

# It's What She Does

by Diane Rice

At an age when most of her generation is already sitting back enjoying retirement, die-hard barrel champion June Holeman continues to haul to amateur rodeos and a few pro events in and around her home state of Nebraska.

In 2004, after a lifetime of regional competition, the Arcadia native decided it was time to try for the National Finals Rodeo. Just a year later, riding Sparky Impression — aka “Little Sparky” — she made it there, setting the still-standing record as competitor with the greatest number of birthdays behind her.

“I rode Little Sparky 10 years,” she says. “I still have him and he still looks beautiful and cute as can be. He was AQHA Horse of the Year in 2005 and I still hold the record of being the oldest-ever [to compete] at the NFR!”

But, reaching the NFR didn't quench her fire. “That was good, but I didn't do all that I wanted to,” she says. “I searched for another ‘Little Sparky’ but couldn't

seem to find one, so I had to start a tall colt that had a late start due to injuries. I really had given up on him, but then he seemed to get sound.” So ‘Tall Boy,’ registered as Hopes Money Boy, took June to the top again, winning the Prairie Circuit Finals average, which put her into the 2014 National Circuit Finals, where they took second.

The very next day, after hauling from the finals in a snowstorm, the pair also won the Bonus Race in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Also in 2014, June and Tall Boy qualified for RFD-TV's The American in Arlington, Texas. “I didn't help him finish his run very well,” she says with regret, “so we were just out of the top four. I needed less than 0.2 second. He ran a year and a half for me, and he won a lot!” And by “a lot,” June means they won two amateur associations and several saddles together.

June and Little Sparky at the 2005 National Finals Rodeo



June and Tall Boy winning the 2013 Cornhuskers Derby



Riding is everything to 71-year-old barrel racer June Holeman



Little Sparky, with June, makes his last run at the age of 22 on Jan. 29, 2011, at the PRCA in Denton, Nebraska

June and Tall Boy winning a go round at the 2014 BBR  
©Pixel Worx

June and Tall Boy qualifying to The American in 2014  
©Cowgirl Photography

## How It Came About

June Leach Holeman was born to Leland and Evelyn Leach on June 11, 1943, at an aunt's house south of Arcadia, Nebraska. June followed a sister, Polly Anna, 10 years her senior, and a brother, Laddie, who was seven years older than June and who taught her to ride.

"My horse riding started at the age of nine days," June says. "It had rained and the family got caught in town, so Mom had to take me along when she rode out to gather the milk cows."

Because her mother was the teacher, June started school at age 4 and graduated from high school at 16. "I rode 2 1/2-miles to school through the eighth grade, as did my sister and brother before me," she says. "We rode over steep hills that were very icy in winter, but the only accident happened when a neighbor's dog

jumped out of the trees and scared my horse, and I fell off and broke my arm."

Her horseback memories also include being dragged in a hay field at the age of 4 or 5 when her horse shied at a hole, and June fell, catching her boot in the saddle strap. "My boot finally came off, but I was so battered and swollen I didn't know my face when they got me home and I looked in the mirror!"

Also around age 4, June became locally famous for riding 10 miles into Arcadia looking for her dad one day. "I believe he made me ride that horse back home, too!" she says.

Her horseback escapades didn't dampen her passion for riding. When a neighbor several miles north held horse shows, she'd ride up to compete. She also rode in a few junior

rodeos — "I'm not even sure they had high school rodeos back then," June says.

She ran the pro rodeos at North Platte and Burwell for a few years as a local before getting her permit. "A lot of amateur rodeos in Nebraska wouldn't let you run if you had a pro card," she explains.

Meanwhile, her dad bought colts at the local horse sales and June broke them for resale within a few months. Her uncle and aunt, Pat and Louise Hiser, owned the famous Palomino Horse Ranch north of Burwell and would let June ride some of the horses into the sale ring. "Since my dad's family was from Burwell, we always took in the pro rodeo 50 miles away, and I was determined to be in it as soon as I could!" she says. Her future was sealed.

At age 4, June rode Trixie 10 miles to town looking for her father



June Leach Holeman was born in 1943 and grew up in Arcadia, Nebraska



June would ride her uncle's horses into the sale ring when she was a youngster

June on Buck, the horse that dragged her through a hay field at the age of 4

**"My horse riding started at the age of nine days."**

June's converted ambulance and horse trailer, on her way to the National Finals Rodeo with Sparky Impression, the oldest horse ever to compete at the event



## Married Life

June met her husband, Donnell, while in school in Arcadia. "He courted me on horseback," she says. "We lived 12 miles apart, so he put on a lot of miles on horseback!"

June and Donnell married in 1961 and competed at the Nebraska amateur rodeos — she running barrels, and he roping calves — while Donnell worked his "regular job" as a welder for about 20 years.

They had three children in the 1960s: Teresa, Tammy, and Donnell Jr., who now lives in Carpenter, Wyoming, where he shoes horses and competes in calf roping. "My husband watched the kids while I barrel raced and I watched the kids while he roped," June says.

As they got older, Teresa and Tammy helped break each year's new prospects for their mom. "Us girls would start the horses, and she was good at competing and winning," Teresa says.

June's winnings and the money she made selling each year's mount helped support the

family and the farm. "That was her job," says Teresa. "She didn't usually keep her horses [more than one year]."

For the past 49 years, June and Donnell have lived just one mile south of the ranch where she was raised. Donnell hauled with June for many years and also kept the ranch running while she was on the road. "My dad's been a great pillar for my mom, allowing her to pursue her life endeavors," says Teresa.

During those 49 years, the couple has experienced both triumphs and tears. In 2009, their daughter Tammy was killed in a horse-related accident, and that same year, June lost her brother, Laddie. Tammy left two boys, Justin and Jaden, then 14 and 10.

June's other daughter, Teresa McCormick, has two children as well: June's grandson Blake, 15, and granddaughter, 26-year-old Abby Ford, a technician with the Air National Guard in Lincoln, Nebraska.

"Most grandparents go around watching their grandkids' activities," she says, "but in our family, *we're* going around supporting *Grandma!*"

Just like her grandma, her mom and her aunt, Abby's heart is wrapped around horses — particularly barrel racing. In 2014, June and Abby shared the joy of victory at the Bonus Run in Lincoln, Nebraska. After training and competing on June's mare, Bubblin With Hope, aka "Bubbles," and riding her own horse as well, Abby shocked herself by placing at the top of the 1D field with Bubbles, stopping the clock at 16.43 seconds. "I didn't think I'd heard the announcer right," Abby says of her top time.

But being old school, June wasn't afraid to let Abby learn to deal with disappointment. She deftly one-upped the youngster with a time of 16.00. "Our family is very, very competitive," Abby says proudly. "Grandma came in on Tall Boy and made sure to knock everybody around!"

**... her perseverance and pure grit seem to inspire all those who know her and see her race.**



Donnie, June and Teresa, with their puppy Amigo

Donnie & June's 25th wedding anniversary



June and Donnell met while in school and were married in 1961

## A Source of Inspiration

June's success is due as much to her training skills as to her riding ability and her knack for reading a horse. And, she has instilled in her family a love for horses, rodeo and the competitive atmosphere.

"How many 71-year-olds attempt to compete at the level she's trying to?" asks Teresa, who's also a 4-H leader. "She's a natural. Where Tammy and I had to learn how to break down the steps to train a horse, Mom instinctively knows."

"It's her 'old style' of training," Abby adds. "You watch her do stuff and it's like, 'Holy cow! She can get a horse to do anything!'"

Along with June's talents, her perseverance and pure grit seem to inspire all those who know her and see her race. "Traveling with her is just such an experience," says Abby. "It's like trying to keep up with a celebrity. You go somewhere and the rodeo announcers just go nuts!"

"I attribute her toughness to her older generation," Abby adds. "She'll travel in her camper and it's like minus 5 degrees and there's no heat and she's fine, and me, I'm dying. She's getting horses ready, grooming and saddling, and I'm like, 'Let me help you,' but she doesn't take the help. She'll haul three horses by herself and do it all. When I was stationed in Afghanistan three years ago, she was competing with a broken rib. And I'd be like, 'I'm dying and I don't want to move.' When I'm struggling with something, I'll think, 'Grandma can do this, why am I being such a wimp right now?' She's just tough on so many levels. She's using a walking stick now and she was hurting when I saw her last, but she just puts on her front and does her thing. She's my motivation and my inspiration in anything and everything."

Family members admit they'd be relieved if June would hang up her spurs and conduct clinics instead of competing, but that doesn't seem to interest June much. "I've always said, every year, I'll go another five years," June says. "My back discs have deteriorated a lot in the past year or so, so I'll go as long as I can, but it probably won't be 'five more years' like it has been. So I'll just say, 'See you down the road; God bless!'"

June won all three rounds at the 1990 Kansas State Rodeo Association Finals

June took 1st place in the Open 4D 2nd Go at the 2013 BFA World Championships

©Kenneth Springer



### For The Veterans

We've been around so many years  
What would they do without us?

Who would they call old veterans  
like they always talk about us?

Some think we're past our prime -  
I've often heard it said!

Some people don't know when to quit  
and should have quit when they're ahead.

It does seem miles are getting longer;  
the horse is getting taller.

The ground is getting harder;  
the saddle's getting smaller.

A lot of friends and rodeos, too,  
have come and gone for me and you.

But next year may be the best one yet,  
so don't think now's the time to quit!

- June Holeman