

# PRACTICAL HORSEMAN

Expert how-to for English riders

August 2017



## My Life

### Competing Against Cancer

By Monica Oliver

**F**our brave women stood in the center of a large indoor arena in front of 200 people one evening last May. Each described how being with horses helped her to cope with cancer: living with, recovering from or carrying on with the fear of its deadly return. The event was held by Mane Stream, a New Jersey-based therapeutic riding program. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.

I knew what these women were going through. On a frigid Monday morning in January 2016, my doctor called to say a small polyp removed a week earlier during a routine colonoscopy was *cancerous*. I would need surgery soon.

*No, this won't do, I thought. I've just started a lease on an amazing mare and we have really big competition plans this year. As it turns out, cancer doesn't really care about your plans.*

I endured a three-hour surgery to remove an 8-inch section of my colon and 18 lymph nodes a month later. Cancer had moved from the polyp through the colon to one of those 18. "Lymph nodes trump all," according to Dr. Mark O'Hara, my oncologist at the University of Pennsylvania. My cancer was stage III—chemotherapy required.

Now things were getting serious. I found myself re-reading an op-ed in The New York Times, "To be happier, start thinking more about your death." The article asked: "Are you making the right use of your scarce and precious life?" I knew my answer would involve horses and competition.

Six weeks after my surgery, I gingerly climbed aboard my equine partner, Josie.

What an incredible feeling to be in the saddle again! I was under surgeon's orders to take it easy, but walking seemed too cautious, so we began trotting. Knowing the canter would actually feel smoother on my incisions, we moved up another gear. My endorphins exploded. I was in heaven again.

One month after starting chemo, with the incredible support of my trainer, Sarah Stewart, I competed with Josie over 2-foot-3 fences at a local show, ending up reserve champion. I quickly became obsessed with scheduling horse shows during my six months of chemo treatments. Josie and I went on to compete successfully at 2-foot-6 in seven more shows, including HITS Saugerties, Saratoga Springs Horse Show and Monmouth at the Team in Gladstone, New Jersey, where Josie and I were second out of 30 in the Bit O' Straw Classic and first in my division in the hunter derby.

How did this compare to my life in the show ring pre-cancer?

Before each show, I fixated on being perfect. I spent time overthinking my course. In the ring, my brain would get hijacked by my internal critic, "the saboteur," who would often question my approach to a jump, and that uncertainty easily transferred to my horse. After starting chemo, I focused on the joy of every practice and competition ride. Each time, my endorphins skyrocketed. I could feel the natural chemicals in my body working to heal my colon, brain and heart.

Here's what I learned in what became my competition against cancer:

**1. Focus on what gives you the most meaning in life.** Then define success in those terms. In riding, I shifted from getting a blue ribbon to partnering with this beautiful animal.

**2. Use a positive mantra.** I viewed my competition as cancer. Each time I entered the show ring, I'd say under my breath "F\*#@# cancer!"

**3. Eliminate non-value-added distractions.** We all get easily sidetracked by that voice in our heads, the saboteur who tells us, "You're not good enough" ... "You're going to fail." Once in the ring, I stayed laser-focused on having a positive ride, allowing no internal B.S.

**4. Require internal positive feedback.** After each ride, I focused on the top three things I did right.

**5. Find a way to release your endorphins.** During and immediately after my rides, the side effects of chemo—nausea and neuropathy—went away. Endorphins helped me recover faster and made it easier to deal with the next round of chemo.

In April 2017, my CT scans showed no signs of cancer. For now, I'm considered a cancer survivor. But I call myself a thriver. And every opportunity to tack up Josie, enter the ring and work up a sweat is a gift. 🐾

*Monica Oliver is a certified business and leadership coach, cancer survivor and thriver and education advocate.*



Monica Oliver and Josie compete at the Marshall & Sterling Finals last September, two weeks after Monica's last chemo treatment.

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