

Five years ago Elizabeth Charleston, former international model and show rider sustained a life-changing head injury after falling from her horse. Show Circuit caught up with her to find out how she's helping other people cope with the same condition through THINK! ("The Head Injury Network for Kiwis").



THINK! Ambassador

INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH CHARLESTON

WORDS: JENNIFER BOYES

SHOWCIRCUIT: Do you remember the day you sustained your own head injury?

Elizabeth Charleston: It's etched into my memory. It was Auckland Anniversary Day, 2005. I was on a horse in the collecting ring at a show, waiting to go into my class, when he reared up and flipped on his side, crushing the right side of my body and knocking me unconscious. Most riders have a fall at some point but this accident was different. It was the start of a very long journey that completely turned my life on its head.

SHOWCIRCUIT: What happened next? When did you start to realise that something was wrong?

Elizabeth Charleston: I was discharged from hospital the same day as the accident. The only outward sign of injury was a pair of crutches to support damaged ligaments in my knee, but I just didn't feel right. My head was swimming and somehow I knew something wasn't right with my brain. The doctors told me I would be fine in a couple of weeks and to come back to the hospital if there was a problem.

I went back to the hospital about a week later and said that things were most certainly not all right. I could stand up for no more than ten minutes before I would have to go back to bed. The thumping noise in my head and the ringing in my ears were terrible. I kept on falling over and walking into things like doorways.

My eyesight, speech and hearing were all affected and my brain just would not work. It was horrible.



The medical profession kept up the pretence that I would get better. First they said I would be well again in two weeks, then it was changed to three months, then six months, then twelve months. Finally, two years after the accident, a room full of doctors were honest with me and said that they were not sure if I would ever recover from my head injury. One doctor cheerfully informed me that I was disabled and that I should get used to it...

SHOWCIRCUIT: How did suffering a head injury change your life?

Elizabeth Charleston: After the diagnosis from the doctors, I retreated to my home and my horses. It seemed that any hope of a normal life was gone. There was very little help from the medical profession in the way of guidance on further symptoms or

warning signs, advice on coping with a head injury; nor did they tell me of any support groups that might be able to help. There was no hand book on how a head injury would affect me and my family. The depression that normally comes with a head injury was a heck of a shock to me. The total brain and body fatigue alone was pretty horrific.

There was also the battle for understanding from the outside world. After a day out when people saw me smiling and chatting away to friends, no-one would realise how bad the next day would be for me with pain and tiredness. I'd have to crawl on my hands and knees to get out of bed to go to the bathroom. My rate of processing speech was severely affected, which has led to some pretty embarrassing times where people thought I was half witted.

SHOWCIRCUIT: How does having a head injury affect your riding?

Elizabeth Charleston: Summer is really tough to get through because I just can't handle the heat and brightness of the sun. It totally zaps my energy. I must be one of the few riders that get excited when it's cold, overcast or raining at a show!

Another problem is motion sickness which strikes five or ten minutes into a ride; canter is the worst pace. When I ride and school in an arena, it really makes my head spin and can cause vertigo – not a lot of fun. I've had to learn that I can only do a couple of events at a show. Last season I was only able

compete at five shows which is incredibly frustrating as I love to get dressed up in my nice riding clothes to go for a spin around the arena and win a bow.

SHOWCIRCUIT: Where did the idea come from for THINK! The Head Injury Network for Kiwis? What is the group trying to achieve?

Elizabeth Charleston: The group was formed earlier this year with the support of the Waikato branch of the New Zealand Head Injury Society. Along with the other founders, I wanted to raise awareness of head injuries amongst New Zealanders and offer avenues to sufferers to get the support and advocacy that the New Zealand Head Injury Society has to offer.

One of the main messages I want to get across is that anybody can suffer a head injury. I would also like to break down some of the attitudes that people have towards head injury victims and the stigma that is attached. Often, even after a sufferer has begun to accept their head injury, the people around them do not know how to deal with the changes to their personality and abilities. This has to change.

SHOWCIRCUIT: The Head Injury Awareness and Appeal Week ran this year from June 8th-15th? Did you do anything special to promote THINK and head injury awareness?

People are too complacent around their own horses... It's this whole "It won't happen to me" attitude.



Elizabeth Charleston: One of our objectives is to encourage people to wear safety-approved head protection when playing sports, so this year we teamed up with Saddlery Warehouse and Stirrups Equestrian to give riders the opportunity to acquire a new riding helmet at a substantial discount. Saddlery Warehouse offered a 20% discount on any helmet purchased during Head Injury Awareness Week. Stirrups Equestrian offered a 10% discount on their GPA range of riding helmets and 20% off other safety riding helmets. I hope to make this an annual event for the equestrian community and in future would like to get more saddlery shops on

board with the discount. The campaign had the support of Equestrian Sports NZ and the NZ Pony Clubs Association.

I also started a Facebook group called THINK! The Head Injury Network for Kiwis. The Facebook page offers information on how to deal with a head injury and what to expect when a friend or family member sustains a head injury.

SHOWCIRCUIT: Finally, do you think there is sufficient awareness of the dangers of head injury among horse riders? Or is there still a long way to go?

Elizabeth Charleston: I think there is slightly more awareness of the risk than there used to be. This is partly down to an increase in media coverage recently, especially in relation to American dressage rider Courtney King-Dye's horrific accident.

An accident around horses can happen at any time, either mounted or on the ground when handling horses. When you get into a car you automatically put on your seatbelt – I just wish people had that sort of automatic response when they get on a horse, to wear their riding hat.

Elizabeth Charleston would like to thank Equestrian Sports New Zealand and the NZ Pony Club Association for publicly supporting Head Injury Awareness and Appeal Week.



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