



Erin dressage rider overcomes bad luck, two hip surgeries to pursue Olympic dream

BY OLIVIA RUTT

ERIN - Having not one, but two hip surgeries isn't stopping Summer McEwan from pursuing her dream of competing with Canada's dressage team in the Olympics.

McEwan started riding horses when she was eight years old. Now 36, she rides and coaches all over Wellington County.

For many years, she has dreamed of competing in dressage at the Olympic level, but a diagnosis of femoral acetabular impingement (FAI) meant stepping out of the saddle.

FAI is a condition caused by extra bone growth in the hip joint. Movement can cause the bones to impinge on the cartilage, leading to friction and pain, especially

in athletes.

McEwan said the hip flexion of sitting in a saddle irritated her hip joint.

Two and a half years ago, McEwan underwent surgery on her right hip. She explained it is more intensive than a complete hip replacement. About three and a half months later, she was riding again, feeling great.

"It really sucked that I had to have surgery, at the same time all the physiotherapy I had to go through, I was in physio for eight months after surgery and several months prior to surgery," she said.

"It brings this amazing body awareness so when I got back in the saddle again, I was so aware and able to control my body that I actually felt better than I had before,

which was really cool."

McEwan, who grew up near Coburg, has been riding competitively for a number of years. She found dressage to be her sport of choice when she realized eventing wasn't

jumping, I loathed cross country, it terrifies me," said McEwan.

Eventually, McEwan said she found she was looking forward to the dressage shows more than the others.

"I love my horses, I enjoy being around them, this is the reason I do it."

- SUMMER MCEWAN

for her.

Eventing includes show jumping, cross country and dressage, and is a common beginning point for many riders starting out in pony club.

"I actually loved show

"It suits my personality type; it's a very focused sport, it's sort of ballet, yoga, Pilates ... so a lot of body awareness," she said.

"I tend to be quite A-type in personality and so I'm drawn to and always looking

for perfection, and this sport is about that."

She said she feels the deepest connection with her horse when she is riding dressage.

"Because you're so involved ... you listen for a response, you try to figure out what the horse is telling you about what you've just done, why it's hard, why it's easy, alter your course a little bit to help the horse understand what is required from them," she said.

"I love my horses, I enjoy being around them, this is the reason I do it."

She began working with her coach and mentor Nancy MacLachlan when she was nine.

"She's been a big influence in my life. I was very lucky to have her," she said.

Eventually, McEwan became MacLachlan's working student then assistant trainer before going off on her own.

"She was really generous with her time and she always made sure I had opportunities and horses to ride," McEwan said.

She explained she has had a lot of bad luck with her horses over the years. One had a brain tumor that led to the development of founder, a debilitating foot condition.

In 2007, McEwan declared for the Canadian Pan Am team with a horse given to her by MacLachlan. However the horse was injured after losing its footing at the barn.

Another horse colicked

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Rider overcomes surgery to pursue Olympic dream

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but didn't recover after surgery. McEwan said it was hard for her to be in the barn after that.

"When things fall apart it is heartbreaking," she said.

"I couldn't go to the barn for three weeks afterwards, I just couldn't bring myself to go out there and do it again."

McEwan added she invests so much emotionally into the horses she rides.

When she met Chris Von Gartzten she was asked to help with a young horse.

"Chris has had similar bad luck to mine with horses," said McEwan.

Von Gartzten added, "I've just gotten to the point where, I had too many heart breaks, I've lost too many horses."

After McEwan's first surgery, Von Gartzten asked her to ride and care for Diego, a Zweibrücker German warmblood.

"He has been sort of my main project," said McEwan.

"He's a complex character."

At 17 hands, Diego is a large horse. But it's not his size that sets the eight-year-old apart.

"He's not everybody's cup of tea because he is so in your face, he's constantly busy and a lot of people find that frustrating and time consuming," said McEwan.

"He's one that you're always talking to, you always have to figure out what's going on in his head and why

is he doing what he is doing."

About six months into recovery from her first surgery, McEwan started to struggle again.

"I couldn't really keep training, so I spoke to the surgeon and he asked me 'well, what are you doing in a day?' and I said 'I'm only riding like four horses,'" she said.

"He said ... 'one maybe two horses max.'"

At that point, McEwan said she had to scale back her involvement. Von Gartzten had an opening as barn manager at her farm in Erin and McEwan jumped at the opportunity.

"Chris needed somebody and I was out here every day anyways to see this guy (Diego) and we were living in Fergus at that time and so it just worked," McEwan explained.

"There's only the four stalls here so it's not a lot of labour and I could do it on my own time, according to how I was feeling. I could take breaks if I needed to, it was a really great way to come back from the first surgery."

Then in April, McEwan had surgery on her left hip, which she said will take about a year to recover.

Four years out of the ring, she said she is champing at the bit to get back into dressage.

"We'll see if this guy's ready, he's been slow to mature both physically and mentally," she said of Diego.



Summer McEwan doesn't want two hip surgeries to hold her back from Olympic dressage dreams with sponsored horse Diego. Photos by Olivia Rutt

"He's kind of a party animal and he's big.

"Because he is such a big mover, he covers a lot of ground and covers a lot of reach. It requires an awful lot of strength for him to actually balance that, it takes time to actually build up that strength."

But McEwan said she has faith in him.

"He's going to be fabulous when he's all grown up," she said.

McEwan said it takes about seven years to train a horse to Grand Prix.

"It's a long-term investment," she said.

She explained the goal is to work up to Grand Prix level nationally then internationally. By showing in the international ring, a dressage rider accumulates points to be ranked on a world level.

"Then what happens is whenever these games are coming around, the Olympics or the World Equestrian Games, the year prior usually, a set of criteria come out and ... they are from Equestrian Canada," explained McEwan. She said riders eventually

get to a trial phase for the Olympic team.

"If you're thinking about trying to qualify for the Olympics, you're in it for a few years," she said.

McEwan said Von Gartzten's support has been unparalleled.

"She's been amazing, she's so supportive, she's bent over backward to make this work for me," said McEwan.

"She's not made me feel guilty or badly or I'm just unbelievably lucky to have her helping me."

Von Gartzten is rooting

for McEwan and Diego's Olympic aspirations, saying the pair work well together.

"We all have that dream," said Von Gartzten.

"I admire that, you should have goals in life and if that's your big goal, that's awesome and you just work step by step, you work your way up."

While the Olympic dream is still years away, McEwan is focusing on getting herself and Diego strong again.

"I think when we get the chance to show, I think he's going to show off a little bit," she said.

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