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Sarah Rose McDonald and her talented mare known as "Bling" have turned heads in the rodeo arena.

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THINKING BIG

Get inside the mind of 10-year-old rodeo phenom Pecos Tatum.

Story and photography by **CHRISTINE HAMILTON**

PECOS TATUM has a serious goal: to be a Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association all-around world champion. At age 10, he's already won eight saddles and more than 40 buckles, including multiple titles in the American Junior Rodeo Association. He competes in every event he can, from steer riding to tie-down roping.

His dad, Brett, a roper and former PRCA bull rider, and mom, Keylie, a Women's Professional Rodeo Association world champion header, hit the road with him. During the week, the family operates their custom award buckle business, Tres Rios Silver, Inc., at home in Llano, Texas, and Pecos is homeschooled.

His parents say Pecos was trying to tie his goats before he was 3. Now he pursues his passion like a pro.

WE PRACTICE almost every night. I work on something I didn't do good the night before, to try and make it better.

MY BIGGEST THING to overcome is my size. I can't flank many calves; I have to mug them. I really wish I could flank them like the

Tatum practices on his roping pony, Peanut.



"I'm always thinking about horses and roping—what I can improve. I've liked it since I was little bitty."

Pecos Tatum, 10, and his Halflinger pony, Sunny, work together daily at home in Llano, Texas.



pros can, but I just try to copy them as good as I can. I get to flank just a couple of calves here and there.

SOME RUNS are much better than others. Just try your best and work hard at it. Keep doing it and moving on.

MY BEST HORSE is Hootie, my line-back dun. He helped me win the 8-and-under breakaway title at the [AJRA] finals. He gives me an easier shot and I can be fast on him.

WHEN I LOOK at a new horse, I want one that's just good enough, that I think I can make better to win on.

MY PONIES [Peanut and Sunny], I can see over their heads and I like to run right behind the calves and rope. [Hootie's] head sticks up higher, so I like to run him a tick to the left so I can see the calf

better. He knows where to go and runs right there. My ponies, I have to ride a little harder with them.

DON'T GET MAD. If I do, I try to calm down, rope one or two and then be done. And move on to the next day.

I'VE HAD LOTS of help with my roping. My parents help. [PRCA tie-down roper and eight-time National Finals Rodeo qualifier] Justin Maass showed me how to mug calves better. [Multiple WPRA champion roper] Lari Dee Guy helped me with some of my horsemanship.

I STOP when my horse has had enough, and I've had enough, and we've done good.

WHEN WE'RE DONE late at night [after a rodeo], I drink chocolate milk. And I go to bed. **VWH**



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Budding Star

Jeneve Rose Mitchell stole hearts—and won many votes—on the final season of *American Idol*.

By JENNIFER DENISON



When she's not playing music, Jeneve Rose Mitchell enjoys training horses for riding, packing and even jumping.

I DOESN'T TAKE ELECTRICITY to light up a stage. Jeneve Rose Mitchell, aka "The Rocky Mountain Hillbilly Girl," proved that during her audition and subsequent performances on

American Idol earlier this year. The 16-year-old musical prodigy plays 11 instruments, and delivered some of the most expressive and novel performances of the show's 15th and final season. She finished in the top 14 and cultivated a faithful fan base dubbed "Rosebuds."

While all lights were on her in Hollywood, Jeneve is most content at home high on a mountaintop in Crawford, Colorado, where her family lives without electricity and plays music by the glow of a lantern. The youngest of nine children, Jeneve is homeschooled and not your stereotypical

teen. She'd rather be training horses, writing songs or making music than playing video games, social networking or dating.

STARTING OUT IN MUSIC

My dad [Tim Mitchell] was a musician and played the guitar. He taught me to yodel and sing the National Anthem when I was 2 years old. When I was 3 he brought me to a music store for the first time, and I saw a small violin just my size. I knew I had to learn to play that instrument. I started playing classical violin music at age 3. When I was 8 years old, I learned my first bluegrass tune, "Mississippi Sawyer," and I never went back to classical again. Classical still has a special place in my heart, but I can put a lot more attitude into bluegrass!

AUDITIONING FOR AMERICAN IDOL

My parents and I have always joked that I could go on *American Idol*. We never thought I'd actually audition, because the odds of even making it past the first round to get to see the famous judges were so miniscule. A year before I was old enough to audition, I realized if I really wanted to do this I'd have to work on my vocals. I'd always been a musician and performer, but not really a singer. I really stepped up my game, and I'm very proud of what I accomplished. My parents were so supportive of me, and without them I couldn't have done any of it.

MAKING MEMORIES

I made a million memories on *Idol*. I had a blast even during the parts most people thought would be bad, like being at a B-roll [video] shoot all day, rehearsing, singing,

learning a brand-new song that night, meeting with the vocal coaches at 2:30 a.m. and still being chipper enough to meet the producers at 4:30 a.m. to perform. So I'm grateful for my time on the mountain, staying up late and not sleeping to make sure a foal is born healthy, and keeping it warm and fed through the night.

Another memorable experience was when I played "Angel" by Sarah McLachlan on the harp to get to the top 14. Nobody knew that my grandpa had died the morning of the performance. I learned to be strong in a different way that day. I also was honored to sing that song at his funeral.

LIVING OFF THE GRID

I love living off the grid! We go without electricity up on the mountain. We use kerosene lanterns at night when we need to see, and we play music. But since *Idol*, I have to keep a fan base going, and the best way to do that is with social media. So when we got back to the mountain [from Hollywood], we hooked up an inverter to a car battery that had just enough power to access social media once a day or every other day. However, it's hard sometimes living so far away from people, and it makes it harder to get to gigs.

DEVELOPING TRUST

Horses have taught me how to work hard at what I love. I've always been a very careful person—most of the time too careful. But dealing with horses, I have to take a leap of faith and trust them, putting my life at their disposal every second. It really has taught me to open up and to not be afraid to trust sometimes. **VW**

The Rundown

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Musical Goal: Learn to play as many instruments as possible; get on the Grand Ole Opry; and touch as many people's lives as possible by performing

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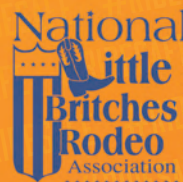
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Andy Welch moves a group of horses to another pasture on a ranch near Hardin, Montana.

Sarah Rose McDonald
and her flashy roan
mare have run right into
the record books.

BARRELS

By **SUSAN MORRISON**

WHEN YOU'RE 21 years old, pulling into a rodeo grounds and seeing barrel racers you've only watched at the National Finals Rodeo on TV can be intimidating, even when you have a good horse. Sarah Rose McDonald knew her horse was special, but didn't realize how far the mare might take her until a summer day in 2014.

The Brunswick, Georgia, barrel racer and Fame Fling N Bling already had success in National Barrel Horse Association events, winning a world championship. But pro rodeo was new; she had just purchased her Women's Professional Rodeo Association permit earlier in the year. After hitting a few pro rodeos, in July she headed to Spanish Fork, Utah, where she and "Bling" set an arena record with a 16.77-second run.

"That gave me a boost," Sarah Rose says. "I knew we could do it, and I didn't need to be scared or intimidated. I knew I had the horse. I just had to get a little confidence."

The 2014 season ended with Sarah Rose being named the WPRA Rookie of the Year and ranking 19th with \$64,063 in earnings. In 2015, she finished the year in third place with \$284,426. Among her wins were the Fort Worth Stock Show & Rodeo and The American. At the NFR, she won two rounds and tied for the win in another, finishing sixth in the average and earning \$139,827 in Las Vegas.

RIDING ROOTS

Sarah Rose's accomplishments seem to have come quickly, but

in fact she's spent years practicing. Her competitive nature comes from a family that has always had horses and enjoyed other sports, as well.

"We have a small farm," she says. "My grandfather had horses, so it's always been in the family. My uncle has been training barrel horses for a long time. I got to ride every day. I'd go to school, come home, and go to the barn and ride. I always put a lot of time in it. My family taught me everything and made sure I knew how to take care of my horses. When it was time to move to a different level of horse, they made it happen."

Starting out on her sister's Western pleasure horse, Sarah Rose began running barrels and poles at local shows.

"My mom and dad always took me. That was what we did every weekend," she says.

In middle school and high school, she also played "pretty much every sport there was"—basketball, softball and volleyball—at the small Christian school she attended.

"My dad always taught me if I was going to do it, it had to be my best, and I thank him for that," says Sarah Rose.

At 10, she began riding her "first really good horse," GC Highly Motivated. "Jerry" carried her to the National Barrel Horse Association world championship in 2005. The 1997 gelding still is part of the family.

"Jerry helped me move up to the NBHA 'Super Shows.' He was very competitive at that level," she says. "He helped me win district, nationals, pretty much everything. He was a free runner, so we didn't hit many barrels. He was just fun



Sarah Rose McDonald and Bling qualified for the 2015 National Finals Rodeo.

to ride and was so fast. Now my niece, Anna, is riding him."

Jerry also helped refine Sarah Rose's riding skills.

"My uncle [Stephen McDonald] got him through a trade deal," she says. "I would go out in the field and try to lope circles, and we would just run wide open. He would tell me I needed to gain control of my horse. That's when I learned a lot more about what went into [horsemanship]. I spent a lot of time just riding and listening to what he said."

ADDING BLING

It was ultimately her uncle and Larry Ammons, partners in A & M Performance Horses, who bought the horse that would change her life. Bling was purchased at the Fulton Performance Horse & Production Sale as a yearling in 2005. The bay roan filly was by A Streak Of Fling, Fulton Performance Horse's standout barrel horse sire, and out of Short Penny by Dash Ta Fame. And she was something special.

Sarah Rose was attending college when Bling came home to Brunswick.

"We saw her potential, and could tell she was an outstanding horse," she says. "I was in my second semester of nursing school and having a little trouble with it. Everything kind of fell in place for me to rodeo, and I went with it."

"My uncle broke her and started her on barrels, and I spent a lot of time with her. We had to be careful with her because she was a little hot. We didn't push her [for futurities] in her 4-year-old year. We let her go at her own pace, and she let us know when she was ready."

Sarah Rose focused mainly on NBHA competition with Bling from 2010 through 2013. In 2014 they added WPRA events to the schedule and things began to change.

"The first year [in WPRA] was definitely hard on both of us, just learning everything, and spending so much time in the truck and trailer," she says. "I never really went anywhere before. Three hours was the most we would ever go to a show. Bling had to learn to adapt and learn different routines, different arenas and different dirt."

AND BLING



Sarah Rose and Bling have teamed up to earn more than \$600,000 in barrel racing.

But rodeo gave them both a chance to do what they like.

"Bling is so smart and very sweet. I think she enjoys what she does," Sarah Rose says. "I've learned a lot more about her being on the road. Everything we do is about Bling first. That's the reason I'm out here. I take care of her and my other horses the very best I can."

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

Being on the road doesn't come without trials and tribulations.

"The hardest thing is being away from home and my family," she says. "And things aren't always good. You go through times when you cannot win or place; nothing can go right. You ask yourself, 'Why am I still out here?' But you have to keep going. There's going to be bad times, and you have to get through them to get to the really good times. You have to toughen up."

Sarah Rose says she talks to her parents daily, and her

boyfriend, Wade Whatley, also offers encouragement.

"If I get upset, I just regroup and go to the next rodeo. But it's hard when you're not doing good and you have to think about it on those long drives," she says. "My biggest goal is to take every rodeo one at a time, and win the next rodeo. And of course, being out here the goal is to make it back to the NFR."

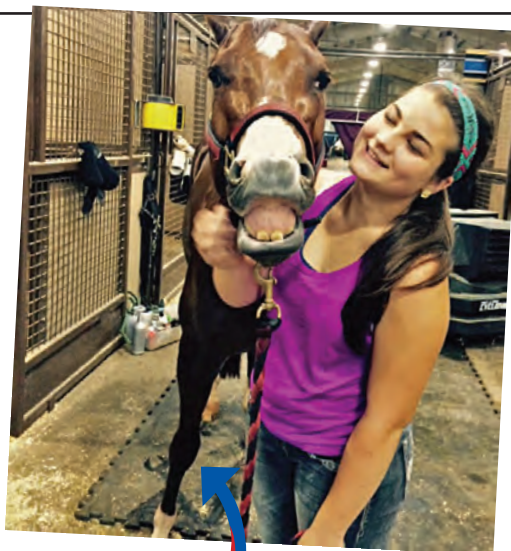
Her competitive nature drives her, and Sarah Rose says she decided early on to heed

her mother's advice. It's resulted in lifetime earnings of more than \$750,000.

"She would always say if you do your best, that's all you can do," she says. "My advice [to other barrel racers] is to put your all into trying to be the best rider you can be and work to bring out the best in your horse. Be realistic about where you are and where you need to be, and stick to what you want to do even if it gets tough. Never give up." **VWH**

TIPS FROM THE TOP

Compiled by
KATIE FRANK



Shelby Reine

Age: 18

Hometown: LaPlace, Louisiana

Horses: Keepyourgunsloaded ("Load"), 2011 gelding, and A Gunning Affair ("Plum"), 2012 gelding

Recent accomplishment: 2015 American Quarter Horse Youth Association Ranch Riding World Champion

Shelby's Tip: Just like people, each horse is different, and you need to adapt. I must learn to adapt to both of my horses' styles to help them perform to the best of their abilities. Both of my horses are hardworking, like to learn new things and love attention!

Youth champions offer advice on what it takes to be a better competitor, from preparation to sportsmanship.



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Meredith Graber

Age: 17

Hometown: Cannelburg, Indiana

Horse: Hickorys Chic Olena ("Smarty"), 2005 gelding

Recent accomplishment: 2015 National Reined Cow Horse Association Youth Limited World Champion

Meredith's Tip: Don't allow the intimidation or pressure of other riders get in the way of having fun. Enjoy showing instead of dreading it just because you think you're not good enough.

Sidney Dunkel

Age: 17

Hometown: Archer City, Texas

Horse: Bobbie Can Do ("Bobbie"), 2010 gelding

Recent accomplishment: 2016 AQHA Versatility Ranch Horse Youth World Champion

Sidney's Tip: Go for it! Find a horse, find someone to ride with and show. You can't always be the best, just know that you worked as hard as you could. The more you show, the better you'll get. It comes with time and practice.



Reece Rosenauer

Age: 18

Hometown: Burleson, Texas

Horse: Playin With Smoke ("Smokey"), 1998 gelding

Recent accomplishment: 2015 National Reined Cow Horse Association Youth Bridle World Champion

Reece's Tip: Practice until you feel good about how your horse feels and how you connect with each other. Make sure you're ready for the horse show environment, too. **YWH**




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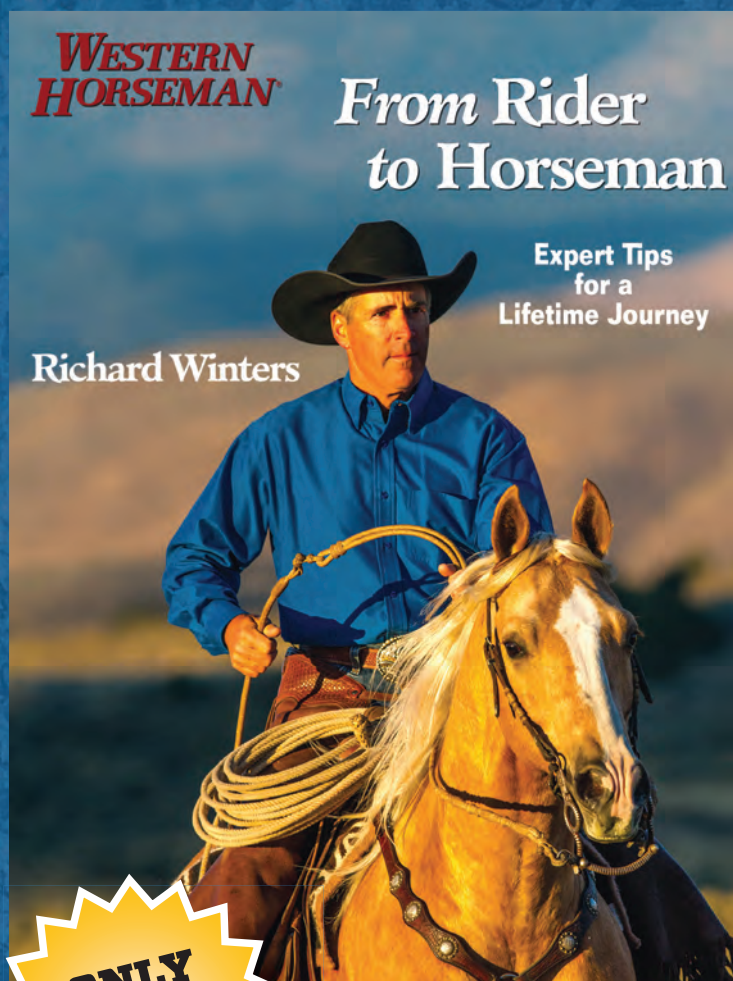
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