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Austin amputee on a path to 2020 Summer Paralympic Games

Competing with the perfect four-legged partner is helping in her journey to heal.



By Gigi Barnett

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(AUSTIN) KXAN – In the summer of 2015, everything seemed normal for Katie Jackson, she had a thriving dental practice, thinking of starting a family with her husband and in tip-top shape. She ran almost every day. Until, she felt an unusual mass behind her right knee.

“I’d always had creaky knees. So, having a little bit of pain in my knee was not abnormal,” Jackson said. “I felt the mass and I said, ‘OK something’s going on there.’”

At first doctors said it was a cyst and to ice it...but weeks later, they came back with a different, darker diagnosis: Clear Cell Sarcoma. It is so rare that researchers have only documented a few hundred cases in the country.

And, the only way to fight the cancer cells rapidly growing behind her knee was through amputation.

“You’re just sitting in that reception room just everything’s spinning,” Jackson said. “[I was] hugging my husband and we’re both crying and it came out. I said, ‘Well, if I have to lose my leg, I’m going to keep riding and I’m going to become a paralympian.’”

Jackson said at the time, she was thinking of the ways to keep her life moving forward. And, what better way than on a horse in dressage competitions. She had dabbled in the sport before, which requires the horse to obey Jackson’s commands through leg movements.

Three weeks after her surgery, she started working with physical therapists at St. David’s Medical Center; and, everything was new.

“Her energy output is several times what it was prior to the amputation,” said Physical Therapist Kerri Kallus. “When they put a prosthetic leg on, this is a mechanical device. They have to get used to that. They have to understand what it’s able to do for them.”

Kallus said that Jackson’s high level of fitness helped her in her surgical recovery period and dressage training.

Jackson did; and, soon she was on her horse, Royal Dancer. A steed she calls a patient partner.

“Part of it is finding a horse that’s OK with it. That wants to take care of you” said Jackson, a Paralympic hopeful. “I’m not a cancer patient. I’m not an amputee. I’m just riding my horse.”

In September, Jackson will compete in the U.S. Para-equestrian Dressage National Championship in North Carolina. Posting well could mean a spot on one of the Paralympic teams. She said another big challenge now is finding sponsors to financially support her new career.

She said the stakes are high for her and other amputees.

“I’ve had a lot of people come up to me and say that, “seeing you watching what you do has been an inspiration and I’m not going to let my bad day get me down,” said Jackson.

After the competition this fall, Jackson said the next big challenge comes in September of next year, when she heads to the World Equestrian Games, also in North Carolina. If she makes the top three, Jackson will move on to the 2020 Paralympic Games in Tokyo.