



PRESS RELEASE

22 August 2016

Hannah Francis and Willberry Wonder Pony inspires The Wobbleberries Challenge

18 year old eventer Hannah Francis sadly died on 1st August 2016 from lung, hip and pelvic cancer. The blog Hannah wrote during her illness in the name of her mascot Willberry Wonder Pony, alongside the charity she set up in the last few months of her life, inspired “wimpy weekend rider” Sally Barr to take up jumping and riding competitively. Sally came up with the idea of challenging herself to get fit in order to compete in a British Eventing (BE) 80cm event with the sole aim of raising money for Hannah’s charity.

Sally posted the idea on Facebook asking the horse community for feedback. The response was overwhelming, with offers of help and support from all over the country and requests to join the challenge. Sally quickly realised that she needed help as the idea gathered momentum and help came flooding in. Sally was quickly joined by Georgie Horrell who suggested the group adopt the name “The Wobbleberries” and after approval from the Trustees of Hannah’s charity the Facebook Group called The Wobbleberries Challenge was launched; “it’s all about raising money for the wonderful www.willberrywonderpony.org by middle aged wimpy riders being inspired by Hannah to start eventing.”

Sally Barr commented, “I was not lucky enough to know Hannah – like thousands of others, I followed Hannah’s blog and was blown away by her maturity, strength and courage. When I heard the news that she had tragically passed away, donating and joining the Friends of Willberry just did not seem enough. I felt she had achieved so much in her all too brief life, that anything was achievable with drive and commitment. The #rideforhannah all over social media made me think. I desperately wanted to raise money in her memory, so I came up with the idea of challenging myself to get fit and start eventing to raise as much money for her charity as I could - an easy feat for many,

but a mountain for me. I was completely unprepared for the response I would receive when I asked friends for feedback, so the idea snowballed. So many people want to both raise money in Hannah's memory, and also challenge themselves, inspired by Hannah, to aim to take part in her sport."

All funds raised will go towards bone cancer research and granting horsey wishes to those with serious illnesses. In Hannah's words 'Willberrys Wishes' allows seriously ill people like me, but not just with cancer, to have their dream of some kind of horsey experience granted by Willberry just as he's granted so many of mine."

More than £160,000 has now been raised for the charity, through donations, fundraising and the sale of merchandise with more than £25,000 donated via Just Giving on 1st August (the day of Hannah's death) alone, from more than 3,500 groups and individuals.

Charity Trustee Ian Peters says: "Hannah's Willberry Wonder Pony Charity wholeheartedly supports the Wobbleberry Challenge. The love of horses binds us together as a community and we are incredibly grateful that so many people want to brave this challenge to support us and honour Hannah's legacy. Kick on Wobbleberries and all ride home safely. Thank you for your wonderful support."

The Wobbleberries are currently recruiting other like-minded individuals to take part in the challenge via Facebook with a deadline for applying of Friday 16th September. The idea is to create regional groups of Wobbleberries who commit to raising as much sponsorship as possible to take part in selected BE events in the Autumn of 2017. The Wobbleberries Schedule of events will be confirmed following the publication of the British Eventing Calendar.

If you would like to sponsor the Wobbleberries or donate anything that would help the Wobbleberries to succeed in their challenge please contact Sam Elms at wobbleberrychallenge@hotmail.com. Any sponsorship will be used to raise funds directly for the charity.

Ends.

Notes to Editors

Hannah Francis

"Hi, my name is Hannah and I am 17 years old. I've ridden horses all my life; it is my absolute passion and it is my dream to ride at the top of the sport."

Hannah was fortunate to be accepted onto a rider development eventing pathway assessment day in April at Kingston Maurward College. Mavis, her horse was an absolute superstar all day and didn't put a hoof wrong – she had everything crossed that they would be the lucky combination accepted as they only took one forward. Hannah was chosen to go through to the next stage and was over the moon, but her dream was shattered when on May 1st she was diagnosed with an aggressive bone cancer in her pelvis, right hip joint, lower spine and lungs called Osteosarcoma.

"On 10th May I received a soft toy horse called Willberry. He was to become my mascot and go everywhere with me. Little did I know how famous he would become or how important he would be to me, let alone how much I would love and rely on him by my side. He is super special and always

smiling. So, together, we finally began chemotherapy on 21st May, 21 days after being diagnosed. The journey and fight against this awful disease had begun. We were going to do all that we could to beat it and before we knew it we had the whole world behind us too. Hannah and her wonder pony were #kickingcancersbutt.”

Hannah began writing a blog of her experiences from the point of view of her mascot, Willberry, and raising funds for various charities. The soft toy horse became a household name in the equestrian world, with tens of thousands of followers on social media. Eventer Ben Hobday, who had been diagnosed with cancer at the same time as Hannah, competed at Badminton in May of this year with Willberry Wonder Pony strapped on his back, to raise awareness of Hannah and the legacy that she wanted to create.

On 2nd May Hannah announced that Hannah’s Willberry Wonder Pony had been approved as a registered charity with Ben Hobday as its Patron.

Hannah created Bucket List and one of the things on it was to compete for her country. She realised this dream on 2nd June when she rode at Tattersalls International Horse Trials in Ireland performing the one- and two-star dressage test rides on her mare Mavis.

Before she died she wrote;

“I’ve probably achieved more in the past 12 months than I would have done in my entire life [without cancer]. People have been so unbelievably generous to help me realise things on my never-ending bucket list. Every day of my life has been made to count because we don’t know how long I have left. Even when the day comes that I won’t be able to get up in the morning I want you to continue to keep fighting for me so together we can beat cancer.”

On 1st August Hannah lost her fight.

“James, Rachel and Sam are deeply saddened to announce that today Hannah passed away. She has made every day count and has fought courageously from start to finish. They are immensely proud of their beautiful daughter and sister.”

In response hundreds of supporters took to social media with images of them riding accompanied by an #inspiredbyhannah hashtag.

Hannah Francis was a truly inspirational young girl and the Wobbleberry Challenge is about celebrating that and making every day count.

Look at <https://www.willberrywonderpony.org>

The Wobbleberries are keen to help the Friends of Willberry secure long-term donation commitments to ensure that Hannah’s legacy is going on giving year after year. All the information is available here: <https://www.willberrywonderpony.org/charity/friends/>

Facebook

Willberry Wonder Pony

The Wobbleberry Challenge (see <https://www.facebook.com/wobbleberrieschallenge/>) is associated with The Willberry Wonder Pony charity and is described in brief here:

"We were inspired by Hannah Francis - this is all about her legacy, and trying to raise money. Please read her website. We are middle aged, weekend "riders" that have not jumped in years. Most of us have nerves to conquer / weight to lose / fitness to achieve - that's before we learn how to jump....so we are aiming to make a public spectacle of ourselves by attempting our BE debut at the end of next season (2017). It is likely to be a painful and humiliating journey but if it raises money for Hannah's charity it's all worth it. That's why we are looking for sponsors.

About the Founder Wobbleberries

Sally Barr

An overweight, unfit, middle-aged, weekend wimpy rider that has not left the ground for decades. Hamish (aka Thelwell) was bought as a happy hacker, but now believes himself to be a dressage diva - an Irish cob with an incredibly generous and forgiving nature, such a personality he is adored by all who meet him. He would like to be sponsored by Polos.

Georgie Horrell

After a brush with cancer two years ago this middle aged unpaid groom and event-driver wants to add another kick to #kickingcancersbutt ! Wheeling the wonderful Charlie-the-Hero (aka Charlie O Kelly) out of his hacking semi-retirement means that at least one in the partnership has an idea about what to do. The other one will be on a wing and a prayer ...

Julia Godbold

Over 50 Happy Hacker for over 30 years, and for the past 15 years has been the Pony Club mum, helper, tack cleaner etc etc. Irish Edd (Edward) is my daughter's 20 year old first pony who is a special character and likes being the boss. Between us this Challenge will be 'interesting' but exciting at the same time. Now it's our turn.

Sam Elms

If this middle-aged, unfit mother of a horse-mad eventing daughter stands any chance of completing this challenge she will actually have to get on a horse and ride, rather than just petting one! The horse of choice is her daughter's "spare" dressage schoolmaster Cool Britannia. Let's hope he can teach Sam a thing or two and she doesn't end up in detention!

How to follow the Wobbleberries Challenge

Website - www.wobbleberries.com

Facebook – The Wobbleberries Challenge

Twitter - @TWobbleberries