



A New Showring Perspective

With a fighting spirit, dedication and determination, one Pennsylvania girl pursues her passion.

Story & photos by *Elizabeth Nixon*

When 18-year-old Tessa Hockenberry was born, her grandfather gave her a heifer calf. As she grew, this early start of Tessa's small herd sparked a passion for agriculture she has never been able to shake.

While growing up on her family's 60-acre farm in Perry County, Pa., she fell in love with showing livestock and caring for her animals. She said she knew she wanted to be involved in agriculture for the rest of her life.

"Agriculture is my one true passion," Tessa says.

However, a terrible incident Nov. 6, 2014, changed Tessa's life forever. On that day she

got into the back seat of a friend's car. She and two friends were in a serious car accident.

The impact from the accident severed her spinal cord, and her spleen, pancreas and stomach were pushed into her left chest cavity. Her friends walked away without any serious injuries, while Tessa was rushed to a hospital in Harrisburg, Pa., and then was moved to another hospital in Hershey, Pa.

Tessa was in surgery for 10 hours as surgeons first dealt with her internal injuries and then her spine. They stabilized her spine with a piece of bone from her hip, a rod on each side and eight screws.





Recovery

"In the beginning, I was less concerned about her being able to walk and more concerned about her internal injuries," says Jason Hockenberry, Tessa's father.

Angela Hockenberry, Tessa's mother, says the family was blessed, however, because Tessa did not sustain any head injuries in the accident.

"Initially, there was so much wrong we were running off of adrenaline," Angela says. "We were focusing on one small victory at a time to get us through."

"Once we got her pain under control, each day got brighter," she adds. "I knew the drive and spirit she had and that her tenacity would get her through it."

The prognosis of Tessa being able to walk again was guarded in the beginning, Tessa says.

"They told me there was a 50-50 chance of being able to walk again," she says. "I was devastated, and it was awful hearing those words."

"It was like having your favorite thing in the entire world being taken from you, and you'll never get it back," she says.

After spending two months in the hospital, she was released Jan. 1, 2015. She then went through six months of physical therapy, going three days a week for four hours a day.

Finding a new normal

Once Tessa returned home from the hospital, the whole family had to adjust to their new life. Tessa's bedroom was originally upstairs. Her room was moved to the lower level and around the house three different times. Her family also built a ramp and put in a more accessible shower.

"Being in a wheelchair is my new normal, and sometimes it has its perks, like having special seating at events," Tessa says. "Since the accident, I am a lot more relaxed, and I am getting along with my parents better now than I ever have."

"All things considered, good things have come out of the accident," she says.

Back in the barn

One of those good things was getting in her barn and learning how to work with her animals again.

"I got home and got back in the barn," Tessa says. "I told myself that I could not stop this because it is my passion, and I was determined to get back in the showring."

Says Jason, "When she told us she wanted to keep showing, we were not surprised and told her we would do whatever we needed to make it work."

By August 2015, only nine months after her accident, she was back in the showring.

"She did a practice run the day before her

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first show back with her Angus heifer, and it was very difficult for her,” Jason says. “She realized it was not going to be as easy as she thought, but we nudged her back in and were so proud to see her accomplish her goal the next day.”

So, how does a girl who uses a wheelchair even begin to halter-break a heifer? Her answer is rather simple. She starts working with her cattle when they are young.

“A few days after they are born, I put a halter on them, and I start trying to walk them,” Tessa says. “They will try to step on me and jump on top of me, but they get used to it eventually.”

Other than halter-breaking the cattle, showing in a wheelchair presents a few other challenges.

“It is really hard when you do not know what kind of bedding is going to be in the ring,” Tessa says. “Sometimes the ring bedding can be really difficult to push myself through. That is my main challenge.”

Even through the challenges, she refuses to give up.

“When I take an animal into the showing and it acts up, there is always a part of me that wants to give up,” Tessa admits. “I cannot do that though. It is just how it works sometimes, and I have to push through.”

While there may be times she gets frustrated, she never asks for help and insists on figuring things out on her own, Jason says.

“She does not want someone doing things for her,” he adds. “She just does things herself. It is so natural for her and almost effortless, it seems.”

Tessa says her animals and family are her drive to get up every morning.

“Having animals that trust me so much — that is an amazing feeling,” Tessa says.

Helping others

Not only has Tessa been busy working on the farm, but she and her family are looking for ways to impact the lives of other paraplegics like Tessa.

“My mom and I want to get a therapy pony that we can take to hospitals to comfort people who are in the same situation I was in,” Tessa says. “We want to make people with similar injuries feel better and tell them that things will get easier.”

“That is all I wanted when I was in the hospital,” she adds.

The fighting spirit, drive and determination of Tessa is certainly admirable, and her “don’t give up attitude” is looked up to by many, Angela says.

“It is amazing,” Angela says. “I do not think we thought we would be living a relatively normal life a year and a half later.”

Doctors have told Tessa if she reaches the two-year mark after her accident without regaining most of the feeling in her legs, a full recovery is almost impossible, Tessa says.

“I have actually gotten all of my thigh muscle and feeling back,” she says, “which is more than [the doctors] thought I would ever get.”

“I can stand up if I am holding onto something, and I can slowly walk with a walker,” she explains.

Tessa is determined to live her dream and to continue to work toward success.

“God is so good, and our faith has carried us through this,” Angela says.

In May 2016, Tessa graduated from West Perry High School. She plans to attend Lancaster County Career and Technology Center to study animal production science and technology in a nine-month program.

“I have known since my freshman year of high school that farming and having livestock was all I ever wanted to do,” Tessa says. “This whole process has been extremely challenging, but I am determined to make it work and live my dream.”

