses. She just liked the horses because I liked them. She always thought they were so pretty,” said Ross, 56. “My friends [who work at BCRF in Boca Raton] suggested we do an equestrian event for the foundation. I saw it as a perfect opportunity to do something in memory of my mother. So that’s how it started.”

The first Challenge of the Americas was held in March 2002 at the International Polo Club in Wellington, Fla., with only three riders performing a pas de trois—something Ross had witnessed once in Germany—and the spectacle moved her.

“I thought it was so beautiful, and Mom would have loved it, so that’s why I started originally with that format,” said Ross, whose event celebrated its 10th anniversary this year. “It improved because more and more riders wanted to participate. We started with a pas de trois, and every year it got bigger, and we now have three international teams [of six riders that make up a “quadrille”] who participate every year.

“It’s fun; it’s a great evening, and I’m sure she’s up there smiling away,” she added.

Ross’ vision was to create more than just a showing of horses. She wanted crowd involvement, different disciplines and parties. Her enthusiasm was contagious; now the event has multiple sponsors, includes a pre-event cocktail party, a silent auction and a gala. Before the feature event of three

## DRESSAGE FOR THE CURE



very year—several times a year, in fact—in cities all over the country, droves of pink-clad supporters can be found marching in the name of a cure. Breast cancer charity walks (the American Cancer Society, Avon and Komen For the Cure all have their own versions) are wildly well-attended.

Mary Ross’ charity event involves less walking than most, but there’s a lot of piaffing to make up for it. And there’s still plenty of pink.

Ross’ mother, Jane Cruse, lost her battle with breast cancer in 1996. Ross, of Boca Raton, Fla., has been an active equestrian since her late 20s—first in the hunter/jumper world and then in dressage. So with a little help from her friends at the Breast Cancer Research Foundation, Ross stumbled on the idea.

**“Everybody knows somebody who’s had breast cancer, and everybody wants to support the cause.”**

—Mary Ross



teams (U.S., Canada and international) performing upbeat freestyle routines, there's now a show jumping exhibition or a polo match.

"We break a lot of rules—we try to make it fun," said Ross. "Our 'quadrille' has six people [instead of four]; our music has words. We really try to get the crowd involved. And after a great show of the horses, guests walk across the polo field to attend our gala."

The 2010 event celebrated the life of Ingrid Lin, a dressage enthusiast who battled breast cancer for more than a decade. Lin was the owner of Lisa Wilcox's Grand Prix Lusitanos, Queba HM and Quemacho, and the founder of White Fences Equestrian Center in Loxahatchee.

That evening, a synthetic ice surface topped the polo field, and four ice skaters performed a synchronized routine with four Spanish horses.

Ross says the whole experience—the riders' dedication,

volunteer support and people who keep coming back—still gives her goose bumps. To this day, the Challenge has raised nearly \$1.8 million to benefit the BCRF.

"I had two friends looking for a horse in Europe, and one was wearing a Challenge of the Americas ball cap, and [the people they met] knew about it there. They know about it in California. It's spreading awareness for the need to find a cure for breast cancer.

"And what I'm learning is that there are a lot of people in the equestrian community who have breast cancer or have had it, fought it and won," Ross continued. "Everybody knows somebody who's had breast cancer, and everybody wants to support the cause—and what better way to do it than have a good time?" ©

**Proceeds from the Challenge of the Americas**, in which three teams perform upbeat group freestyles, benefit the Breast Cancer Research Foundation.

## THEY'RE NOT ALONE

Shannon Dueck, Meredith Bullock and Mary Ross are far from being the only prominent horsewomen with personal connections to breast cancer.

In fact, many top riders and horse sport supporters have courageously battled the disease, like eventer Debbie Rosen, who completed the 2010 Rolex Kentucky CCI\*\*\*\* just weeks after finishing chemotherapy and before beginning radiation.

In 2006, prominent hunter rider and trainer Sandy Ferrell became an outspoken advocate for breast cancer awareness after enduring a double mastectomy herself. And although Rebecca Broussard lost her 12-year battle with the disease in late 2010, she left behind a stunning legacy to the U.S. eventing community.

Has breast cancer affected an inspiring equestrienne in your life? Share your stories with us via email at [cc@chronofhorse.com](mailto:cc@chronofhorse.com).