

AMERICAN HORSE

THIS DUO
BEAT THE **ODDS**

Graceland's
QUARTER HORSES

RAMBO
RIDES REINERS



Roosters Zack and Paula Francis both overcame difficulties to achieve great success in the show pen – and a great friendship.



'Beyond What We Could **Ask** ^{or} **Imagine**'

**A horse who wasn't
supposed to show any more
and a rider who wasn't sure
she would be able to ride
again make a dynamic duo.**

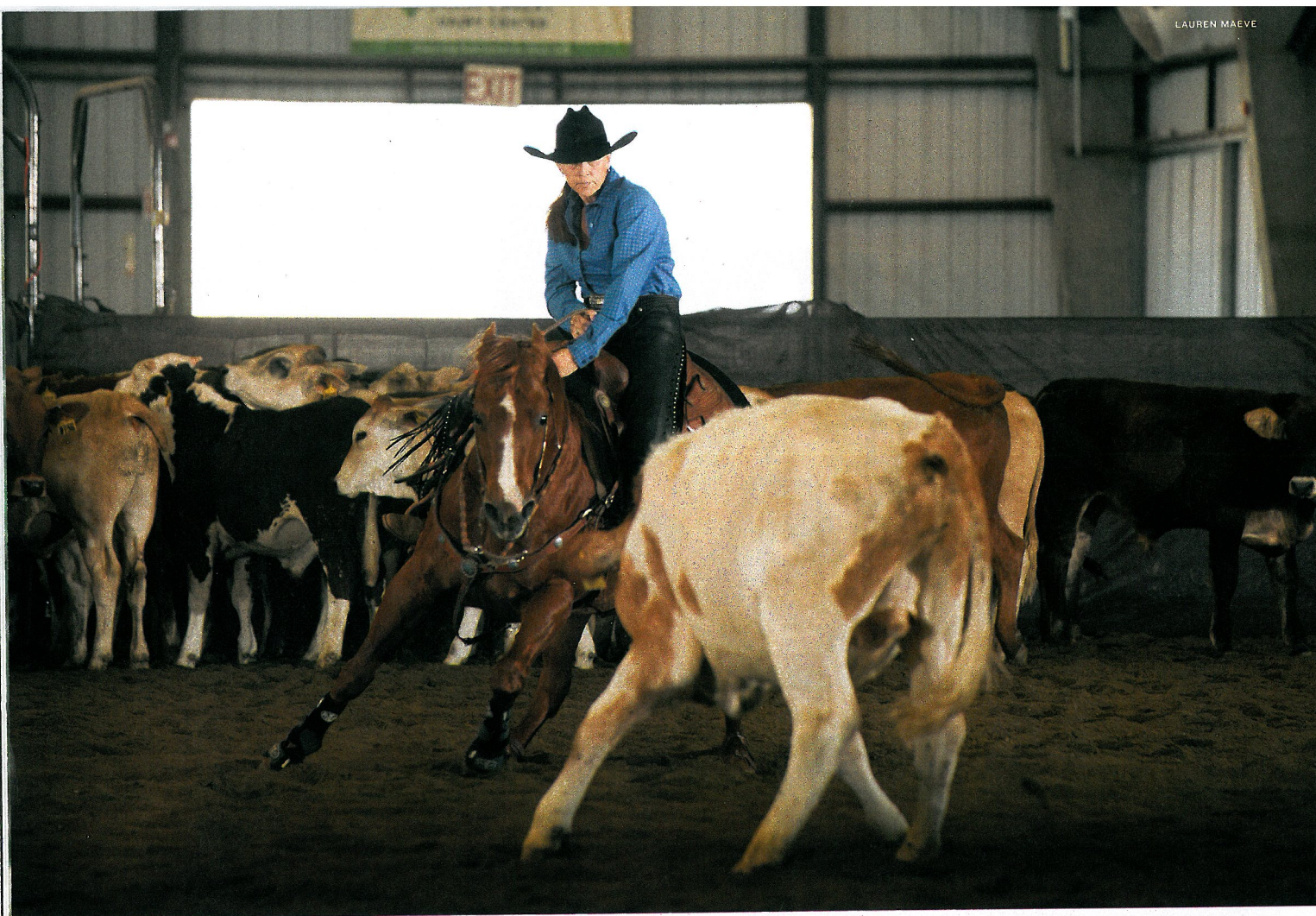
By Kathy A. Johnson

THOUGH PAULA FRANCIS OF BAKERSFIELD, CALIFORNIA, LONG dreamed of showing a reined cow horse, she never dreamed she would have a horse the caliber of Roosters Zack, let alone become a National Reined Cow Horse Association reserve world champion.

And though "Zack" demonstrated he was talented as a 3-year-old, an early diagnosis of navicular syndrome threatened to end his show career for good. Here's how this unlikely duo became a winning team.

Zack's Promising Start

ZACK'S SHOW CAREER STARTED IN 2009 WHEN JOHN McCARTY of Gaviota, California, entered him in both the non-pro and open divisions of the NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity and made it to the finals in both.



Paula and "Zack" excelled at California Cow Horse Association shows before heading to the national stage.



A regimen of supplements and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories helps Zack stay sound.

When John entered the arena for the cow work in the finals of the non-pro, he and Zack were leading.

"They electrified (the arena)," Paula says. "They were working so well – it was picture-perfect cow work."

However, as Zack made his final circle around the cow, he tripped and fell, and John came off. Instead of winning, they wound up placing 14th.

John and Zack competed in the open finals two days later, where they won the cow work this time and placed 15th overall. Zack's performance, despite his unfortunate accident, left a lasting impression in the reined cow horse world.

Shortly after the Snaffle Bit Futurity, John discovered that Zack had navicular syndrome in his right front foot and was already showing some deterioration of the navicular bone. It wasn't horrible, according to Paula, but it was enough to make them realize that Zack probably couldn't hold up to the rigors of open showing for long. John continued to show Zack lightly until 2011, occasionally used him as a ranch horse, then turned him out to pasture.

Paula's Story

PAULA HAD GROWN UP RIDING, AND WHILE IN COLLEGE AT California Polytechnic State University in 1986, she attended her first NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity in Reno to watch a friend compete. It was the first time she had seen reined cow horse events. She immediately fell in love with the sport but put aside her desire to compete in favor of finishing college,

getting married and raising two sons. She committed to being a stay-at-home mom and home-schooled her kids until they entered high school.

Fast forward to May 2013. Paula, her husband, Daran, and their two sons, Drew and Ethan, were competing at a local fundraising ranch rodeo, as they did every year.

Sunday, May 19, "was a great day and a horrible day all within five minutes," Paula says. Her two sons, who had tried for years to win the youth team-branding competition, finally won the event. After cheering them on, Paula, who had been watching from the sidelines from the back of a 3-year-old mare, began to warm up prior to competition. The horse hit a deep spot in the arena and began to lose her balance.

"I leaned forward to help her, and that was my mistake. She caught me in the head with her head, and I fell, and she fell on top of me," Paula says.

At the hospital, doctors discovered Paula's pelvis was fractured on the right side, front and back. Though she didn't need surgery and had no internal injuries, for six weeks, she had to use a walker or wheelchair to avoid bearing weight on the injury. She began intensive physical therapy, and no one was sure how long it would be before she could try riding again.

In August 2013, Paula was still in physical therapy when her older son, Drew, was severely injured in a dirt bike accident. It was the first week of his senior year in high school.

"I thought my injuries were bad, but his were terrible," Paula recalls. "He had a shattered scapula, seven or eight transverse processes in his spine that were fractured, he broke his collarbone, a couple broken ribs and a punctured lung."

Mother and son ended up doing physical therapy at the same facility. Other than some residual tightness, she doesn't have any lasting effects from her broken pelvis. Her son recovered fully from his injuries.

Paula and Zack Meet

FINALLY, IN 2016, WITH HER CHILDREN THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL, and her injury healed, Paula began looking in earnest for a horse to show. That's when she got a phone call from an old friend, John McCarty. Early in Paula and Daran's marriage, Daran had worked for John, and the three remained good friends.

"John heard that I was looking, and in March of 2016, I got a voice mail on my cell phone from him," Paula says. "He said he had this gelding, and that he had shown him in the Snaffle Bit, and he was gentle and broke."



Zack's pedigree is full of performance-horse luminaries.

John also told them of Zack's navicular diagnosis.

"He told us, 'I don't know if he'll be sound enough for you to show, because we haven't done anything with him in two years, but he might be. If you guys will take him, I'll give him to you, because we're family and I know you will take care of him whether or not you can show him. I think you guys would be a perfect match for each other.'"

"We were blown away that he would offer us this horse, because obviously there's a lot of money and time that has been put into him, and we knew what his value would be," Paula says.

In April, when they went to pick up Zack, "He had been

turned out on green pasture, he was fat and dirty – he was just kind of a toad!” she says, laughing. “We walked up to the trailer, and he looked up and his ears went forward, and we were like, ‘Oh, my gosh, he’s so cute.’ He was just a sweetheart. So we loaded him up and headed home.”

In May, Paula decided to ease Zack into competition at the annual ranch rodeo, the same one she had been injured in three years before. She competed in several events, and says, “We just kicked tail. He was so cowy. My husband and I competed in a trailer-loading event, and I rode Zack. It was the first time I’d put him after a cow, and I wasn’t sure what he was going to do.”

Thanks to Zack’s performance, they won the event.

“This was less than a month after we owned him,” Paula says. “I’d never won a buckle before, and that was always my goal. My husband had won one, my boys had each won one, and I just wanted to win a buckle! So the first weekend out, Zack wins me a buckle!”

By the end of 2016, when they were ready to learn the ins and outs of cow horse work, Paula asked John’s advice on finding a trainer. She settled on Monica Caetano. After her first lesson, Monica encouraged Paula to enter the next California Cow Horse Association show, which Paula did. She and Zack placed third in the \$1k non-pro limited.

They continued showing, and in August, Paula discovered they had qualified for the NRCHA World Championship Show, the Celebration of Champions at the Will Rogers Coliseum in Fort Worth, Texas.

“I wanted to show a horse, and here God gave me this incredible gelding. Not only have I been able to show all year, now I’ve qualified for a world show that I didn’t even know existed. This was beyond what we could ask or imagine,” she says.

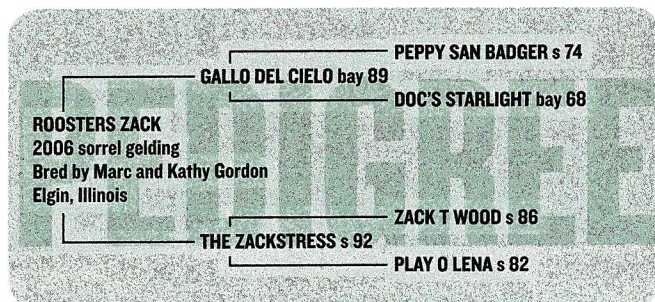
Initially, Paula didn’t plan to go. But the more she talked to other people about the possibility, the more she realized it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

“In reined cow horse, the Will Rogers Coliseum is legendary. To ride in that arena, it’s historical. After we unloaded the horses and got everything put away, I said, ‘I just want to go walk in the dirt.’ I stood in the arena, and thought, ‘Oh my gosh, I can’t believe I’m here.’”

Paula and Zack finished third in the preliminary round, qualifying for the finals. In the finals, they tied with another competitor for third and fourth.

Keeping Zack Sound

DESPITE HIS NAVICULAR DIAGNOSIS, ZACK REMAINED SOUND. NRCHA rules allow the use of bute, but in their first year together, Zack only needed it late in the season. Paula also started him on a couple of supplements, which she credits with making the biggest difference in Zack’s comfort.



Paula doesn't know if another world show is in Zack's future or not, and that's OK. "What an incredible career he has had, what an incredible run the two of us have had, and he will stay with us until the day he dies."

After the 2017 show season, Paula did not expect ever to compete at the NRCHA World Show again. Zack was still sound, however, so their vet suggested adding Equioxx to Zack's management. Equioxx, a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory, was effective and kept the two competing.

In 2018, Paula and Zack moved into the \$5k non-pro limited division. They won two divisions in the CCHA and again qualified for the Celebration of Champions. And in December of 2018, with Monica's blessing, Paula began working with trainer Jake Gorrell, whose facility was an hour closer to her home. Paula and Zack traveled with Jake to Texas for the NRCHA World Show, where they finished first in the prelims and were named reserve champions in the finals.

"Zack is a miracle, basically. He's the horse that shouldn't be showing, and he still is. And I'm the rider who wasn't sure she was going to be able to ride again. The two of us are definitely an unlikely pair, but we work well together. He gets me, and I get him. We're just a team," she says.

The two took off the first part of 2019 while Paula dealt with some physical issues that required surgery.

"I'm probably going to start riding him in August after I recover," she says. "I'm going to try to show him in Reno in September, the first place I ever saw the Snaffle Bit Futurity. If I can show him in that arena, it will be a full circle for me."

"People ask, 'Are you going to try to do the World again?' Not necessarily. I am so blessed with the two years that I've had, that if that was our last year, and we're done, and he and I just get to play around on the ranch for the rest of his life, I'm OK with that. What an incredible career he has had, what an incredible run the two of us have had, and he will stay with us until the day he dies. When I have grandkids someday, I'll let them ride him. He is a gem, and they don't make them like him. God gave us a pretty big blessing when he gave us Zack." ■

Kathy A. Johnson is a freelance writer and AQHA member from central Florida.