

# TEXAS HILL COUNTRY OUTDOORS

## 8 SECONDS

By Steve Ramirez

It wasn't fear that I was feeling although it should have been. It was a rush of adrenaline that caused my right leg to involuntarily spasm so that my spur clicked against the metal shoot. The saucer sized eye of the bull watched me, waiting for an opportunity to lash back with his horns against my face. That's what I like about bulls...they are open and honest about their homicidal intentions. It's all very straightforward; you will try to ride him, and he will try to kill you. I can deal with that. As I rubbed my leather clad hand up and down the flat of my bull rope the resin began to heat and regain its stickiness. Rusty pulled my rope tight. After sliding my hand onto the handle I wrapped it twice with the flat of the rope and then placed a final "suicide loop" through my pinky finger...slid up to my rope, pointed toes out, spurs in, and gave the nod for all hell to break loose. The bull launched from the shoot his power rose up beneath me. The world became silent save for the breathing of the bull and the beating of my heart. In slow motion we moved across the arena, connected; nothing real, but the two of us. And, it was then that I first realized the absurdity of my situation.

At the buzzer I became aware of two realities; one surprising, and another humorous in a "cheating death while acting stupidly" sort of way. Much to my surprise, my first ride had been a perfect ride in every detail save one. I had spent so much time learning how to stay on the bull that I never learned how to get off of him. This takes us to the story of how I entered the ranks of American bull riders. To be fair, I was more of a "bull faller offer." I spent far more time suspended in the air just before landing face first into the soup created by water, mud, and road apples than I ever did firmly upon the back of any Toro. When you fall off a horse, people think you're clumsy. When you fall off a bull, people think you're brave. Apparently, I was very "brave."

I got the bright idea of becoming a bull rider when I attended a rodeo in 1979 in which the great Larry Mahan was performing an exhibition ride. He came out of the shoot on the back of a big black saddle bronc and rode him out into the middle of the arena like it was easy and he jumped off landing on his feet with a smile. As he walked to the fence line someone handed him a microphone and a beer. It was all pretty amazing until he began to sing "Mamas don't let your baby grow up to be cowboys." He should have let it go at the dismount.

In rodeo saddle bronc is a classic "rough stock" event reminiscent of the early days of the sport when ranch cowboys competed against each other in the skills of their trade.

Bareback bronc riding takes a different and harder approach where the cowboy is connected to the horse by a handle and a prayer. Bulls are just plain nasty. They jump and kick and spin and hook and let me tell you once you take your seat on one you get a new appreciation for their power and the impermanence of life. I've tried meditation for years and it has its place but nothing focuses your attention like a ton of angry beef that wants you dead.

When the bulls came out the cowboys began to pile up. One after another the bulls had their way and vaqueros left on foot or by stretcher. It's not usually that way but that day...the bulls were winning. And that's when it happened. A friend sitting next to me knew my penchant for a challenge. He turned to me and said four life changing words. "Could you do that?" I felt a twinge of fear fill my chest. That wouldn't do.

Rodeo and Texas just go together like chili and beer. Like our great nation state, rodeo has its roots in the American west and south of the border. Beside the rough stock events there is steer wrestling, calf roping, and every guys favorite...barrel racing. Each event is steeped in history and tradition. The San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo, February 2-21, 2010 is one of the biggest and it's right in our neighborhood. The "Cowboy Capital" of Bandera opens the shoots October 22-24<sup>th</sup> and Kendall County's rodeo is during the Labor Day weekend. Kerr County gets riding October 22<sup>nd</sup>-24<sup>th</sup>. If you live in the Texas Hill Country, you can find a rodeo faster than you can say pass the brisket.

And now we return to that moment when the buzzer sounded and I realized that I didn't know how to get off the freight train that I had strapped myself to just eight long seconds prior. I like to tell you that a voice spoke to me like some cowboy spirit of the past. "Use the force Steve." But the truth is all I could hear was the grunting of the bull and the long silence. And then...I pulled the rope free and let the power of the bull throw me upward...end over end like an Olympic gymnast until I landed on my feet as if it were easy. When I got to the fence line no one handed me a beer and the microphone was not forthcoming. You see...the singing came later. The other thing my trainer had neglected to teach me was that real bulls are a lot wider than the machine on which I trained. When the adrenaline wore off I figured out....I should have stretched. X

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