

CROISSANTS HIGH

on Kate's wish list

KATE NIPPERESS HAS BECOME AN INSPIRATION FOR MANY IN THE RACING INDUSTRY AND IS NOW FIRMLY FOCUSED ON GETTING TO PARIS FOR THE 17TH PARALYMPIC GAMES WORDS: MARK BRASSEL IMAGES: GEORGIA YOUNG PHOTOGRAPHY



Kate Nipperess in action at Sydney International Equestrian Centre

It was a Thursday morning in July 2016 when the life of Kate Nipperess changed irrevocably.

Kate, then 29, was involved in a nasty and freakish track accident while riding trackwork.

A horse had become loose and started galloping the wrong way on the Warwick Farm Pro-Ride surface heading straight towards an unaware Kate and her mount.

"I was riding pacework and I remember it very clearly up until when it must have happened," Kate recalled.

"I remember counting my last furlong [200m] and I heard the loose horse siren go off.

"I looked around everywhere and couldn't see the horse; I was just concerned how my horse was going to react to a horse coming past it.

"I just looked at my horse's ears to see how he was feeling, and he was relaxed and working along nicely – and then I woke up on the ground.

"I didn't know what happened. I remember [trainers] Marc Conners and Gary Portelli holding me down and I was fighting them trying to get up, as you do when you fall off.

"They said 'you've had a fall Kate and not to move'. I said 'no I haven't' – I was really confused.

"Although it was daylight, the sky was apparently blue, I just remember it being purple and swirly behind them, so I was obviously in shock.

"And a few minutes after that the pain kicked in; it was excruciating and I didn't realise you could feel that much pain and still be alive, it was horrific.

"I ended up breaking my back, my neck, most of my ribs, my shoulder, I was knocked out, split my head and both my lungs collapsed.

"The diagnosis afterwards was that I had a 50-50 chance of walking again."

Kate spent nearly 10 months in hospital battling to mend her broken body.

"I thought like everything else in life I'd done with horses and work, that if I worked hard enough, I'd be able to defy the odds and walk again.

"When I came out of hospital, I thought I'd continue to improve but when I went home that really didn't happen.

"I started struggling a lot mentally and spiralled down into a pretty dark place; it went on for a couple of years and got worse."

But Kate's world changed dramatically when she became friends with another woman in a social media group.

"She convinced me to attend a wheelchair rugby training session and that was the turning point in my life," Kate said. "I wasn't playing, it was the people I met there who really saved me.

"One of the guys there said to me 'what is it that bothers you about being in a wheelchair?' as I'd barely left the house in years because I didn't want to be seen in a wheelchair.

"I said, 'I hate people pitying me' and he replied, 'do you feel sorry for me?' and I laughed.

"He then remarked 'why don't you feel sorry for me, I'm a quadriplegic?' and I thought about it.

"He said 'it's because I can do anything ... I'm a weapon'. He said you can also 'be a weapon!'



A beaming Kate Nipperess after receiving her award at the State Para-Equestrian Dressage Championships

"And that completely turned around my way of thinking. People only feel sorry for you if you see yourself as the victim.

"It was then I started changed my outlook – I was not going to let this beat me. And I overcame it.

"I wanted to get back on a horse from the moment I came off. Horses aren't what I do, they're what I am.

"I felt like a piece of me was missing and no matter how happy I became, I always said to people a part of my heart will always be broken."

Kate began her equine journey as a four-year-old and simply was 'born with a love for horses'.

"Not sure where it comes from, Mum and Dad weren't really into horses but for some reason I was, I would scream at the TV when I saw a horse," Kate explained.

"I think it's in my soul. My parents knew so they did the best they could getting me to pony club and I always especially loved dressage.

"I grew up riding horses, I can't remember not riding them. I was very small."

However, Kate didn't ride a racehorse until she turned 20.

"I started working in the stables with Greg Hickman and I remember leading horses over to the track.

"One morning I saw a horse being galloped on the course proper in the fog and I thought 'that's what I want to do'."

Kate was apprenticed to the late Guy Walter but went up to Greg Bennett at Scone on loan for more opportunities.

"One of my first jobs riding trackwork was with Guy. He was a father figure to everyone.

"I also went to Tasmania and worked for David and Scott Brunton. I called Guy during my stay, and he said to come back and he'll teach me at Goulburn and at Warwick Farm.

GET KATE TO PARIS

"Guy was awesome, and I owe him so much. He told me to come on Sundays and he'll have more time to teach me.

"He took me to the 'bull ring' and taught me many things like horses that pull and how to handle them – I ended up riding horses like Appearance, Zanbagh and strapped Streama.

"I also worked and helped break-in horses for Tim Martin and rode Heavens Above, Moral Victory and Hunter Jack.

"I rode a few for Matt Smith but at the time he didn't have that many horses."

Kate's initial winner came aboard Chief Seattle who scored with ease at Armidale for Todd Payne in August 2013.

"That brings back great memories, obviously everyone's first winner is a big thrill.

"My fondest memory of that day was phoning Guy Walter afterwards and telling him that I'd ridden a winner.

"I mainly rode at the picnics and there you could claim down and go back to riding professionally.

"I rode at Bong Bong and it was incredible, so many people were inside and outside the course proper."

Kate's Paris journey started with Equine Pathways Australia in Box Hill, NSW around 10km from Windsor.

The high-performance clinic offers participants the opportunity to advance their competition skills to achieve goals through comprehensive assessment and training programs.

The ultimate goal in any high-performance athlete is to represent their country at an international level.

"I found them via a welfare role with Tye Angland's charity 'Team Tye Foundation'.



Kate sits quietly as Chief Seattle cruises home at Armidale. Image by Bradley Photographers

"They're involved with Equine Pathways so I asked if I could also join. I was at the clinic a few weeks later after contacting Julia Battams.

"I feel whole again riding at Pathways. It's completely changed my life and I wouldn't be able to be back on a horse without their help. I felt like finally being back home."

Former top jockey and Sky presenter Corey Brown did a fantastic interview on Kate that appeared on Sky Racing and he remarked: "I saw you on your second day when I arrived out here [Pathways] and I was amazed by the look on your face. Your style and the seat you had on a horse was incredible."

Kate has already competed in a State Para Dressage Championships at Sydney International Equestrian Centre, Horsley Park where she finished second in both tests to make her overall Reserve Champion in her section.

"The horse I was on was an Anglo Arabian endurance horse. He tried really hard but it's all a new level once I start trialling for the Paralympics.

"We're still searching for a horse that meets the specifications to be a Paralympic contender – hopefully we'll find the right one soon.

"There are quite a few trials to qualify. I need three scores of above 70% to be in the running and they then select the team."

Julia Battams is program executive manager at Equine Pathways and has been the national coach for Paralympics, having taken teams to London (2012) and Rio (2016).

"At the high-performance end, it's about getting athletes back into competition sport right through to Paralympic representation and Kate's got what it takes," Battams told Corey Brown.

"Kate has talent in spades and straight away I thought this girl's got it, she's potentially a medal contender, but that's not an issue.

"What's holding her back is access to the sort of horse that's required at international level.

"To access a horse like that we need support ... either financial support or an owner who has a high-quality horse who would like to come on the journey with Kate."

Kate said getting to the Paralympics would be "pretty special".

"Going to the Olympics was something I wanted to do as a kid when I was competing in equestrian events – it would be a lifelong dream come true.

"With my injury you need a specific type of horse as well as it being talented. It must have a good nature and has to be forward thinking as I can't use my legs.

"And it will be quite expensive so we're going to have to find a way to facilitate some fund raising.

"But all in all, it is an amazing goal and to accomplish getting to Paris would be indescribable."

Kate's GoFundMe page - You can help Kate fulfill her 2024 Paris Paralympics dream by heading to her GoFundMe page at - gofundme.com/f/help-me-get-to-paris-paralympics *RNSW*