

From Death's Doorstep To Dressage At Devon

A trailering accident almost ended Cobra's dressage career before it started, but he bounced back with amazing results.

Sara Lieser

Pamela Doolittle spent years waiting for the moment that she would trailer her horse, Cobra, home in her new trailer to her new farm. When that day came it should have been a moment of triumph, but it turned into catastrophe instead.

On April 14, 2004, Doolittle was trailering "Coby" from a local boarding establishment to her home in Baraboo Hills, Wis. She'd taken the 4-year-old there four months earlier in January to get him started under saddle while she finished her barn and riding ring at home.

"My family met me at the barn to say goodbye and help me pack up to leave," recalled Doolittle. "I wrapped Coby's legs in standing wraps and put on the extra halter I always use when I haul. We loaded him in the trailer, and I drove slowly out of the parking lot into the residential neighborhood. My husband followed with our two little girls in our minivan."

But they hadn't gone more than a few blocks before Doolittle received an urgent call from her husband, Daniel. "You have to get back here right now," he said. "Coby just fell out of the trailer."

Dazed, Pam pulled over

"I was so proud of my horse," said Pamela Doolittle after her Dressage At Devon victory. "He wasn't embarrassed about his scars."



by the side of the road to check for herself. "The door swung unapologetically on bent hinges," she said. "There was a bulge right under the rear door window silhouetting Coby's rear end. A mark of manure stained the door. The trailer tie and a broken halter were all that remained of what we had secured inside the trailer."

The back door of the Kiefer Built trailer had bent, allowing

the latch to open, and Coby fell out onto the paved road.

Dan led the injured horse back to the boarding farm while Pam desperately sought a place to turn her trailer around. She arrived back at the stable to see Coby standing in the crosssties completely stunned.

"His knees were ripped open to reveal the carpi on both front legs," she recalled. "I could see bone on the fetlock of the right hind. The left hind as well as both stifles were ripped completely to reveal fragile underlying tissue. The veterinarian who responded to the emergency call didn't know what to do. We decided right then to take Coby to the Wisconsin Equine Clinic & Hospital."

► Keeping Her Passion Alive

Pam rode as a child and tried a career as a dressage professional, working for Jayne Ayers in Wisconsin and Col. K.A. Von Ziegner in Germany, but found that she was getting burnt out.

"I learned at that time that as much as I love horses and riding, I didn't want to make it my job," she said. "I always wanted it to be a passion."

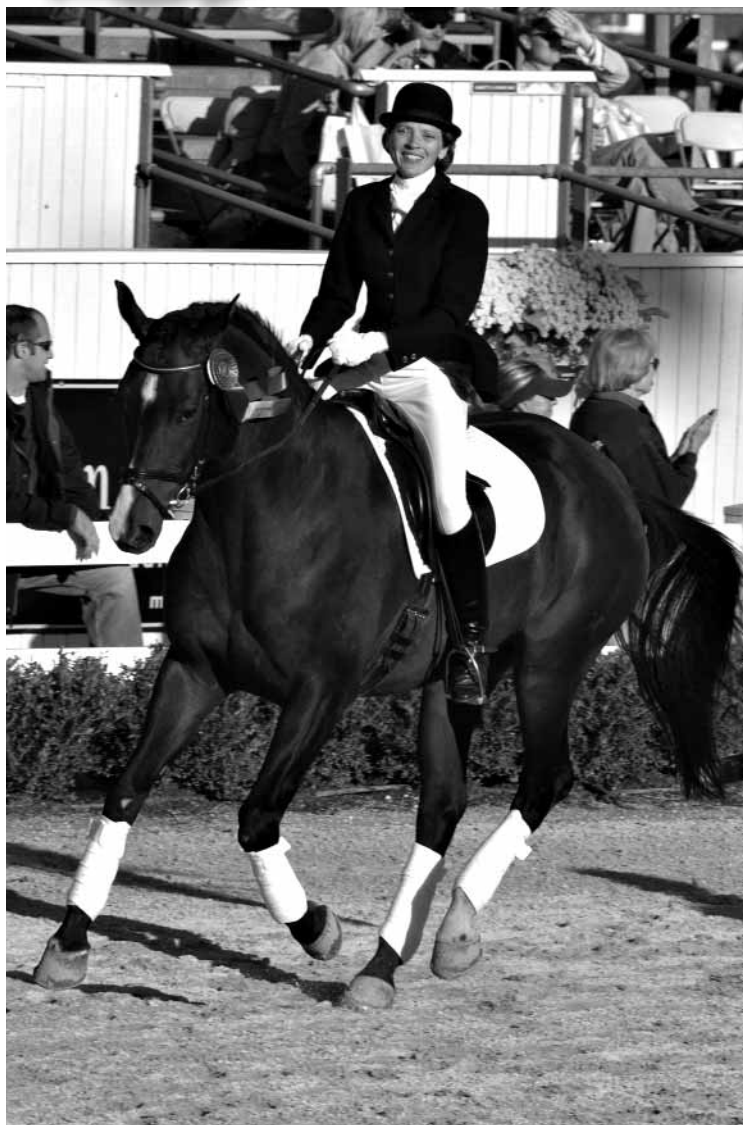
So she went back to school at 24 and earned her Ph.D. in chemistry in order to get a job at the University of Wisconsin that would pay her living expenses and finance her passion for horses.

She spent six years without horses while she earned her degree. She and Dan saved their money instead so they could afford their 60-acre farm. "We put all that money that you spend on horses in the bank," said Doolittle with a laugh.

She bought two young horses, Coby, and a yearling filly as well as a pony for her three children. She found Coby as a 2-year-old at Meg and Ron Williams' Oakwood Farms Hanoverians in Lawrenceburg, Ind.

"He floated around Meg's arena with his tail flagged, snorting at me as I stood in the corner," said Pam. "His feet only touched the ground out of respect for gravity. My thought at the time was I'd bring both horses along to a certain point and then sell them."

The young horses lived out in the field at the Doolittles' farm while they saved money to build an



(Sara Lieser Photo)

Cobra's horrific injuries from falling out of a moving trailer took almost a year to heal completely.

indoor arena. Pam believed that 2004 would be the year that she could start competing Coby and finish building her barn, but his accident changed all that.

► **Lucky To Be Alive**

"Coby's prognosis was not good," said Pam. "While there was no apparent fatal injury, much of the skin around the wound beds had detached during the fall, and pockets of dirt and sand remained hidden."

Douglas Langer, DVM, MS, initially treated Coby at the hospital. "He had severe abrasions from being drug on the road—primarily on his knees and fetlocks," recalled Langer. "On his right hind fetlock part of the tendon was worn away."

He credited Pam's shipping wraps in saving Coby's life, since they were shredded around his legs.

"My biggest concerns were to prevent infection in the joints," said Langer. "From the knee down there's very little muscle and very little blood flow. It's much more difficult and slower to heal. There's very little soft tissue. The tendon that was injured over the front of the fetlock has very poor blood supply. It makes infection difficult to treat."

But thanks to Pam's quick action in taking Coby to the veterinary hospital, he started on strong antibiotics immediately, lowering the chances of infection.

Coby spent nine days at the equine hospital before Pam brought him home. "Coby was not happy in the stall," recalled Pam. "He wouldn't stand quietly and the excessive movement would prevent the underlying tissue from attaching back to the skin."

So they placed Coby on the long-acting sedative Fluphenazine to quiet him. "The playful and mischievous horse I had come to know and love now stood with his head in the rear corner of his stall," recalled Pam. "He wasn't interested in treats or attention. It broke my heart knowing I could not explain to him that we were trying to save his life."

They had no way of knowing then what other injuries Coby might have sustained in addition to his horrific wounds. "I was concerned that he had damaged his joints,"



(Photo courtesy of Pamela Doolittle)

said Langer. "He was very stiff and sore, but moving his joints well. When we took radiographs, we found no changes or chips, and that was good. But arthritis could show up later down the road."

Pam spent the next months wrapping and re-wrapping Coby's legs. "The skin and hair around his rear end and tail dock area became irritated by the diarrhea caused by the antibiotics," she said. "Dr. Langer recommended we not even hand walk him, since any excessive activity would irritate the process of allowing the skin bed to attach down and granulate."

Langer's former student, Jennifer Thompson, DVM, visited the farm weekly to check on his wounds. "My children did their homework in the barn while I changed bandages and brushed and entertained my horse," said Pam.

"My husband cared for our other horses while I combed Coby's stall for manure and wet shavings. Coby's care had cost us over \$10,000 by this time and countless hours of care. We could no longer afford the completion of the stable we had dreamed about. Everything we had in both time and money was now focused on Coby's comeback."

By June Pam started hand-walking Coby, and in July she started turning him out in a small paddock. She also took Coby back to Langer to assess his soundness for riding.

"He had me longe him in the clinic indoor," recalled Pam. "Coby spent the first five minutes at an airy trot with his tail flagged and his nostrils flared. I remember Dr. Langer smiling as he commented what a beautiful horse Coby still was, and he said it was time to put him back to work."

But the horse that had been a strong, healthy 4-year-old was now thin and lacking muscle tone. "His body was scarred," said Pam. "The burns on both hind fetlocks remained open, and the right hind tendon had developed a large mass of scar tissue. He developed a big hunter's bump where he had an injury to his sacroiliac."

► **A Strong Mentor**

Pam felt unsure of how to rehabilitate Coby. "I needed strong mentoring because I just didn't know what to do with this poor horse that had gone from looking like a healthy 3½-year-old horse to a bag-of-bones," she said.

She turned to Alex Gerding, a German breiter who moved to the United States in 2000 and teaches clinics regularly in Madison, Wis.

"Pam asked me to evaluate this horse," said Gerding. "She trotted it around and it had all this scar tissue, but it moved OK. He was not lame, just very weak. I really liked the horse from the beginning because he has a super mind and is very trainable."

But Gerding couldn't overlook the obvious trauma of the accident. "You could literally feel the pain yourself looking at these marks and holes on him," he said.

Although Gerding had never worked with a horse with injuries like Coby's, he's rehabbed many horses from a variety of joint and tendon problems.

"You evaluate the way it moves and create a specific program for that horse," he explained. "Of course you don't overwork it. You use short time frames and give him more breaks. You school certain movements in only the more healthy direction and really get him fit."

Because Gerding didn't see Pam on a weekly basis, he gave her homework to get Coby fit between their lessons.

"He was weak, and we had to really get all his muscles built up," said Gerding. "Her original program was based on walks, lots of long straight lines. Not so much lateral work off the right hind leg,

more off the left hind leg—lots of transitions and not too much circling.”

Gerding gave Pam a basic training plan geared toward fitness. She rode him six days a week for 30 minutes. She worked on developing a rhythm and incorporated caveletti and hill work into their program.

As Coby gained strength, Gerding added more lateral movements into Pam’s program. “We were targeting the build up of specific hind leg muscles,” said Gerding. “The right hind was a little bit weaker, so we did a little bit more left lead counter canter so we could build up the right hind. I had her do more half-pass to the left than to the right and renvers where you bend the horse to the left.”

But complications from the injuries continued to plague Coby, even as he started to get stronger with work.

“The hind fetlocks remained open and weeping,” said Pam. “Between August and December we varied the stall rest and activity to try to promote granulation of the fetlock wounds.”

In January, Thompson suggested A-cell therapy to try to close the wounds. “We

“Even now there is a strength issue from behind,” said Pamela Doolittle of her horse, Cobra. “I believe that he may still struggle with some pain.”

decided to surgically remove the poorly granulating tissue as a way to promote the closing of the fetlock wounds behind,” explained Pam. “Then she installed a graph of material that would promote the healthy growth of new epithelial cells.”

Coby was once again relegated to stall rest, and Pam continued her regimen of bandaging and playing with Coby to keep him happy. She started riding him again in February of 2005, and the fetlock burns finally closed in March.

► Proving His Potential

By the summer of 2005 Pam felt ready to show Coby. But in her enthusiasm to make their first show a success, she ended up drilling Coby on the movements.

“When we came to competition stress, I needed to put a little bit of a hold on Pam,” said Gerding. “He was really fit, and she could ride him like he’d never had the accident. I had to tell her not to forget about it, though, and only do the good things so much.”

Pam backed off and focused on enjoying Coby instead of demanding perfection in their tests. They started showing at first level and scored in the high 60s, but Coby still lacked the strength to do the FEI 5-year-old tests.

However, they were on track to compete in the FEI 6-year-old tests in 2006.

“The judges consistently emphasized that our training path was positive and that Coby had good potential for the future,” said Pam. “Constructive criticisms pointed out that he lacked the strength necessary to maintain collection—especially the uphill balance necessary for the canter work. I continued to work on the hills in our hayfield at home

Cobra fell out of the trailer and onto the road when the back door of the trailer bent, allowing the latch to open.



(Sara Lieser Photo)



(Photo courtesy of Pamela Doolittle)

to improve his strength and endurance.”

Pam knew she had a super horse under her and wanted to prove it. She had her chance at the 2006 USEF/Markel Young Horse Dressage National Championships (Ky.) in September, where they placed third and then again at Dressage At Devon (Pa.) in October.

“I’ve never even competed in a regional championship, so one can imagine the competition was quite daunting,” said Pam. “For my rides both Friday and Sunday, Coby paraded proudly around the outside of the ring while the announcer introduced us. I swear he looked all the spectators in the eye as he went around. He would have shaken each of their hands if he could have.

“Every movement flowed,” she continued. “The changes were obedient and expressive. I had watched the riders in my class school all week with horses that were healthy, strong and expressive. To have placed third in such a talented pool of horses and riders was beyond anything I could have possibly imagined. I was hoping not to be last!”

An even bigger accomplishment lay ahead for the pair at Dressage At Devon. Their first class took place with severe weather brewing on the horizon and was cancelled just as Pam finished her test. They picked up second place regardless.

The final was scheduled for the following

Why Did The Trailer Door Fail?

In 2002, the Kiefer Built trailer company was buying trailer doors from an outside manufacturer, according to an article in the *Orlando Sentinel*, Aug. 11, 2006. These doors were defective, and Kiefer Built manufactures their own doors now.

People who bought the trailers from Kiefer Built dealers were notified of the problem, and the doors were repaired or replaced. But people who bought the trailers used weren't contacted.

"I purchased the trailer from a lady in Michigan who had purchased it new from a dealer in Iowa on July 2, 2002," said Pamela Doolittle. "She used it less than six times. She only hauled one horse in it. She never loaded a horse in the rear stall. It did not have a butt bar or a strap installed."

Doolittle bought the trailer in November of 2003. She used it once in January to take Coby to a nearby boarding stable.

"We used the front stall. He fit, but it was snug for him. We used it the second time on that ill-fated day in April," she said. "We used the rear stall because it had more room length-wise."


Doolittle is currently pursuing legal action in circuit court. An official from Kiefer Built did not return a phone call.

She then faced the ordeal of waiting for the other riders' scores to come in. But when the last score was tallied, Pam and Coby remained on top in the FEI-6-year-old test.

"We were standing there during the last ride holding hands," recalled Gerding. "If there's one horse that deserves to win, it was this horse. When it was over, it was a very overwhelming moment. I cried at the end when he won. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience, especially when you know how much pain that horse suffered through."

Although she originally intended to sell Coby, after going through this ordeal, Pam knows she never will. "He's done his job, and he's a member of our family," she said. "He's so amazing with his character, I just couldn't part with him."

But her filly is for sale, and she hopes that money will cover finishing the farm. Pam plans to compete Coby at Prix St. Georges next year, but she wonders if Coby will ever fully recover from his accident.

"Even now there's a strength issue from behind," she said. "I believe that he may still struggle with some pain. And it may be the thing that's going to stop us. I don't know. If that's all there is to it, I don't care, because I'm so proud of him and this story. I hope that he can inspire people to do good by their horses." 

day. "I had the unlucky fortune of being the first to go in our afternoon class," said Pam. "I took my time grooming and braiding, reminding myself with every breath to relax and enjoy this day. It's my normal routine to cover Coby's scars with shoe polish, but as I bent down to do it that afternoon, I realized we had nothing to hide. I was so proud of my

horse. He wasn't embarrassed about his scars."

Pam entered the Dixon Oval for the first time ever that afternoon and halted at X. "As expected, Coby raised his head above the bit to take in everything. It's his personal version of a salute!" joked Pam. "Our test was not perfect, but there were no major mistakes."

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