

INSPIRATION

COMEBACK COWGIRL

JUNE HOLEMAN IS LIVING TESTAMENT TO THE COWGIRL'S CREED "NEVER GIVE UP."

BY SUSAN L. EBERT



Seventy-three-year-old June Holeman competes on Go Deck the Holly, half-sister to Tall Boy, at the 2016 Cheyenne Frontier Days rodeo.

She starts each day with 45 minutes of weight lifting followed by balance exercises, then heads to the barn to feed, throw hay, and muck stalls before working her horses with a laser focus on endurance, perfect patterns, and blistering speed.

Some up-and-coming barrel racer, perhaps? Nope.

At the tender age of two, June Holeman started her riding career clasped on the front of the saddle as her mother gathered in dairy cows. She's been in the saddle ever since, making more than 73 trips around the sun.

June caught the "barrel-racing bug," as she calls it, at the age of 4 or 5. And she doesn't just run the barrels, she runs 'em with the best: She qualified for NFR in 2005 aboard Sparkys Impression, the AQHA 2005 Horse of the Year, and qualified for RFD-TV's The American in 2014 on Tall Boy. Later that year, she and Tall Boy would outrun more than 1,000 contenders in Lincoln, Nebraska's Top Hand Saddle Company's Bonus Race Finals, beating the second-place racer by three-tenths of a second—a whopping margin in barrel racing.

Abby Ford, the second-place racer, couldn't outrun her grandmother, but posted the next-fastest time on Tall Boy's maternal half-sister Bubblin With Hope.

Talk about teaching the youngsters a lesson, eh?

"I had a good year this past year; I'm running decent patterns, so it's about speed now," June says. "My balance is better, and I have a wonder horse."

Holeman competed in more than 50 rodeos in the past year from Cheyenne to the north and Midland, Texas, to the south. "I mostly travel by myself these days," she says, as her husband of 55 years stays close to their home in Broken Bow, Nebraska, due to a heart condition.

June herself nearly hung up her spurs a few years back when a herniated disk forced her into an electric wheelchair. But she never let go of her goal of making a comeback.

"Just five more years, I tell myself," she says.

And what advice would she give her younger self?

"Be patient," says June with a girlish laugh. "I've learned to prioritize patience over determination. Still, I'm determined to make a comeback."

2017 might just be the year she does.

PHOTO BY TYLER STOCKTON