

# Back in the Saddle

**Multiple sclerosis hasn't kept Mary Jordan '88 from a successful equestrian career**

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Mary Jordan '88 was 4 years old the first time her family made the drive to New York City. Her mother drove, and a doctor met them curbside to draw spinal fluid from her father's back, because multiple sclerosis left him unable even to stand. Every month for 14 years, they made that trip. The treatment didn't help but it was all they had.

Today, 12 years into the disease herself, not only is Jordan still standing, she's a seasoned equestrian who competes on the national and international stage. In August, the Wells, Maine, resident qualified for her third international competition. "My father was a quadriplegic who could only turn his head and neck," Jordan says. "I can ride a horse. How lucky am I?"

That's her natural posture, one of hope and optimism and a kind of faith that has kept her pursuing the passion that has fed her since she was a 12-year-old growing up in rural New York, where her father was an Episcopal minister who taught philosophy at nearby Hamilton College. "He never saw me compete but he was one of my key inspirations," Jordan says.

Jordan competes regionally in three-phase events and dressage. Three times now she has been named a New England champion. Her international experience began in 2009, seven years after her diagnosis, when she learned she was eligible to ride as a para-athlete. That year, she traveled to Holland to work with a Dutch trainer who helped ready her for the European Para-Equestrian Dressage Championships in Kristiansand, Norway.

"There were 78 riders on an international elite level and there I was on a borrowed horse with a team put together with duct tape," the 48 year old says. "I spent three weeks in Holland training. Failure was not an option."

And fail she didn't: Jordan's scores qualified her for the 2010 Alltech World Equestrian Games in Kentucky, where she rode with the U.S. team. Twice since she has earned a spot as an alternate on an international team, once with the Paralympics and again with the World Games. Though she wasn't called up either time, the grade IV rider—the rating for a least-disabled contender—is determined to make a Paralympic team. "It's on my bucket list," Jordan says.

She is already part of another team, one that travels the country talking to MS patients and their families, offering encouragement and firsthand knowledge about the illness.

Jordan, the third member of her family to be afflicted with MS—an older sister also has the autoimmune disease that targets the central nervous system—says it's one of the most important things she does. "MS affects whole families. I make it my mission to connect with those people. When we meet, I feel like I know them because I've been there. I try to throw them a lifeline."

Unlike her father, who had no options, Jordan has been able to control her symptoms with medication, giving herself injections every day for the last 12 years. "Now, it's like brushing my teeth," Jordan says of the shot regime. "Instead of viewing it as a daily reminder of the disease, I see it as a daily dose of hope."

What's more, she has been able to show her son, who was 5 when she learned she had MS, the person she wanted him to see. "I thought a lot about how it would play out with my son. I wanted to show him what a person with MS could do. Sitting on the back of a horse, I felt powerful. I felt in control. I wanted to make sure he saw that," Jordan says. "I figured if he could see me doing things, he wouldn't be afraid."

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