

THE DAY
SECRETARIAT WON
THE TRIPLE CROWN

And the impact on a young
disabled girl



A story of pain, heartbreak
and triumph

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Carolyn R. Scheidies' credits include over two-dozen books (several of which have garnered awards) as well as contributions to several non-fiction books. A graduate of the University of NE at Kearney (UNK) with a degree in journalism, she's written for a variety of publications, and has a regular column in the Kearney Hub. Scheidies also speaks to different groups on a variety of topics, leads workshops on writing, and guest lectures at UNK.

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CHAPTER ONE-The Beginning

The news of Secretariat's death made me realize how far removed I had become from my youthful obsession with horses, especially with Secretariat, a horse I had never even seen. It had been a long time since I'd even thought of him or how important he had been to me that spring.

The tentative rays of the afternoon sun lengthened the shadows in my small, square bedroom. I sat on my bed on the thick, warm, pink comforter-spread Dad brought home from Canada where he pastored a church. The windows on two sides of the room were covered with the white dotted pink curtains my older sister Karin lovingly made for me.

In one corner was the large desk Dad made for me several years earlier that was high enough for me to sit at in my wheelchair. In fact, I was surrounded with things that gave me security and attested to the care and concern of my family. The room itself was my secure little hide-away in a world that spun crazily. Even after all these months, I still felt bemused and not a little confused over the major events that had recently transpired.

Karin and her husband Jim had been transferred from McPherson, Kansas way out east

to Maryland. There was the possibility of surgery for me. And then came the sudden death of my mother. My college graduation was not the same without Mom cheering me on as she had so diligently over the years.

The decision for or against surgery weighed heavily on my mind. Surgery might change my entire future, and I was in no state to make such a momentous decision.

It was June 1973. I turned 23 in January and graduated from college in May. Looking ahead, I was frightened, perhaps more frightened than I had ever been. And I had been frightened many times in the past ten years. Frightened and alone I perched on the edge of life, but for me that edge appeared to be more a dangerous precipice.

Crippled (why try to disguise the truth with the latest politically correct term) and able to move my wheelchair about only with my feet, I faced major surgery on legs that had not functioned properly for ten years. They were permanently bent and my fingers were gnarled from the ravages of Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis, which one way or another affected all parts of my slim body. Surgery might get me walking again--might. Knee replacements were fairly new and using them on someone my age was not recommended. My sympathetic doctor, Dr. Ken Ellis, gave me no guarantees.

Was it worth it? It was my life--and my decision. Did I want to walk again? Of course! But what if I went through all the surgery and was no

better? I thought. I prayed and was still not settled in mind or heart. My odds for success were a whole lot less than Secretariat's odds of winning the Kentucky Derby. I smiled as I turned my thoughts to the large horse. Horses. Nothing else could turn my mind as quickly from my present problems than horses.

From my earliest years I loved horses. More than once I heard Dad crack, "The day she was born, she began crawling toward horses."

"Completely horse crazy," was my sister's pronouncement, and she was right.

I loved horses. When we lived in Clitherall, Minnesota, some members of Dad's church had a farm that I loved to visit. To my delight, I even got to stay at the farm when Mom went to the hospital to have my younger brother Paul in 1954. I was four at the time.

They also had a very gentle horse. A few times, they lifted me up on its broad back, and, though I was hardly more than a toddler, I loved it.

I recall going to the Minneapolis State Fair with my Grandmother and Aunt Esther when I was perhaps five or six. The only things I remember from that day was running toward the corral filled with real live ponies and begging Mom to let me ride.

My aunt was fearful I might hurt myself, but Mom overruled her. I got a wonderful, if short, ride. Later, some fair promoter brought live ponies to Siren, Wisconsin where my Dad pastored a church from 1955 to 1958. Dad bought me a ride.

It was wonderful, though I got to do nothing more than go round and round a ring.

I did not stop with live horses. If nothing else, I rode round and round on the carousel at every circus and fair I went to, pretending I rode a mighty steed.

At my side, I often wore a play six shooter set, for I was addicted to the Western shows, which showed so regularly on TV. Roy Rogers and Dale Evans were my heroes. They sang about God, so Dad and Mom approved of the show. In Clitherall, I even had Roy Rogers and Dale Evans paper dolls.

One day as I galloped about on my make-believe steed and flashed my pistols, Dad watched. He watched me aim and “shoot” down the neighbor boy, a young friend who lived next door to us in Clitherall. Interestingly enough, the church bought the old brick bank building for use as the parsonage right next to the post office where my best friend lived in the back with his family.

“Carolyn,” Dad said later that night, taking me onto his knees, “I know this gun is not real, but no gun is really a toy. Real guns hurt people. I don’t want you to point a gun, even in pretend, at anyone. Ever.”

I frowned. “But how can I play cowboy then?”

“Aim up or down or to one side, but not directly at anyone. I want you to realize that guns are dangerous, and I don’t want you to take lightly pointing them at people. Real guns can kill. God

wants us to love our enemies, not kill them.” His blue eyes were serious. “Do you understand?”

I nodded soberly. I did understand. Never, after our little talk, could I handle my pistol without realizing what a gun could do, and never after that could I aim it, even in play, at another person.

Though I watched all the cowboy shows, I did more than take in the plot. Intently, I studied the way the heroes handled their horses. I watched how they held the reins and how they moved their bodies to get the horse to trot and to gallop. I watched, and learned.

As I grew older, I followed horse racing. I read books on horses and studied statistics. I fell in love with Man O’War, that great horse who had never run the Kentucky Derby, though many of his descendants had.

I felt a strange bond with horses and each spring I prayed another horse would come along as great as Man O’War, one who would run all three races of the Triple Crown: the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness and the Belmont Stakes. Run...and win.

There had not been a winner of the Triple Crown since Citation in 1948, but every spring I diligently read about the current crop of three-year-olds. Each year, I listened to the races on my little radio that Dad bought me for eighth grade graduation, hoping for a winner. Each year the failure of a horse to emerge with the coveted crown echoed my own failure to overcome the

odds of my walking again. Walking...and riding.

Once walking had come so easily. Once I ran and jumped with abandon, twirling around and around so fast I got dizzy. Would I ever again run, ever again even walk?