*Spotlight on*

**Alex Lewis**

(PNER member #4477)

**From Setback to Comeback; The Power in Never Surrendering**

We asked Alex to tell us about her personal journey with horses and life.

Enjoy getting to know more about our new PNER President!

**Alex**: *Let me introduce myself:*

I am incredibly blessed to be riding and training endurance with my husband David. David and I met at an Endurance ride in 2016 (it actually does happen!) He later bought me a lovely horse Marco who I am currently still riding over 10 years later! We are introducing our five year old son Eli to endurance! We have six Arabians, one Mustang adopted from a rescue and one Haflinger pony. All of our horses were rescued or given to us due to needing help with retraining, or body issues (or both), or need for retirement, and all but two are or have been in the past training for endurance. I have learned a great deal from every horse that comes to us! Additionally I am so fortunate to spend time with even more horses while traveling for my Equine Bodywork and PEMF business, “Limitless Sport Horse Solutions". David and I also work together with our photography business “Dream Team Photography”.

**Alex**: *My early years:*

I got my actual riding start in Quilcene Washington on a 100 acre Cattle ranch which belonged to my Dad’s best friend. My father, who raised three kids as a solo parent, would leave me for weeks during the summer to ride with his friend’s daughter. With her, I learned the ways of a real farm hand, waking at dawn to feed or complete any assigned farm tasks before we went about our day riding and playing with the animals. I would've preferred to stay there forever even if it had meant living in the barn! Spending time on the ranch was a great emotional comford to me.

During my young adult period I went for a few years without horses while I pursued an education and worked. I felt an emptiness without horses in my life. However an introduction to Heather, the head trainer at a jump barn rekindled my equestrian passion. Heather and I became fast friends! Her expertise and friendship profoundly influenced my riding journey. She introduced me to the more serious side of riding and training. Watching her ability to recognize a capable horses and train them over fences encouraged my love for sport horse breeds.

**Alex**: *Here’s how my involvement with horses turned into riding endurance;*

After the purchase of my first horse, I spent a LOT of time on trails in the woods riding alone. Endurance riding friends started to ask if I could help condition their horses. I was so excited to get to ride fun and fit Endurance Arabians!! I ended up selling my horse, a gaited horse, to a very close friend in hopes of buying an endurance Arabian under the notion that I needed an Arabian to compete...silly me! I know better now. Gaited horses, and many other breeds excel in endurance!!

A good friend and experienced endurance rider Mari Smultea reached out; she had a 17 year old Arabian named Kazi who unfortunately had developed an issue bucking under saddle. Despite pasture rest and many visits to a well known veterinarian, the cause of his discomfort remained a mystery. Eventually Kazi became my own. It took time for us to bond and gain his trust before he told me that he wanted to be ridden. We spent countless hours handling, doing groundwork and hiking. Our connection was spiritual; all I had to do was THINK what I wanted him to do, and he was already doing it. We prepared for a year to complete our first LD ride together 11 years ago. Six months after that ride I lost my beloved Kazi to somewhat rare degenerative genetic disease.That loss broke my heart, truly... I felt I was breaking in half when we said our goodbyes.

**Alex**: *You asked what attracted me to endurance riding and what I enjoy most about the sport:*

Well, I was instantly attracted to Endurance when I discovered the terrain and longer distances the horse and rider teams travel, knowing this could only be achieved with a deep and almost spiritual connection between horse and rider team. When there is no one else out there on the trail, and its just you and your horse, you have no one to encourage you and nowhere to pull from except deep inside...that's when you and your horse get to shine and your connection comes through!

I really love the deep care for the Equine athlete by the veterinary staff (and AMAZING volunteers), knowing it's the only sport that monitors the horses during equine events so closely. That is HUGE, as I have ridden in other Equestrian sports and worked on MANY Equine athletes in other disciplines where horses can be given substances and pushed through true pain and injury to continue working. I admire the high standards of Endurance because athletes of the caliber that we are creating can't compete without a very capable, healthy and strong body which aligns with my personal goals.

**Alex:** *The challenges I have faced as an endurance rider and overcoming them:*

I’ve experienced a fair amount of challenges along my endurance journey, and even a bit of trauma, or spicy memories (as my dear friend Stevie Delahunt likes to refer to trauma!!) The tragic loss of my first endurance horse Kazi left me a deeper understanding of the horse's body, a heightened recognition of pain in the horse, and an ability to feel and sense that pain in my own body while being near a horse. This catapulted me into Equine Bodywork. I suddenly found myself exchanging energy easily with horses; I would feel nauseated when close to a horse with ulcers, overwhelmed by unexplainable fear when working on horses in distressing environments for them, pain in my body before finding areas of tension and injury on a horse; my connection with horses deepened tremendously, seemingly overnight. My Bodywork business started to grow and I began working on horses at Grand Prix Jump competitions, dressage barns, and endurance rides.

Two separate near death horse accidents, an early stage cancer diagnosis and finally multiple surgeries following my child's birth set me back in all aspects of life including Endurance training, I was curious at this point if a life of setbacks and healing was a part of my path? Despite all these setbacks I was determined to keep going because I JUST WANTED TO RIDE ENDURANCE!!

I was able to reset my body and heal from the stage 0-1 Breast Cancer diagnosis with a major shift in food, exercise, stress, and by having the affected tissue removed surgically. The cancer was slowly dying with the strict dietary changes, food/juicing protocols, and supplements I was using. However, I was 36 years old and the oncological medical community was panicking because I was refusing radiation and chemotherapy drugs; it was NOT the normal recommendation for my stage of cancer...they were pushing the treatments on me due to my young age and blatantly telling me so. I knew that radiation would ruin my heart causing me heart disease, and chemo meds would cause scarring in my uterus, rendering it too damaged to ever carry a child. I had only been married for one year, and was already forced to make life changing decisions that would alter both my and my new husband's future.

I felt confident in my choices surrounding the disease. Had I taken those medications, I would not have had a body that could have children. One year almost exactly to the DAY of my diagnosis, sitting in the same hospital as my first cancer surgery in 2017, I was told I was pregnant; we were having a baby!!!

No matter how much I worked at my dietary and exercise regimes it seemed that I kept running into obstacles to getting to my endurance riding goals. I would train so hard, get to a 50 mile ride or two, and suddenly have to have another surgery and begin the healing process over again. I got SO GOOD at healing myself, that once as I was training to go to a 300 mile Endurance Race in Mongolia, I only took four weeks off riding after an accident that left me with a lacerated liver and a fractured vertebrae, and sent me to WA state's largest trauma hospital for three nights! My son was only six months old. I chose to see these traumas (spicy memories!) as opportunities to develop greater resilience.

However, in my determination to heal and continue Endurance riding, I also learned to disregard my body's stress signals; a perilous state to be in. Which is when I received my second Cancer diagnosis, on my way to photograph Tevis; Stage 3C Invasive Breast Cancer that had moved to my lymph nodes, ultimately having to undergo a Mastectomy and removal of 16 lymph nodes. NOW I was given the ultimate healing task.

Having learned a GREAT deal about cancer by this time, and knowing I had Estrogen positive cancer by 95%, and just had a baby less than 2 years before, it did not surprise me to be dealing with this again. That Estrogen was feeding any micro cancer cells left behind, which the Oncologist assume were there. There was still stress in life; we had sold our home in Duvall, WA, packed up and moved to Oregon, moving a farm and seven horses twice in under a year!! And I was feeling the fatigueand raising a small child in the midst of Covid.

SO how did I deal with this and make it back into Endurance you may be asking?...Well, I never left it. With any energy I had throughout the six months of body-poisoning chemotherapy, I would push myself to go get on a horse. Some days I would be so sick I was unable to get out of bed, and have to regrettably cancel. I learned that despite feeling guilty over cancelling, I needed to recognize those feelings, and immediately release them. I still adopt this mindset today; if my body is not capable I listen to it, and I do NOT hold on to guilt! Other days, I would WANT to cancel more than ANYTHING, but if I could get out of bed and make it to the couch, and to the shower, I knew I could ride. No matter how badly my body felt, I would close my eyes and try to imagine the possibility of feeling pain free for a moment in time, and how good I might feel after the ride...and I would go get on that horse, if I could. There were many days this wasn't possible, but, there were many days that it was. And that's what I held onto, and gave me hope on the toughest, most painful days during Chemo and radiation, and healing from many surgeries. Ultimately; I feel I would definitely NOT be doing this sport without the support of my tribe, my husband's endless love and support, and the joy of my two year old asking why Mama was in bed and encouraging me to come play with him! I stay on top of my diet/eating a very clean plant-based diet, LOADS of supplements, vegetable/fruit juicing during rides, and balancing my electrolytes and the use of most important healing tool in my arsenal, is my Pulse PEMF machine.

**Alex:** *Healing and riding after cancer:*

During my healing period I rode a friend’s gentle, beautiful gaited horse named Hawking. He took great care of me!! Even if we were only walking or even if it was for a few short miles, I would go ride. It hurt and some days I was severely uncomfortable and so sick that I would have to take a LOT of medication just to get out of bed, much less ride! But it was SO worth it to be on the back of a horse!! I am even still sick today during my endurance rides and training since finishing chemo and radiation; those treatments change the chemistry of your body, and how your body responds to stress and everything you put in it. I have gone completely metabolic during rides, developed heart problems from the radiation, as well as POTS (Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome) where my Blood Pressure will drop after I get off my horse so low that I faint, so I have to watch my electrolyte balance very closely and sit down immediately after dismounting if I am riding hard or it’s hot.

**Alex:** *Tell us about your endurance ride history and accomplishments.*

I primarily rode in LD during the first few years of my endurance journey. Dealing with illness and injury, I was definitely doing the best that I could. I would read about how people considered LD not to be "real" endurance, but I was doing endurance in the human body that I had.

I have a “Bucket List” and have been able to check off some lifetime aspirations on that list including the Redwoods Ride in CA. Marco and I rode our first 50 there together in 2016 through those magical trees! In 2022 I got to bump up to 50s after my second cancer diagnosis and was still going through treatment for stage 3C Cancer that same year, I decided to make the leap at AHA Nationals to test my mettle. Despite it being extremely tough on my body, I was so glad I did it! I had started running and lifting weights with a trainer to toughen my body and mind, while simultaneously going through radiation treatment, Marco and I had a great time, we rode well, and we were both incredibly strong throughout! We took our time and I was so proud of my Red horse!! Bucket list item checked off!!

In 2023 I started the year being VERY sick from Covid, followed by another surgery in February. I wanted to wait to gain strength and because I had barely ridden my horse! However, 19 year old Marco was incredible at keeping fit and we came in first at the Prineville LD! So we bumped up to a 50 at the Mary & Anna Memorial. We rode with our great riding pal Glen Silver aboard Sami. Stopping often to let the horses graze and drink, we probably spent a good 45 minutes resting the horses, walking and talking. A highlight of my season! The trail is a great place to make friends.

After that, I had the incredible, once in a lifetime opportunity to ride one of Stevie Delahunt’s horses at the Tevis!!! I was not confident that I had the strength YET, but I was going to get ready and give it my all! Tevis was a dream for me for 20 years... and her horse Alexander Hamilton and I had exactly ONE MONTH before Tevis to get to know one another under saddle. We completed in 33rd place with all five horses of Stevie's crossing the finish line, a huge accomplishment in Endurance riding! Hands down, riding it was my favorite Endurance experience I still get to do Bodywork and PEMF on Alexande. I thank him every time I see him for the incredible gift he gave me that day...

**Alex:** *The best lesson learned from my personal experience:*

Never judge anyone else's situation at first glance, especially at a ride where we may be experiencing stress. We can be pretty harsh to one another by gossiping, or responding harshly, or creating a false narrative about someone and their horse by not understanding the full picture, or not knowing about what else just happened right before or right after we were there and only seeing a snapshot of what is in front of us. Kindness for each other goes so far in this tough sport.

**Alex:** *You asked what advice I’d offer someone who is new to the endurance world?*

First, I would say to read, study, and become a sponge for information. Keep an open mind to things you hear and read! You don't have to adopt all the policies on feed and electrolytes, or that you hear other people tell you, but do your own homework! If a lot of successful riders are talking about something, it is worth looking into, but that doesn't always mean that it the only way. This is a tough sport, and there's a LOT to learn, which takes time.

Second, I would say to find someone who you see treating their horses the way you would treat your own, and who has a decent record, or perhaps lives near you, or is a professional in the Equine world, and ask them if they'd be your mentor. There is no reason not to ask! It is always flattering for that person being asked, and you get to learn from an experienced rider...win win!! If in the super rare chance they say no, offer to help them (or someone else who is successful) clean tack in exchange for asking them some questions at an upcoming ride! You can always find a way to gain knowledge, and knowledge is power. You and your horse will do better the more YOU learn, commit to the hard work, and are consistent.

Lastly, I would encourage people to try a longer distance as soon as they have a conditioned horse, even if you are nervous about it. You will not always have the fit, forward, seasoned horse for the longer distance/race you want to ride, and you will wish you did! It's also incredibly empowering to move up and see what you are capable of as a team. Even if you think you won't complete the first time! People often think failure is an incomplete ride, a pull. However, failure is not even attempting to get to the starting line at all. Sometimes we do not believe enough in ourselves and our capabilities, and it can hold us (and our amazing horses) back from greatness.

**Alex:***In conclusion*

I want to express how honored and proud I am to be your new PNER president. My dear endurance friends encouraged me to became a PNER member in 2011. I believe the strongest part of PNER is the community that it offers its ridership, and the ability to bring people together from across different states to form lifelong friendships. Even our horses form bonds and get excited to see one another at rides and go down the trail together!! Friendly competition is fantastic and I love being competitive, but the friendships forged in sweat, blood, hard work, and laughter on the trail is irreplaceable.