

TOUGH & ORNERY BULL, OR BULL RIDER?

By Jacquie Rogers

“Keep your left leg on the left side, your right leg on the right side, and your mind in the middle,” said Dan Burnett, quoting an old bullriding adage. “You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to ride a bull, but you do have to be tough, have a high pain tolerance, be 100% focused, and totally dedicated.”

Dan knew all about it. He rode bulls and saddlebronc for sixteen years as a professional rodeo cowboy. He rode every kind of bull: spinners, high-buckers, and hookers. (Don’t get excited, a “hooker” is a bull who likes to bury his horns in your ribs.) He rode big bulls and little bulls. He rode hurt, sick, and otherwise disabled. As another saying goes, he rode anything with hair.



He won money and buckles, and he had some pretty fabulous wrecks, too. A wreck is when the cowboy is thrown off the animal (called “throwed”) and often results in severe injury, or worse, messes up his hat.

It’s all in the luck of the draw.

His rides didn’t always go as planned. Early on in his career, he was riding his bull in fine style hoping to win some money. The bull threw him, though, and stepped on him, too. His chew tobacco went halfway down his throat and cut off his air. His friends ran out, saw him gasping for air, and unbuckled his belt. By then he had swallowed his chew. When Dan was finally able to stand up, his pants fell down in front of several thousand people. Some days are just that way. He didn’t win any money, and he NEVER chewed while riding again. Even cowboys learn.

“You Gotta Have Try”

One character trait he stressed was most important is what rodeo people call “try.” No matter how rank (or docile) the animal is, how partial the judges are, how bad the weather is, how injured you are, how empty your pockets you are—you’ve got to have *try*. **Try** to stick on the rankest bull ever born—after all, your best scores come from those bulls. **Try** your best, even if the judges have their local favorite or if you told them off in the bar the night before. **Try** to make that ride and be in the money despite those broken ribs and pulled tendons. Cowboys don’t get sick pay. **Try** to get that entry money—after all your luck will change this time. **Try** to book one more rodeo this week, you can sleep when you’re eighty.

Successful cowboys are determined people. This picture shows Dan riding a bull while he had pneumonia, a



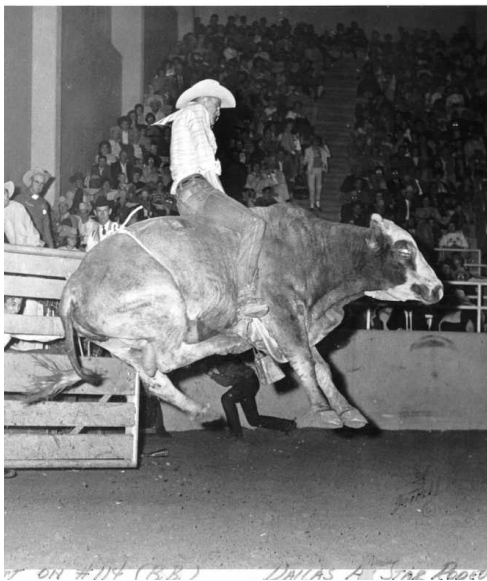
temperature of 102, and four broken ribs. He wasn't too stylish that day, but he had try. He rode that bull to the buzzer.

A Half-bubble Off Center

Some say bullriders are crazy. Dan readily concedes to the notion that no one would ride a bull unless he was nuts. He also has to be fearless and aggressive. So what, no one has ever ridden his draw the full eight seconds, and so what, the last rider who tried this bull wrecked and is in the hospital. The successful bullrider has to have the utmost confidence that he *can* and *will* ride this bull. After he gets bounced on his head, he has to believe he could have ridden that bull if he'd... and, by darn, he *will* ride the next one!

Do Your Homework

Bulls are creatures of habit, Dan says, and cowboys study them. The riders talk about the stock; they study each other's rides and remember their own last ride. Does the bull make two jumps out of the chute and then spin left? The cowboy decides how he wants to be positioned in order to maintain his balance. He uses his free arm as a counterbalance, reaching into the spin to counter the centrifugal force. Of course, if his free hand touches anything he's disqualified which means no money. Meantime the bull he's riding would like nothing better than to drill the cowboy's hat six inches into the arena dirt.



Let's say you stayed on a rank bull for eight seconds. It isn't enough, Dan says. You have to ride with style. If you asked him to give you a lesson, he'd instruct you to keep your toes pointed out, legs in, riding arm bent slightly. Keep your body over the bull and focus the hump. Keep your balance over the middle of the bull and use your free arm to do it. All this time a bull weighing anywhere from 1,200 pounds to over a ton is doing everything he can to knock you off. Eight seconds turns into eight years, then you hear the buzzer and feel money in your pocket, but you're not done yet.

The Tricky Part

You have to get off.

Sometimes the dismount isn't quite so stylish. You throw your leg over the bull's hump to hop off. Instead, the bull takes one more spin and bucks high. If you're lucky, you'll land in some nice soft dirt away from the bull's hooves. You hit the ground running. The clown takes care of the rest.

If you're not lucky, you're liable to get trampled or gored. In this case the clown will

run up and slap the bull to get its attention. He will make the bull chase him to another part of the arena so someone can run out and get you out of there.

If you're really unlucky, your hand is hung up in the bull rope. Dan's advice was to yank on the tail of the rope and it will loosen. Stay on the bull, but if you're thrown, keep your feet under you. You sure don't want to fall under those hooves. The clown runs in to free your hand. You buy him a beer later.

Protect Your Luck

Speaking of luck, there are a few things a cowboy won't do:

- ↳ Never put your hat on a bed.
- ↳ Never eat peanuts behind the chutes.
- ↳ Never spill salt. If you do, throw some over your shoulder.
- ↳ Never light three cigarettes with one match.
- ↳ Never lose your hat during a ride.

Cowboys have lucky charms, too. Dan's was his boots. Someone stole his warbag once, and his boots were in it. He and his new boots were thrown on the next ride.

Cheesburgers or T-Bones

Cowboys are the only athletes that have to pay to play. They pay an entry fee, the rodeo throws in some purse money, and the first, second, and third place winners usually get a 60-30-10 split. It's a little more complicated than that because there's usually "day money" as well. Day money is money won on a single ride, rather than on the average of two or three rides combined.

So if you don't mind pain, are in excellent physical condition, have a keen sense of balance, like to travel hundreds of miles a week, don't mind being broke every once in a while, and aren't afraid to get knocked around every now and then, bull riding is probably for you. Go for it!

*Dan Burnett rodeo'd sixteen years. He wrote **A Cowboy Never Lies** (New West Press, ISBN 0-9652375-0-8), a collection of ten hilarious stories about rodeo life. He passed on a few years back. We all miss him.*