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Life

KENNETH SPRINGER

Taylor Earnhardt Putnam on Packin Sixes Cowboy at the 2012 NBHA Open World Show.

in the **Fast Lane**

Take a high-speed ride—
along with one of the fastest
girls in town.

By Danika Kent



Taylor and Lightning Twister.

By
SPRINGER

KENNETH SPRINGER



Drop the “Earnhardt” name in a game of word association and spontaneous responses may include fast cars, NASCAR and Dale. But let’s hit the brakes – or mash on the gas and try to keep up with The Intimidator’s youngest daughter, Taylor Earnhardt Putnam. And catch her if you can, but she’s driving what many in our world would consider a more charismatic chassis: horsepower made of horseflesh.

The need for speed seems to not only be synonymous with the Earnhardt name, but inherent, as well. “It runs in our family,” says Earnhardt Putnam. “My grandmother drives faster than I do. I just got more of a crazy side to me, because I want to be on something that’s got a mind of its own.”

And just for the record, she drives a black Chevrolet HD 2500 with a diesel engine. No cars.

Always Racing

Years before sliding behind the wheel, Earnhardt Putnam swung a leg over a horse. It was from her seven-time racing champion father, the late Dale Earnhardt, that she learned her earliest horsemanship lessons – and with them, a craving for the adrenaline rush that comes from pushing the limits.

“I’ve always ridden horses, since I was about 3 on the farm with my dad. We liked to go around and race each other,” says the down-home cowgirl from Mooresville, N.C.

It wasn’t until years later, following that fateful crash a mere half mile from the Daytona finish line that prematurely ended her father’s career and life, that Earnhardt Putnam set out to pave the way to a racing career of her own.

“Shortly after he died, I went to dinner with one of my friends and she had a barrel race the next day. Her family let me borrow a horse and run in it. I don’t remember how I did; I just remember it was a lot of fun. I was 12 then.”

For the next two years, she got her fix for the adrenaline-fueled cloverleaf course aboard borrowed horses. She got a taste of competitive barrel racing within the National Barrel Horse Association in 2002, and the beginner-friendly shows remained a fixture on her barrel racing calendar as she climbed the divisional ranks.

“I really like NBHA shows because there’s always one happening somewhere and you can go to any of them. Everybody is nice; they want to know what’s going on and help you out if you need it. The youth shows I used to run in and the open shows I run in now are just so much fun. You run into people that you know that you don’t get to see all year. It’s a great association.”

She soon acquired a speedster to call her own, a Paint horse by the name of Lightning Twister (“T”) with the chrome of a racecar.

“My mom bought me my first barrel horse in 2004 or 2005. He acted like a mean old man but he was really sweet. Whenever you’d feed him, he’d pin his ears and act like he was going to bite, but he never would. Now he just does it to everybody but me. He’s 18, still ornery, still running and doing well. He’s a good one, but looking at his pedigree you’d never think he’d be a barrel horse. He’s just got enough grit and enough speed, and he just wants to do it. He goes in there and does his job.”

T was sidelined for two years when he sustained a hock injury that required surgery. Consequently, Packin Sixes Cowboy (“Cowboy”) got the call and the pole position as Earnhardt Putnam’s main mount. After six years of trial and error, he holds his ground as her current open rodeo horse.

“When my Paint horse got hurt, I had to get with Cowboy. I hadn’t been clicking with him, but we got better together,” she says.

A major turning point for the duo came in 2008, at R.E. and Martha Josey’s two-week school, where she learned some very important lessons en route to claiming the all-around title.

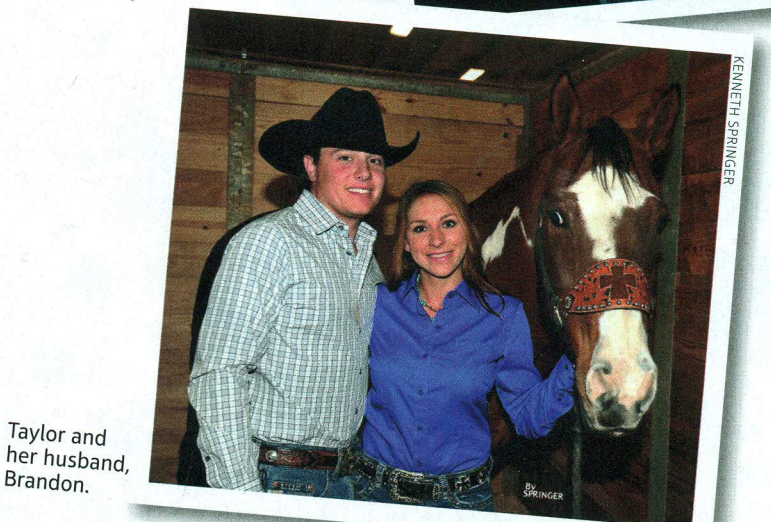
“I was roping on my barrel horse and made him learn poles. It made him pay attention and click with me. That was really when I started getting with him. I made him do some things he didn’t want to do, and I did some things I didn’t want to do. At the end of the week, it ended up as the all-around title, which factors in team roping, breakaway, calf roping, barrel racing and pole bending. I competed in breakaway, barrels and poles.”

But she wasn’t the only one in the running, and competition was a friendly kind of fierce with her closest contender.

Earnhardt Putnam at a book drive to benefit the Dale Earnhardt Foundation Book Center program.



COURTESY DALE EARNHARDT FOUNDATION



Taylor and her husband, Brandon.

KENNETH SPRINGER

Racing Roots

- Two-time Daytona 500 champion and television analyst Michael Waltrip's daughter, Macy, is a competitive barrel racer.
- NASCAR driver Jeff Burton's daughter, Paige, is reported to be a competitive show jumper.
- Jeff Hammond, NASCAR commentator, is an avid team roper.
- NASCAR driver and television commentator Kyle Petty's daughter, Montgomery, is an AQHYA World Champion in Western Pleasure.
- Dragster driver Lori Johns is rumored to have taken up barrel racing after retiring from the track.



KENNETH SPRINGER

Taylor Earnhardt Putnam and Packin Sixes Cowboy at the 2012 NBHA Colonial Nationals.

"It was between me and my husband for the all-around title. Martha was messing with me afterwards, saying I was two points from losing and that Brandon was second. That would've been a long ride home. I don't think I've ever told him," she confides.

Incidentally, she met her now-husband, Brandon Putnam, at the 2006 North Carolina NBHA State Finals where his sister was competing and his mother was involved in the production of the event. She travels with her husband, a calf roper, and sister-in-law to rodeos and barrel races.

"We're making some five- to 10-year plans for making it to the finals, trying to move through the rodeo associations and still make as many NBHA shows as I can. I'm currently competing in the Southern Rodeo Association, the International Professional Rodeo Association, and a couple North Carolina associations. We're just trying to go as much as we can. Ultimately, I want to make it to the NFR in Vegas. It's every cowboy and cowgirl's dream. I want to have a 1D horse at the NBHA Open World, and have a good chance to kick everybody's butt."

Last December, she made the sacred pilgrimage to Las Vegas to the 2012 Wrangler National Finals Rodeo. From the edge of her seat in the Thomas and Mack, she watched as some of her greatest inspirations achieved their personal goals.

"Sherry Cervi is one, because she makes the same run every time. She's so consistent in her riding, and her horses know that. She lets her horses work while a lot of people get in their way. She's such a charismatic woman to talk to, too. Kaley Bass is a big inspiration because she's so young, and she's made it where everybody dreams of making it their whole life. One day I'll be there with her."

With the spirit of a champion, Earnhardt Putnam is well on her way at the age of 24. Among her barrel racing accomplishments are North Carolina NBHA and Southern Rodeo Association championships and top honors at the All-American Youth Race in Jackson, Miss. To top it off, her barrel horse breeding and training program is flourishing with the help of her biggest fan – her mother, Teresa.

"My mom really helped me a lot with my first horse, since then with my new horse, and now with the new breeding and training operation that we're trying to get started. I started barrel racing after hard times and it gave me something to focus on. Her allowing me to do that, sending me to do that, and doing what she had to do to keep me doing it, she's really the one that helped me get to where I am now."

She is undoubtedly firing on all cylinders as she races toward the finish line, that gold buckle that represents her personal checkered flag. In her spare time, she devotes herself to the Dale Earnhardt Foundation, which was founded to honor her father and is dedicated to children, education and wildlife preservation.

"I just try to live like Dad taught me," she says. "Always try, never quit, because you're not going to get anywhere if you quit."

Danika Kent is managing editor of *Barrel Horse News*. Email comments on this article to bhneditorial@cowboypublishing.com.