

Supporting Payton

By Jennifer Grey



When Payton was on the road to recovery, there was a nationwide outpouring of support that included flowers, gifts, cards and prayers. She received this beautiful bouquet from Todd Graham.



Payton's mom, Holly Walker, and her grandma, Ginny Stanley, brightened her day with a surprise visit from her dog, Freckles.



Payton, who was the undefeated Junior Exhibitor 14-17 Five-Gaited Champion with CH Callaway's No More Mr. Nice Guy at the American Royal last year, cannot wait to get back into the ring again.

Payton Walker, a healthy, vibrant 15 year old who was undefeated with CH Callaway's No More Mr. Nice Guy and Two Gun Tommy at the American Royal last year, was an unlikely candidate to suffer a serious illness, but in February this year, she was stricken with a rare disease that became her family's worst nightmare. This is not only a story about her recovery against serious odds, it is about the incredible support received from the Saddlebred community with a nationwide outpouring of prayers, letters, cards and gifts.

The trouble began on Friday, February 17th when Payton, usually stoic about illness, was feeling so sick that she woke up her mom, Holly, in the middle of the night. After a trip to the doctor, she was initially diagnosed with a virus and sent home but by 1 am the next day she was shaking and struggling to breathe. The next morning the situation was dire. "It was absolutely pitiful and my heart sank," Holly reported. At Holly's insistence, Payton was hospitalized in Elizabethtown, Ky., and soon seemed to be improving but by Sunday, everything changed. "As a mother I refused to think the worst but my head was taking me places I did not want to go. Payton's heart rate skyrocketed, her blood pressure dropped and her fever spiked to 104.6. I heard 'meningitis' from a nurse and my knees became weak. Payton's twin sister, Rylie, died 15 years ago from meningitis and I could not lose another daughter... I sought out support from friends and my prayers to the Lord went up at lightning speed."

Given the gravity of the situation, Payton was transported to Kosair Children's Hospital in Louisville. Hooked up to every medical device imaginable, Payton's liver was inflamed, she had nasty lesions in her throat and the infection had found its way into her jugular vein from where it progressed into her body, causing blood clots

as it went. Not knowing how to specifically treat the disease, the Kosair doctors were bombarding Payton with antibiotics. "Watching her in the ICU I felt so helpless," said Holly, telling Payton she loved her and that everything would be fine. She was soon joined by Payton's devoted grandma, Ginny Stanley, who caught the next plane from Key West where she was on vacation. She did not leave Payton's side for the next two weeks.

When Payton's pediatrician phoned Kosair to have her transported, the attending that took the call had a suspicion it was Lemierre's disease and alerted the ICU team. Within seconds of her arrival they were running an ultrasound on her neck looking for a clot. Unfortunately, they could not find it, so Payton had to have a CT scan that night. After samples were grown in the lab and the diagnosis was confirmed, the doctors were able to treat the disease more specifically and Payton slowly began to turn a corner.

Ginny, who did not leave the hospital for the entire two week stay, noted that while competition at horse shows is fierce, when a tragedy occurs, the Saddlebred world comes together in a show of humanity and caring. "When she hurt so bad and was so sick, she was getting prayers from all over the United States," Ginny remembered with gratitude. There were frequent visits from Tammy DeVore and her family as well as friends from school and many others from the local ASB community. Payton is so grateful for everyone who boosted her spirits in countless different ways. Her hospital walls were covered in cards and she was surrounded with stuffed animals.

"I blocked a lot of it out," Payton told us. "I do remember not being able to breathe without oxygen. It was awful!" Having grandma Ginny there as a constant presence was very comfort-

ing. They have always been close but this experience has strengthened the bond even more. "She's the best grandma you could ever wish for!" Payton declared. This unquestionably traumatic event has left Payton with a new appreciation for everything she has in life, saying "I wouldn't wish this on anybody but it has opened my eyes to what's important." Now discharged from the hospital and on the road to recovery, Payton has been cleared to start riding again. "It's killing me not being in the saddle!" Payton told us with feeling, knowing the goal of getting back to her horses has been one of the many positive factors on her road to recovery.

"The outpouring of love from our horse family has been amazing," said Holly. "Payton received gifts of love and well wishes from strangers and those we hold dear. The cards, calls, texts, Facebook messages, gifts and prayers were as healing for me as they were for Payton. It is lonely when you are by the side of an ill family member and cannot physically help. So I thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving us light in our darkness, hope when we didn't have any and love when we needed it."

This personal message from Holly Walker to everyone who supported Payton and her family is a testament to the willingness of the horse show world to act as a caring, extended family when one of their own needs help. Strong and tough, Payton is getting ready to return to horse show competition with a different viewpoint. Knowing how close she came to losing her life, she will approach everything she does with the joy of knowing she lived through this ordeal with the support of her friends, family and the entire Saddlebred community who were there to uplift her in ways she will never forget. We look forward to her return to the show ring, back in championship form, enjoying every moment she spends with the horses she loves.