

The Concussion That Changed My Life

The author speaks candidly about his struggles with the long-term effects of CTE.

By **Jay Duke**

Photos Courtesy Of **Jay Duke**

How do I write this?

How do I talk about a time of overwhelming despair and sadness, to even begin to share the darkness I experienced?

How do I talk about fear, when I was trained all my life to have no fear, show no fear, to completely suppress that debilitating emotion? How do I share the truth about a fall that changed my life, that altered the lives of my children, when everything I have been trained to do is “think next”—next jump, next horse, next ride—never think back?

How do I admit the weakness of day after day of not wanting to get out of bed, of not wanting to be in public, of not being able to be around other people, of averting my eyes to avoid conversation, of hiding from life? How do I apologize to the people I've hurt and mistreated, when I knew my actions and words were wrong, but I was a helpless prisoner inside my own head, a spectator at a horror movie that never ended?

I have so wanted to write this for so many years, and yet I still dreaded writing it. Exposing myself to judgment and ridicule in today's world of social media is difficult. So why am I doing this, typing on my computer at 4 a.m., about how one moment, one blow to the head, changed my life in so many terrible ways?

Because I hope anyone reading this will feel less alone, not quite as awful about themselves. I hope they will realize they can fight mental illness, that there is hope and a fabulous life of happiness, opportunity and friends waiting for you to live. I am writing this to you.

THE MOMENT THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

It was early January 2004. I had just arrived in Indio, California, for the six-week winter circuit. I had 24 horses, four grooms, my wife and children with me. We would “move” to California each year for two months to compete, do business, and enjoy the great weather.

It was Day 1, and I could not have been happier. I was riding outside in the sunshine, and the horses felt wonderful. I had that excitement and optimism that comes from being in a new place, escaping winter and having a great string of horses.

I was about to get on my final ride of the day—a 4-year-old at his first horse show—and I was chatting with my wife Lisa about what restaurant we were going to go to that evening.

I used to take a few young horses to Indio every year to expose them to the life of a show horse. They wouldn't compete, just train and see the sights of a show that had 2,000 horses. The horse had been for a longe and two hand-walks, and now he was ready for his first ride at the show. I mounted from the block with my groom Mario Hernandez, who is an excellent horseman.

I've worked with countless young horses, as has Mario, and we did everything correctly. The horse was quiet and relaxed as we moved away from the block with Mario holding him. I gave him the OK to release the reins and started to walk away. Three steps later the horse exploded in a feat of athleticism that the Calgary Stampede rodeo would appreciate.



Jay Duke, shown with daughter Halle Duke, refused to let the effects of CTE hurt his family. “Live your life as well as you can, love and cherish your family, and keep fighting to be your very best,” he says.

I did not make it to eight seconds. Actually, it was only the third buck, and I was airborne. I went straight up in the air, still holding the reins. When I began my descent to the ground head-first, my head was at a height of approximately nine feet, and my legs were straight up above me.

Now understand, I had been well trained how to fall and had plenty of experience at it. Ian Millar even taught it to me at a clinic when I trained with him, and I’ve hit the turf hundreds of times. Unfortunately in this case, I had no forward momentum to roll with to absorb the impact.

“The wiring in my brain had been altered, and nothing would ever be the same.”

My head contacted with the desert hardpan first, and the pain was instantaneous and unlike anything I had ever experienced. My GPA helmet, which was now cracked open, along with the fast thinking of Mario and Lisa, saved my life in the next few minutes.

After an ambulance ride and admission to the hospital, six hours later I was released and sent home. The doctors told me that my CT scan, MRI and X-rays were all good, and I was deemed fine to go home. Five weeks later I was riding again. As every trainer reading this knows, downtime means loss of income and loss of business. Plus, I couldn't wait to ride! I knew that I should be paralyzed, that I should be in a wheelchair. Everyone who saw the fall was sure I would never walk again. I felt incredibly lucky to have the use of my legs; I was ready to get going again.

Somehow, my tests at the hospital did not reveal that my back was fractured at T4, T5 and T6, something I would find out eight years later. What I was further unaware of, and what the doctors at that time did not know, allegedly, was that the wiring in my brain had been altered, and nothing would ever be the same.

A HELPLESS SPECTATOR

I had always been a patient person. I had a calm demeanor, and I was relaxed and easy-going about life. My nickname in the international ring was "Slush" because I was cool under pressure. (Nick Skelton was "Ice," and I wasn't as good as him, so I was named "Slush.")

However, over the next few months, my behavior radically changed. Most people are aware that concussions can lead to memory loss, and my short-term memory was definitely awful. For several months I would



Before retiring from competition, Jay Duke brought along horses like the 2009 5-Year-Old Jumper Development Western Canadian Championship winner Grappa, who was later renamed Mindful and became a top hunter derby horse with Kelley Farmer.

forget about 90 percent of things. That was frustrating, but what was much worse was the rage. All of a sudden I was angry at innocuous, trivial matters. I had no idea why I was upset and, even worse, I had no control over my anger. It really was the most disconcerting feeling of my life. I was watching myself do and say things. The worst was knowing it was wrong but not being able to stop. I was a prisoner inside my own head, a helpless spectator to a life that began to unravel.

At the time I hated doctors. I grew up in the '70s and '80s competing in multiple sports—soccer, hockey, football, volleyball, basketball, tennis. If there was a sport, I played it, and at a high level. You *never* showed you were hurt; that was weakness.

Show jumping was my passion, and as many of you know it is physically demanding. I have injured both my shoulders, had broken ribs, torn both Achilles tendons, and the previously mentioned broken back. One of the most important things about riding, though, is to have no fear. If we fall, we're taught to immediately get back on and keep riding. This was an essential part of the sport and is still very important today (unless you hit your head, of course).

So, with that background, and being a man who grew up on a ranch, I would never seek medical assistance. To this day I will not take a painkiller. What I've learned though was that I was wrong. I needed help, and not seeking that help almost cost me my life.

For a period of years, almost every day was a struggle. I was desperate for help and pushed everyone close to me—my clients, my friends, my family—away. I felt I no longer deserved them; I was not worthy of their love and attention. I felt that I shouldn't have a successful business or great horses, that I didn't deserve to be paid

for what I do. I certainly did not warrant a wonderful wife (she tried so hard to help me, and all I did was push her away) and my two amazing daughters.

Here was the paradox: I pushed everyone away because I didn't want to hurt them. I wanted to protect them from me, from this dark rage that had manifested inside me. So I did things to isolate myself, to create distance, and I hated every moment of it. Of course this was the opposite of what I wished for, and the terrifying part is I was watching all of this unfold.

I was a spectator at a horror movie where I was the villain. The more awfully I acted, the more I hated myself, so the more awfully I acted. To a person who has never suffered depression, this sounds ridiculous, and of course it is to a healthy, rational mind. But when you are mentally ill, everything is upside down, backward, and flat out screwed up.

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT IT

To put this in writing is not a simple decision and is not the easy way out. I've had people tell me, "Are you sure you want to publish this?" They say people will judge, will be critical, that it may hurt my business. The answer is yes, I want to publish this, but obviously with trepidation.

Mental health is still taboo to talk about, and in my case, depression was caused by five concussions over a long career. Just like the #MeToo movement, everyone needs to realize that it's OK to discuss difficult topics. If the keyboard warriors of social media wish to attack, they will, and I can take it.

I published a blog, "Concussions At Horse Shows—Are You Being Protected?" about post-concussion protocol at shows on my *JayDuke.com* website in 2016. It was met with



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anger and derision by horse show managers, as I pointed out their blatant disregard for rider safety. I received threatening phone calls from very prominent managers, and it was negative for my business. I hope this article helped to influence the U.S. Equestrian Federation and Equine Canada to change their concussion policy, which is now much better than it was when I wrote that article. I know that my words have in some small way helped to make for a safer environment for riders worldwide, so I will take that as a win.

Knowledge is power, and in my case it was the lifeboat I so desperately needed. Studying the lost lives of National Football League players affected by chronic traumatic encephalopathy, the acts they committed, the radical behavioral changes they went through, opened my eyes. These men literally *became* someone else! It reminded me of myself.

The effects of CTE are still very much unknown in the medical world, but there is progress being made. Reading

Reach Out For Help

For the many people who suffer from mental illness, know of someone who is struggling, or just want to be more educated about this topic, go to

cmha.ca/mental-health/understanding-mental-illness

- ▶ 300 million people around the world have depression, according to the World Health Organization.
- ▶ 16.2 million adults in the United States (6.7 percent of all adults in the country) have experienced a major depressive episode in the past year.
- ▶ 10.3 million U.S. adults experienced an episode that resulted in severe impairment in the past year.
- ▶ Nearly 50 percent of all people diagnosed with depression are also diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.
- ▶ It's estimated that 15 percent of the adult population will experience depression at some point in their lifetime.

verywellmind.com/depression-statistics-everyone-should-know-4159056

More details about CTE are available at:

concussionfoundation.org/CTE-resources/what-is-CTE

the players' stories helped me to feel not alone, to start to understand how to fight back to health. Even though many players I researched ended up committing suicide, every article gave me strength and resolve. I couldn't let that happen to me or allow my family to be hurt in that manner. I was determined to find my way back to health and happiness.

Today, 14 years later, I'm doing pretty well. I take great care of myself, both mentally and physically. I coach more than 30 clinics a year, and I have an online training program that is my way of giving back to the industry I love.

I no longer ride. Nobody understands this, and I'm asked about it at least 10 times a week. I'm OK with that, too; it's my decision, and I am comfortable with it and happy.

Live your life as well as you can, love and cherish your family, and keep fighting to be your very best. With the CTE I have suffered from my concussions, it's a fight every single day, and it's one I will win. 🏆

Jay Duke began showing on the 'A' circuit at the age of 8. He was a member of the bronze-medal show jumping team from Alberta at the 1986 Continental Young Riders' Championships, and he was a four-time Canadian Junior Champion in both the hunter and jumper rings. In 1987 he won the junior jumper championship and claimed the junior grand prix at Spruce Meadows (Alberta).

In 1994, he won the Leading Male Rider title at the Spruce Meadows 'North American' tournament and made his Nations Cup debut at the Washington International Horse Show (District of Columbia). He also represented Canada in Nations Cups at the National Horse Show and the Royal Horse Show (Ontario).

In 1999, Jay became trainer at Castle Cliff Farm in Sedalia, Colorado, where he trained horses such as King David and Caymus, both of whom claimed U.S. Equestrian Federation Horse of the Year titles. He returned to Calgary in 2006 to focus on developing young horses in the jumper ring.

Retired from competition since 2014, Jay now works as a senior course designer with Equestrian Canada and is a sought-after clinician.

IN THE FORUM, horsemen are invited to express their views and offer constructive criticism on any topic relevant to working with and enjoying horses. The opinions expressed by the writers are entirely their own and not necessarily those of *The Chronicle of the Horse*.