



By Lorne McClinton

# HORSEPLAY

Hard work and their love of horses have turned Bailee and Lacey Stanton into Canadian barrel-racing champions

Lacey Stanton and Ready cleared the last pole and tore out of the arena into the alley. The rodeo champion had just finished a run fast enough to earn some prize money. It should have been a happy moment, but Lacey couldn't stop her tears. It was the end of an era.

Lacey and her younger sister, Bailee, had both been riding Ready when they won their first championship barrel-racing buckles. But after six years of competitions it was time for the mare to retire. The horse had leg problems from the day they got her, and the wear and tear of racing was taking its toll. It was time, Lacey decided, to retire her from racing and turn her into a brood mare at the family's guest ranch in Exshaw, Alberta. It had been a hard

**Large photo:** Lacey's and Bailee's family have been guiding at Banff for four generations. **Below:** A champion barrel racer like Bailee has spent thousands of hours on horseback.





decision to make, but she knew it was for the best.

“She was our first fast horse,” Bailee Stanton says. “Lacey and I both pretty well learned how to make competitive barrel runs with her. She loved to race and would give it everything. She would have raced on three legs, she loved it that much.”

Barrel racing, the only women’s event in professional rodeo, is filled with fast, intense action. Competitors race against the clock as they guide their horses around three pre-set barrels in a cloverleaf pattern. Whoever completes the course in the fastest time, without knocking over a barrel, wins. There’s no room for error; a winning run is usually under 17 seconds on a regulation course, so the difference between winning prize money and going home with empty pockets can be measured in microseconds.

“You don’t even have time to think if you’re having a smoking run,” Bailee says. “Everything happens so fast; you’re doing a million things, but you’re doing them all subconsciously, by muscle memory.”

**CIRA winners.** The Stanton sisters have dominated the barrel racing and pole bending events on the Canadian Intercollegiate Rodeo Association (CIRA) circuit since 2009. While both women are fierce competitors in the rodeo arena, the two of them remain very close.

“Rodeo is one of the few things we don’t fight about,” Bailee says. “Our winning streaks have continually seesawed back and forth, but I don’t think we’ll ever be at the point where we’ll be super competitive. When she does well, she’s still my sister doing well, so why would it upset me?”

Competing on the rodeo circuit is a grueling life. The sisters will often ride in three to five rodeos in



**Above:** Lacey and Bailee Stanton have both won championship buckles at CIRA. **Below:** Lacey and Bailee would love to teach a dude horse to jump.



a weekend, so they rarely have the luxury of relaxing and watching the action. Often, they’ll just have time to unload the horses, put them through their warm-up routine, and make their run. Then afterwards, as soon as the horses are cooled off, watered, and fed, it’s back on the trailer and off to the next event.

All the hauling is harder on the horses than competing is, Lacey says. So they do everything possible to make sure the horses have as comfortable a ride as possible. Both women credit their father for their expert driving skills. They have been hauling their horse trailers up and down mountain passes since they were 16.

The driving gets tough so teaming up with a competitor to have a traveling partner is very important, Bailee says. Finding someone you are compatible with is a major consideration because you will be sitting with them for hours on end. Driving skills matter, too; you have to be able to trust them to haul your horse, as well.

Horses were an important part of Lacey’s and Bailee’s everyday life growing up. Their parents, Kevin Stanton and Janet Brewster-Stanton, run the Kananaskis Guest Ranch just outside Banff National Park. They also own a riding stable that caters to tourists at Lake Louise, and another company that takes tourists on guided packhorse tours into the park’s breathtaking, rugged backcountry.

“When they were little, the girls rode up front of us in our saddles,” Brewster-Stanton says. “As soon as possible, though, they were in their own saddles and we would lead them around. It wasn’t long before they took the reins and rode by themselves, but we always tried to make sure that they were on horses

**Left:** Being around more than 100 horses all their lives has really honed their horse sense. **Below:** Both sisters quickly turn to their father, Kevin, when they need advice on their horses.







**Above:** Bailee says that she and Lacey were lucky to be able to grow up riding through some of the most spectacular scenery in the world. **Top right:** There is always something to do at the ranch. **Right:** The difference between winning and finishing out of the money can be a matter of microseconds. **Far right:** Jobs like horseshoeing come naturally to the sisters.

that they could handle, suitable to their level.”

“Horses were our babysitters when we were young,” Lacey says. “Later, we spent hours and hours and hours guiding rides. We have been able to ride in some of the most amazing places in the world. It would be nothing for us to be sitting in a saddle for six hours to go back into camp.”

Both of the sisters took riding lessons and competed in horse shows from a young age, too. They started by riding in western and gymkhana events at the Spruceview Horse Show near Calgary. A few years later, they took English riding lessons from

Sandra Donnelly, a former Olympic equestrian athlete at the Alborak Stables in Calgary.

“We started riding English saddle on a little standardbred cross named Tuffy,” Lacey says. “That little horse did everything for us.”

“Bailee rode him in a jumping class against a bunch of trainers at the Jurassic Classic when she was really little,” Brewster-Stanton says. “Jumpers have to memorize a new pattern before every run. Since Bailee has a photographic memory and Tuffy could make corners tighter than the other horses, they did really well. At the end of the day, everyone was wondering about that little girl and that amazing little horse she was on.”

The sisters had been riding for years before they rode on their first high performance horse, Lacey says. Instead, they would pick through the dude horses at the ranch and then convince them to jump.

“Everybody thinks you can just barrel race







**Above inset:** Kevin, Lacey, and Bailee Stanton take a few minutes to visit before it's time for the sisters to load their horses back into the trailer and head off to their next rodeo.

because anybody with money can buy a barrel horse and they think that will make them win,” Lacey says. “But the best girl racers out there have been riding their whole life; we didn’t start racing until we could ride just as well as we do today. When you are starting out, you are better off buying a quiet old horse and spend hours and hours on him. Skipping to the fast horses just scares a lot of people.”

Finding the perfect horse isn’t a simple process, Bailee says. She has a very English riding style and rides very forward, so she had to find a horse that worked with her style. Also, she adds, competitive horses usually have quirks and aren’t the easiest to ride. Don’t expect a fast horse to be quiet and suitable for young children.

“We’re really lucky to have our dad to help us,” Bailee says. “There’s no way I would even consider buying a horse unless he sees him. Dad has even more horse instinct than we do. He loves animals and can tell right off the bat if it has a good mind, a bad mind, or if it is just dangerous.”

“No matter how good a horse you have and how much you train, many things that affect your ride are out of your control,” Lacey says. “You might draw a ride on Friday when the track is a mud hole



**Above:** Even hauling hay can be fun when friends show up to help out. **Left:** Competing in rodeos requires spending untold numbers of hours driving to events.

and you’ll be competing against girls who will be riding on Sunday when the track is as dry as a bone. It’s scary how much the difference between winning or losing comes down to luck.”

Intangibles, like a rider’s mental state, play a role in performance, too. Bailee says both of them had to learn not to take losing so seriously; besides, even the top barrel racers don’t win every rodeo.

**Heart in it.** “Try not to let your world come crashing down every time you lose a rodeo or you’ll be depressed all the time,” Bailee says. “After all, there will be another rodeo tomorrow. If you want your horse to put its whole heart into the race, you better be prepared to do so as well.” ■

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