

Riding by Feel

FOR A YOUNG RIDER IN WEATHERFORD, TEXAS, A HORSE IS MORE THAN A WAY TO GET AROUND LIFE'S BARRELS.

COWBOYS

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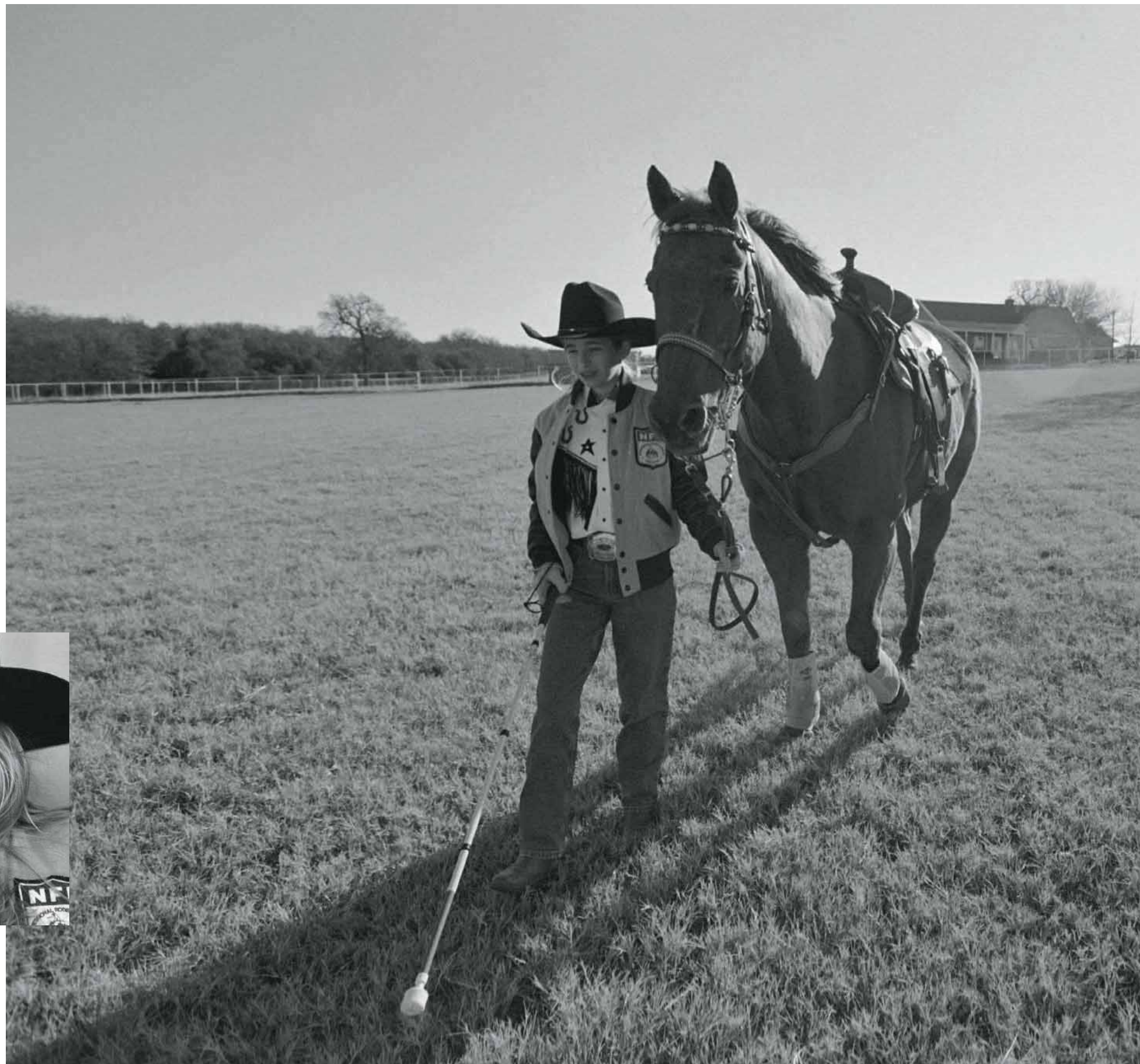


by Dana Joseph

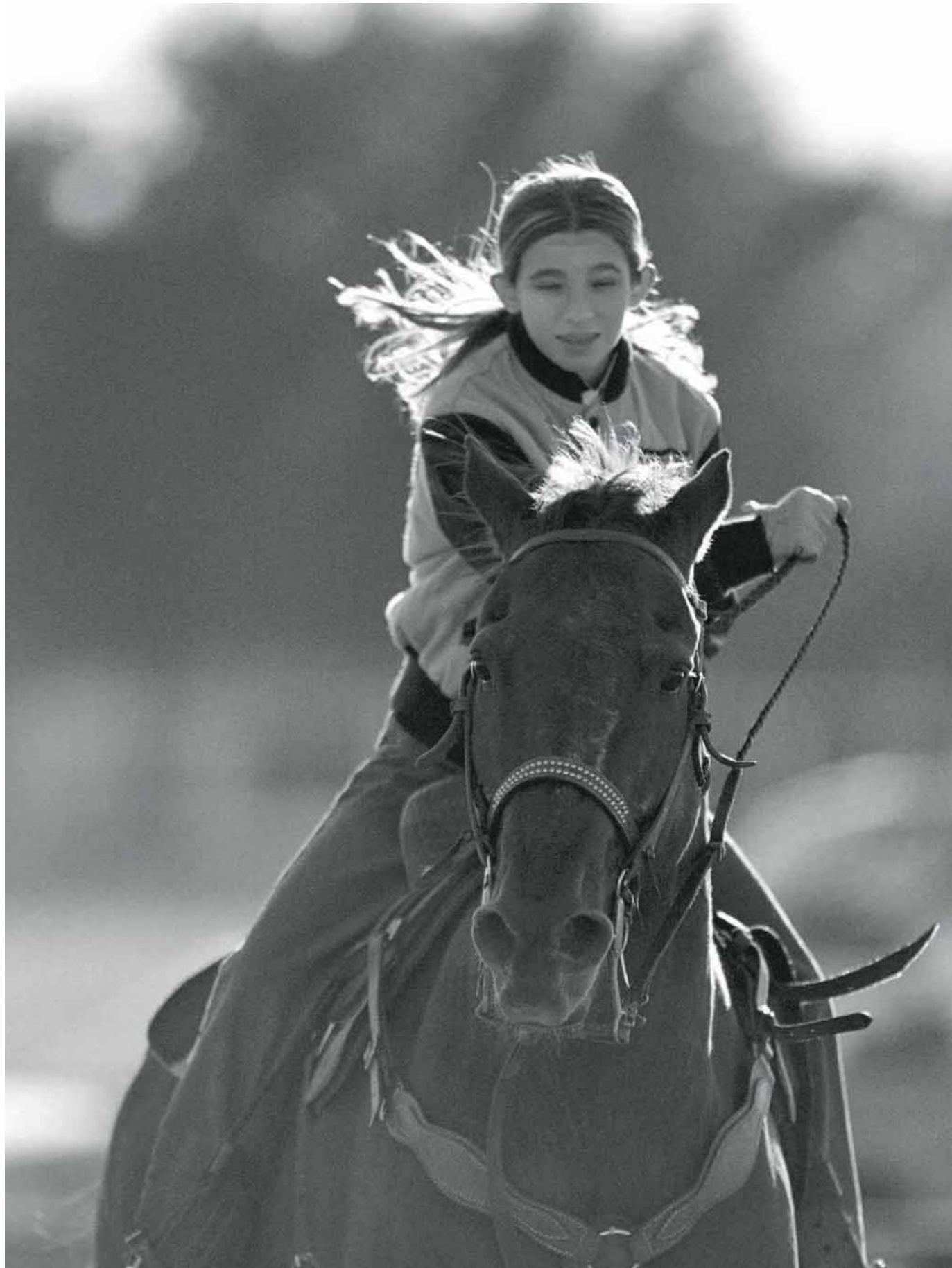
Lots of folks come to trainer Jyme Beth Cochrane's Lightning C Arena in McAlester, Oklahoma, with special horse needs. One client from Weatherford, Texas, is especially particular. Her horse has to be gentle and calm and willing to let her halter and groom him and load him in a trailer. Her horse has to be knowing and willing to take care of her no matter what. He has to automatically sense her every nuance. And he has to run barrels like nobody's business.

This rider isn't overly picky. This buckle-winning barrel racer is blind.

Not that you'd know it when you meet 14-year-old Brittney Holland, who rode first as a baby in the saddle in front of her mom and started riding alone at age 4. If her story sounds vaguely familiar, you might have seen her featured on an episode of *Miracle Pets* three years ago. Though Brittney was born with no macula — she is totally blind in her right eye and can make out only movement and blurred images in her 20x400 left eye — she zips around house, school, barn, and



Photography by Jamie Williams



barrels like a sighted kid. She lives and rides almost exclusively by feel — and heart.

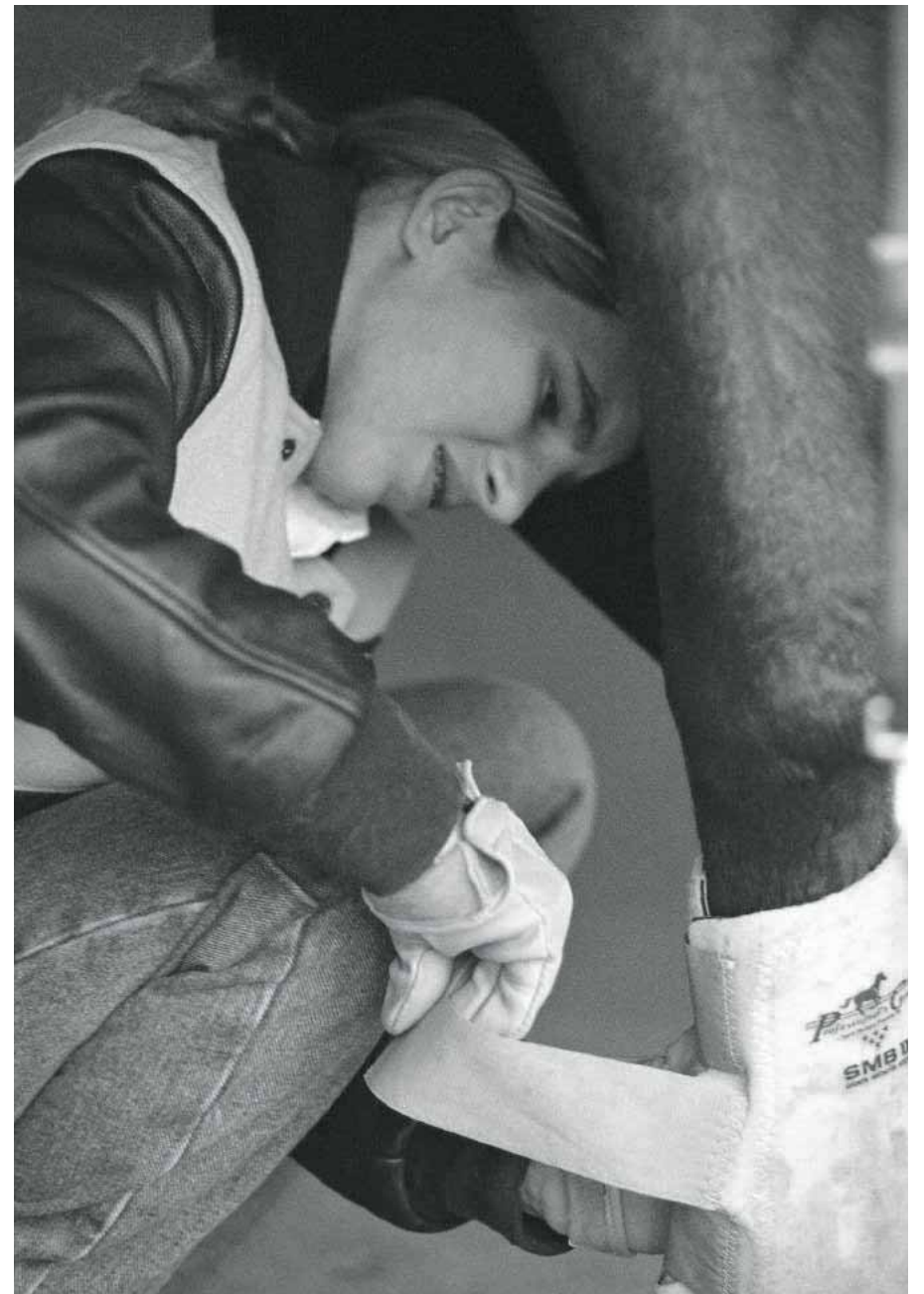
Blindness hasn't stopped her from becoming a real contender in barrel racing either. In fact, it just might have propelled her. "I like competing against others," she says. "I just want to try to get as good as I can. A fast time or slow time doesn't matter. Just riding horses is fun." Still, she has set her sights on riding in the National Finals Rodeo and meeting her idol and role model Charmane James.

If Britt's accomplishments in school are any indication, she'll get it done. Until a high-tech device called a Flipper Port recently came on the sight-impaired scene — allowing her to read two fuzzy letters at a time by aiming and rolling a powerful magnifier — Britt used to read in two-letter increments holding a little telescope. Determination and perseverance have made her a straight-A student.

She goes at barrel racing with the same can-do-it-darn-it attitude. She's been bucked off several times, and almost been stepped on. But she takes it in stride and gets back on the horse. "I believe God made me the way I am and He has a plan for me," she says. "If I weren't like this, I wouldn't be able to do the things He has planned for me."

It's a faith the whole family has relied on. "When the doctor looked in her eyes and said they hadn't developed, it was one of the darkest days of our lives," her mother says. "It took a year — and the confirming diagnosis of five doctors — to accept it." But they had a deep faith that "with God's guidance, Brittney was still going to do great things."

One of those great things turned out to be barrel racing, a talent she in part comes by naturally. Brittney's mother, Susie Holland, barrel raced competitively. She intimately knows both the exhilaration of barrel racing — the skill, precision, and courage it takes — and the challenges her daughter faces in life and the saddle. "The first time I had to tell Brittney she wouldn't be able to see was when we were on a horse together riding next to her sister, Hayley. I said, 'Look at



Hayley, Brittney,' and of course she couldn't. She said, 'Mom, will I ever be able to see Hayley?'"

Though she couldn't see Hayley, she could compete like her. "Britt knew that her sister was competing, and she wanted to do it, too." So Susie got Brittney her first horse, Doc, a sedate old soul who knew his way around the barrels. Though he was the perfect starter horse for Brittney, she outgrew him, and Susie started going to her old friend Jyme Beth for horses. With Jyme Beth's help, Britt moved on to Mr. Ed, who would lope, trot, and mind her. On Mr. Ed, Susie says,

Brittney became a real contender.

But however gentle and intuitive her horses were, Brittney still had to develop very special methods for barrel racing blind. "When I was little," Brittney says, "we had walkie-talkies with an earpiece. My mom would talk me through the race and tell me where to turn." As her confidence and skills grew, Brittney started riding Red. Her latest — and fastest — horse is Two Dollar Colonel (Dollar for short), a 6-year-old registered quarter horse, who stands 15.3 hands and runs like the wind. As she has gotten older and the horses have gotten faster, Brittney has

come to rely more and more on a system: Trust the horse.

"When I'm riding, I can't see where the barrels are," Brittney says. "I trust that my horse knows which barrel to go to." Like an athlete who walks the course before the race, she tries to "sight" the barrel placement before the rodeo starts. "I usually stand in the middle of the alleyway next to my horse and look through my telescope. I find the barrels and a color on them and look to a wall so I can sort of place the barrel relative to the wall. When I'm racing and I see that color, I know where I am." And she knows when Dollar goes to turn, she has to help him around the barrel, pulling him around it. Hearing her mom or Jyme Beth yell from the stands helps, too.

Though the horse-rider connection was immediate with Dollar, it will take time for the team to develop the speed and skill they'll need to make it to the NFR. Jyme Beth should know: She picked the horse for Brittney with that in mind, and she herself has been in the top 15 of the NFR. "Dollar was young and not seasoned, but I had a feeling about him for Brittney," Jyme Beth says. Even though he was young, Dollar was calm and easy down the alley, not jumpy at all or ready to run. "I said, 'Just take him and ride him

and see.'" Which Brittney did — and she knew she'd found her horse. They've been getting faster together ever since. "Dollar has really picked up on Britt," Jyme Beth says. "You know how some animals just know? It seems like he just knows."

And if the horse knows, and the trainer knows, mother Susie has the fix on Brittney, too. "When she's riding, she has control of a 1,500-pound animal," Susie says. "That helps her spirit. We believe she sees with her heart."

For Brittney, though, it's all in a day's work as a teenager. In her "Texas Couture" T-shirt and leather-embellished studded jeans, she is in many ways like any other eighth-grade girl. She likes math and Garth Brooks and wants to be a veterinary assistant or a politician. She's constantly on the phone with friends. She dances with a competitive clogging troupe. She plays snare and bass drum in the school band. Her Uncle Roger is teaching her to rope. When she goes to high school, she'll join the rodeo team. She grooms and rides Dollar every day to keep him legged up. She does chores, feeding her horse every morning and night and cleaning out his stall. And she treasures a very special gift her Aunt Becky brought back from the NFR: an

autographed poster of Charmane James that hangs above her bed.

Today Britt's going to help Jason the horseshoer while he fits Dollar with new rims and slicks. Later, she's babysitting for special-needs kids during the Bible study at church. And somewhere in there, she'll find the key to the shed where one of her cats got locked in accidentally. It's a busy life, but she's still got time to be thoughtful about what a relationship with a horse can mean.

"A horse is my best friend," Brittney says. "It's like a person I see and take care of every day. I get freedom and a friend in return." She loves it that horses try to be funny. "Like Dollar," she says, "when I give him a drink of water out of his bucket after a ride, he throws it on me — hay, too. He comes to his name. Horses like to be loved, and they try to give love back to you."

And horses give her something that the rest of her life can't. "It's the one thing I don't have to ask for help on," Britt says. "When I'm riding I feel free."

On that note, she's off to the barn, jumping a puddle of water that she feels more than sees.

Photographer Jamie Williams heard about Brittney from a friend who saw the Miracle Pets segment. The young Texan sounded like a perfect addition to Williams' project American Cowgirl, a film and book documentary on women in the West. When Williams went to Weatherford to shoot Brittney, it was a cold Texas day and Britt was in between horses. She was riding a loaner from her Aunt Becky named Hollywood. Williams had only one word for the experience of meeting and photographing Brittney: "inspiring" — just like the long-term project that has become the photographer's passion. "American Cowgirl is dedicated to honoring the lives of women who helped shape the American West and to preserving the history of stories that are vital to the American heritage," Williams says. "It not only documents famous and older women, but also the next generation." Williams knows the turf she shoots: She grew up in the Texas Panhandle. And though she calls herself a city girl, she makes her home and studio in Tucson, Arizona, where she continues to photograph the many faces of the West. Williams' photography and filmmaking can be viewed at www.thatgirlproductions.com.

