

Bowman Believes For FEI World Para Driving Championships Win

She cements her partnership with “Lars” just in time for the biggest title of her career.

By **Jess Clawson**

Photo By **Pictureblind.de/Jürgen Sendel**

Most equestrians don't get to the top of one discipline, let alone two, let alone as a paraplegic, but Tracy Bowman, the winner of the FEI World Para Driving Championships for Singles, doesn't let much slow her roll.

Bowman has been infatuated with horses since she was 6 and had an unusually sophisticated start in the sport: Her U.S. Air Force colonel father was stationed in Germany in the mid-1970s, and they lived off-base next door to Josef Neckermann, a dressage Olympic medalist.

As a child, Bowman was diagnosed with neuroblastoma. She survived the cancer and rigorous treatment it required. But two decades later, it would return in her spinal column and permanently paralyze her from her second thoracic vertebra down.

Before the cancer returned, Bowman had her sights set on a top-level eventing career. In the early 1980s, she'd worked for the Sivewright family at the famous Talland School of Equitation in England. By 1984, she was back in the United States, running advanced-level horses out of her own farm. There, she worked with Jolie Wentworth, a young lesson student who would become a business partner and lifelong friend. Everything was going just as it should.

“The first time I met Jolie, she was 8 years old, and she was using a pipe panel to climb on her pony bareback,” Bowman said. “The pipe panel fell over onto her, and I had to run to lift it off of her. That was quite a start to our friendship.”

Bowman and Wentworth joke that they've been in each other's lives longer than most married couples.

“We've been through good times and bad, and we're still together,” Wentworth said. Together, they run Kismet Farms in Martinez, California, where they have more than 40 acres and focus on eventing.

Wentworth has been short-listed for team competitions, including the 2012 London Olympic Games.

“I can never imagine doing this without Tracy,” Wentworth said. “She's my coach and my friend. When I need hand-holding she holds my hand; when I need someone to say, ‘Toughen up, you can do this,’ she's that person.”

Bowman's own eventing career was cut short by the return of her neuroblastoma. An unsuccessful attempt to drain it resulted in her T2 paralysis, which leaves her without the use of her legs.

“I was in my 20s, and I was riding cross-country, and I just fell off,” Bowman recounted. “That's when I found out it was back.”

But Bowman, now 56, wasn't going to let her situation force her out of the horse business. By the time she stopped riding, Kismet Farms was running successfully, so Bowman took on the coaching role that helped Wentworth get to the top.

Bowman hadn't previously considered driving. She was familiar with it from her childhood in Europe, but she thought it would be “selfish” to spend the time and money



“I knew this was my chance,” said Tracy Bowman (left, pictured with navigator and friend Jolie Wentworth) of her August win in the FEI World Para Driving Championships for Singles with Albrecht's Hoeve's Lars.

on a sport for her when Wentworth and their clients were doing so well.

Then she met Diane Kastama, “who won't let you out of her sight until you're hooked on driving,” and Bowman started driving one of her school ponies. Before long, she'd bought a Welsh pony mare named Taylamore Laurabelle from FEI para-driver Leslie Berndt.

“The people in the driving community are like eventers,” Bowman explained. “They're fun and inclusive, and they'll go out of their way to help you out.”

With an experienced pony and the encouragement of the community, she moved up in the sport and

attended the FEI World Para Driving Championships in Kronenberg, the Netherlands, in 2018.

“The level of driving at the championships was shockingly good compared to what I was used to at home,” she said. “Some of the best drivers in our area could be beat by the para-drivers in Europe.”

Bowman finished in eighth place and learned a lot.

When she returned to the United States she retired “Bella,” who was 18, but she was hooked on the sport. Bowman travels frequently to Europe to buy event horses for clients or to co-own with Wentworth, so on a 2019 trip she put out feelers for a driving horse.

There she met the Welsh cob Albrecht's Hoeve's Lars, who had won in Kronenberg with his owner Francisca Den Elzen of the Netherlands.

Bowman purchased Lars, now 12, in January 2020, planning to compete him in Europe that August. Rather than bring him home only to turn around and send him back overseas, she left him with her friends Bram and Ijsbrand Chardon, world-renowned drivers based in the Netherlands.

Then, of course, COVID-19 hit.

"I tell everyone you can blame COVID on me, because I never spend money on horses for myself, and when I finally do, this happens," Bowman said with a laugh. She decided to bring him home, even though she doesn't have a coach here.

"Lars" is not a simple creature.

"After we bought him, I thought, 'What did we do?'" Wentworth confessed. "He was quirky and weird, kind of squirrely and cold-backed. And of course we were trying him in January, so he was feeling fresh in the cold weather."

But the more Bowman and Wentworth got to know Lars (Orchard Red Prince—Castenrayseweg Saartje, Bokkesprong Casjmier), the more they loved him.

Spending 2020 together, Bowman was able to establish a relationship with the pony. As they got better together, she set her sights on this year's FEI World Para Driving Championships for Singles in Schildau, Germany, Aug. 5-8.

"I had to make a decision. I knew the pony and adored him; we were getting along great, but I also knew the level at the champs and asked myself if this was smart," she said. "But I knew this was my chance. I did a little bit of soul searching and decided to go."

She entered the Dutch Para Driving Championships in June in preparation for the worlds.

"I won the dressage, but I sucked after that," she

admitted. "The drivers there are so fast in the hazards and so good in the cones, and the hazards are so much harder than anything in California. I finished last in the hazards and in the cones, and I really started to fret. The level I thought was incredible at Kronenberg had doubled. Not only the course, but the level of driving from my fellow competitors was astounding."

In conversation with the Chardons and Wentworth about whether to go ahead with the World Championships, they decided to arrive in Schildau a week and a half earlier than originally planned to prepare. Bram traveled between Schildau and his own World Cup competition in the Netherlands.

"I just couldn't be more thankful to them," Bowman said.

Between the Chardons' help and her carriage maker accommodating a change in carriage, that extra week made everything click for Bowman.

"Things definitely went my way when we were there.

It was amazing; I can't deny it," she said.

She came home with the individual gold medal and raved about the competition, from the horses' stabling to the accommodations for competitors. "They remembered that a lot of para-drivers are in wheelchairs," she said.

Her entire team was part of her success: the Chardons, Wentworth ("She is basically my child"), her barn team at home who kept things running smoothly, and

Wentworth's husband David Wentworth, who remained home with their daughter.

And, of course, the most important team member, Lars. Bowman calls him her unicorn, her once-in-a-lifetime horse. He's a double world champion with two different para-drivers from two different countries.

"You've had those horses in your life where you know you'll never have his equal," Bowman said. "There will never be another Lars." ●

"The level of driving from my fellow competitors was astounding."

—Tracy Bowman



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