

# Blind faith



Julie Hensley walks with her seeing eye dog, Fonzie, a 7-year-old German shepherd, and her horse, Hot Rod, after riding in her arena.

Photos courtesy of KUOW/Megan Farmer

## Julie Hensley lost her sight, but not her love for horseback riding

BY ASHLEY AHEARN

Julie Hensley's body gently echoes the rolling motion of her horse, Hot Rod, as she lopes in tight circles around her arena. She stops him suddenly and then, as one, horse and rider pivot 180 degrees and take off at a lope in the opposite direction.

Ten yards later they do it again. Stop, roll back, lope on — the palomino gelding an extension of his rider, pirouetting and stopping on a dime at her subtle command.

You would never know, watching this woman effortlessly guide her horse through such complex maneuvers, that Julie Hensley is blind.

A yellow-and-black boom box sits on a barrel in the center of the arena, tuned to conservative talk radio. Snippets of President Trump's latest speech weave in and out of call-ins about wolves killing cattle and ads for farming equipment.

But Julie isn't listening for content. She orients herself and her horse using the sounds emanating from the center of the arena. In one hand she holds a length of stiff nylon rope which she uses as an antenna, tapping and feeling for the fence that marks the edge of the arena, as Hot Rod lopes around.

Julie grew up on a large ranch in Okanogan County and has been a horsewoman all her life. Her father was a rodeo calf roper. The walls of her tack room are adorned with old saddles and faded photographs: Julie in a cowgirl hat wearing a rodeo queen sash (in 1974 she was Washington State high school rodeo queen), Julie on horseback, racing low and fast around a barrel, Julie posing on sleek, athletic quarter horses.

And it was a horse that took her eyesight away.

### Hardest time

Julie was in her early 20s, married, and working at a racetrack in the Tri-Cities when the accident happened. It was the winter racing season and there was some ice on the track where she was exercising a horse. The horse lost its footing and Julie took the full force of the fall on her head, giving her a concussion and detaching her retinas. Within a week, she was blind.

"It was a very sudden thing and sometimes I don't even hardly remember those parts of my life because I try to block them out," she said.

At 23, Julie's life began to unravel. She underwent three surgeries to reattach her retinas, all of which were unsuccessful. Soon afterwards, she and her husband got a divorce and Julie moved home to the ranch. Those first three months were the hardest of Julie's life.

"There was a moment when I felt that life wasn't worth living," she recalled. How could she make herself useful on a ranch without her eyesight? How would she earn money? How would she get around? "I was at a low spot as far as being depressed and not having a lot of hope," Julie said.

And then, her father said it was time for a new horse.

"My father was my hero and my rock," Julie said. "He knew that what I really needed to do was get back on a horse and start working with horses — I think we both knew. He was my mentor with training when I could see, so after I lost my sight I think he knew my passion was horses and he enabled me to start working with horses again."

### New meaning

Julie remembers the first time she got back on a horse after the accident. It wasn't frightening. There were no tears of joy. She says it just felt normal, and good for her soul.

Julie and her father went to the Hermiston horse sale and bought a filly they

named Rendezvous Chic, because she was Julie's first rendezvous with horses after her accident. Julie trained the filly, on the family ranch, as she herself adjusted to life without vision.

"And when I couldn't do it, [my dad] helped me adapt and find ways to be able to do it," Julie said.

Working with horses took on new meaning for Julie after she lost her sight. She used to prefer horses with some spitfire and spice. A blind rider requires a horse that is completely responsive, calm and attuned to the job at hand.

"I have to have a horse that is not going to charge through a gate over the top of me and my dog. I have to have a horse that has certain manners and ways of doing things so that I can function as a blind person riding and working with that horse," Julie said. "It takes hours and hours of work but when you have no sight you have to have higher expectations of your horses."

Julie has three quarter horse geldings now. Rocky is her oldest, then Hot Rod and Hollywood, a yearling colt. She's pretty sure her horses know she's blind. Rocky has learned to stand silently in the pasture when Julie comes to catch him for a ride. (He doesn't even switch his tail because he knows Julie will hear him).

Fortunately, with the help of her seeing eye dog, Fonzie, she can usually locate her sneaky steeds. And once she's saddled and mounted up, Julie says riding her horses is the closest she gets to regaining her vision.

"I think that because the horse sees it makes me feel like I'm not blind. It makes me feel a real freedom," she said.

### Rural realities

Every 10 years or so, Julie has to travel to a city to get a new seeing eye dog. "She says being blind in rural America is different than the city. Where she lives there are fewer services, and public transportation is just about non-existent."

But Julie says the open range is her home and she's built a support network out here. She's a member of the Back Country Horsemen and has a close group of friends with whom she goes trail riding. Her husband, Kurt, (who jokes about meeting Julie on a blind date) has always been supportive of her horsemanship and knows that training horses has given Julie's life focus and meaning.

Julie often goes trail riding with her friend, Sue Robbins. On a recent summer day the two rode out to some of Julie's old haunts on her family's ranch, which is now managed by Julie's brother. Sue took the lead on her mare, Mocha, and Julie followed on Hot Rod, her nylon antenna in hand. As they wove their way through

the sage brush, Sue warned Julie about obstacles in the trail: "big branch on your right" or "barbed wire on the ground to your left" or "we're coming to a gate up ahead." The horses picked their way through the rocky canyonland, carrying their riders smoothly over dips and rises, across creeks and up rocky scree slopes.

Julie can't see the rock formations or the ponds or canyons that she knew as a girl, but she remembers them, and with the help of good friends and a solid horse, she still gets out to enjoy this incredible piece of country.

At a place called Mud Lake, Julie stopped Hot Rod and looked out over the dried-up water body — now a green meadow with black cows grazing in the shade along what used to be the water's edge. Julie and her brothers would play here as kids, racing their horses down the hill and into the water.

"We'd start on the hill over here and then we'd run down and cross the lake and there's a rock on the other side. We thought we were swimming but the horses could touch bottom and we'd go over and touch that rock and then go back across the lake." Julie gestures towards a big rock on the other side of the meadow, as if she could see it now.

### Familiar terrain

In a way, she can. "A lot of the places that we ride I can visualize the rock formations, the trees, just about everything is in my memory," Julie said.

As she rides on, she describes the view.

"This is Coyote Canyon we're going along," Julie said, as Hot Rod picked his way down into a rocky crack in the landscape. "This canyon, you can just imagine that it's like an old trail in a Western movie. It just weaves through sagebrush and up over the rocks."

The trail rose out of the canyon, and Julie stopped at a place called "Lunch Rock" — because, well, that's what one does there. Julie dismounted to let her horse graze a bit, and sat down on the flat, gray stone surrounded by sagebrush and bunchgrass.

"This is a place where I've solved a lot of problems," she said, stroking Hot Rod's neck. "It was a place of healing after I lost my sight, to come home and just get a sense of who I was again and be able to connect with the land and the cattle and hearing the birds and all the things that come with living out on a ranch."

Julie says blindness has been the biggest "brick wall" in her life, but the truth is, we all face them in one form or another. Her advice is not to be afraid to ask for help.

"I was probably to the point of not thinking life was worth living seriously enough that I could have made a horrible, tragic mistake," she said. "Don't be afraid to seek help if you're feeling like life isn't worth living because life is worth living. I can attest to the fact that something tragic happens in your life, you can still have a very happy and fulfilling life."



Julie Hensley with her horse, Hot Rod. Julie lost her sight in her early 20s when the horse that she was riding fell, causing her retinas to detach.