

THE DURABLE

Past president of the Rodeo Cowboy's Association before it became the PRCA and three times World Champion Steer Wrestler, Harley May grew up quickly on a ranch twelve miles south of Deming, New Mexico during the drouth of the thirties. At eight years of age, he could still count the number of times he had ever seen it rain. The hardships of ranch life mounted until his mother left and moved his sister and two small brothers to town, leaving Harley to help at the ranch.

By the following summer, the grip of the unending drouth had driven Edgar L. May to sell the herd to government agents as a final desperate measure to save the land. Innocently, Harley helped gather the cattle, drove them to a box canyon, and watched in horror while the men loaded rifles under the steel-set jaw of his father and shot the cows and calves where they stood.

During these same depressing, back-breaking years, Harley was also responsible occasionally for trailing bucking horses to various rodeos for stock contractor Johnny Mullins, who leased pasture at the May Ranch. Mullins was a dandy — black suit, bow tie, pants stuffed in the top of shining stovepipe boots, a gold watch chain across his middle, a big-brimmed, high crowned hat and a gold tooth just to the left of an expensive cigar clenched in a rubber holder. Mullins loved kids, all kids, and always had extra change for hot dogs, soda pop or a young cowboy to see the sights on.

One of the events at the Johnny Mullins' Rodeos was a kids' stake race. Mullins would line them up, ten at a time, to race the length of the arena on horseback, round a stake, back to the other end of the arena around a second stake, for two laps. The winners of each race would finally race each other for a ten-dollar bill from Johnny's own pocket.

BY BARNEY NELSON

Harley May makes a long jump at the Salinas (California) Rodeo in 1958.

PHOTO BY DEVERE HELFRICH



HARLEY MAY



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While serving in World War II as an Air Corps B29 radio operator, Harley practiced his bulldogging technique even while in uniform.

Harley's pony, Muggins, is still remembered by old-time stake race fans in southern New Mexico. The little horse's speed, plus the quick timing of the boy who was nearly always horseback, kept them several lengths in the lead at every race.

So, during Harley May's formative years, ranch life was tedious, hard, hot and depressing; the rodeos were exciting, profitable and a never-never land for the sad-eyed little cowboy. His father was dusty, tired, hot-tempered and demanding, while Johnny was generous, friendly, patient and full of compliments. Rodeo was a good life.

As the years wore on, Harley's love affair with the rodeo arena deepened. From the stake race, he branched out gradually into steer riding and calf roping.

One hot, dusty afternoon at a Deming, New Mexico local gathering, Harley and another teenager, Leedru Eby, each decided to add another event to their increasing repertoire. Leedru rode his first saddle bronc, and Harley May bulldogged his first steer. Harley's mind blanked just out of the chute, but when daylight and sound returned, he had the steer down flat only a few feet from where he started, with

Harley May begins his winning ways in rodeo by taking the all-around championship in the 1938 El-Paso Herald Post Kid's Rodeo.



The young man from Deming, New Mexico got his big break as substitute for the Sul Ross team's bulldogger in the first NIRA competition.

everyone cheering and telling him he was a natural.

Being seventeen and long on confidence, Harley believed them immediately. Hundreds of successive wrecks followed, one of which, while he served Uncle Sam in World War II, tore his clothes so badly a buddy had to fetch a new uniform before he could return to the base. But Harley May believed he was a natural, and occasionally, when Lady Luck stepped in and the young cowboy made a good run, his belief was reinforced.

After Harley's return from the war, Bill Rush, a locally successful RCA steer wrestler, was watching when Harley stood up and threw his steer after being run over by both his hazer and the flagman. Rush was so impressed that he invited the obviously tough cowboy to travel with him that summer.

Harley couldn't believe his ears and, in fact, didn't ask his father's permission because he thought Rush would not really show to pick him up. A few weeks later, when the big convertible and matching trailer pulled up next to a field he was plowing, and the immaculately dressed Rush stepped out, Harley's doorway to the RCA seemed to be opening. His father forbade him to go, but Harley left, confident in his ability and wanting to see how it would feel to drive into Silver City with the top down on that convertible and Bill Rush's diamond stickpin shining in the sun.

At the Silver City rodeo, Harley placed in the



The 1949-50 Sul Ross State College rodeo team members from left are Buster Lindley, Harley May, Charles Hall, Hank Finger, Gene Newman, Bob Hull and faculty sponsor Everett Turner.

steer wrestling and pocketed four hundred dollars. The neon lights never before burned so brightly while the fancy car toured the streets of Silver City. But the celebrating and night life took its toll, and a war-incurred malaria relapse brought the now big and getting bigger steer wrestler to his knees. Several hundred miles later, a thin, tired, humbled Harley returned to the ranch, his four hundred dollars long gone.

With his father's blessing, he started college that fall at New Mexico A & M to study animal husbandry and become an even better ranch cowboy. Harley wasn't happy. After a year and a half of college, he again felt the pull of the rodeo circuit. He'd been placing regularly at local rodeos, and when the first major rodeo of the year rolled around, Harley was ready to try his luck with the big apple.

Denver is considered by cowboys to be the testing ground of the year. The man who wins Denver has to be reckoned with. He would immediately be in the lead for the National RCA Standings, and just the "Rocky Mountain high" gained from winning that first big rodeo of the year was usually enough to keep up the cowboy's momentum for several more rodeos. Not placing at Denver seemed to have the reverse effect.

"Got a card, kid? That'll be fifteen dollars, sign here, your number is 354. Next?" said Earl Lindsey, secretary of the RCA. During the Grand Entry, Harley was wide-eyed from looking at the people packed to the top of the old

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Denver Coliseum and let his horse get too close to the horse in front of him. Calf roper Chuck Shepherd spun in the saddle, looked down at the horseshoe knocked loose by the green, star-struck Harley, and spat, "You damn kids, looks like you'd know to look where you're going."

No one knew Harley May or had ever heard of him when he arrived in Denver, Colorado; nor did they when he left that year. His borrowed horse had never seen so many people and horses inside a building. The horse blew up. Embarrassingly, the rodeo clown, George Mills, finally grabbed the bridle and pushed Harley and the horse into the box so the rodeo could continue. Times so far down the list they weren't even noticed, plus bucking off his rough stock were enough to send him back to college, vowing to give up rodeo once and for all.

This time, fatefully, he picked little Sul Ross College in the far southwest mountains of Texas. Here college rodeo was a new sport, and the campus was composed mainly of ranch kids, rodeo hands, or those who wished they were.

When the Sul Ross rodeo team's bulldogger couldn't make it to college rodeo's first nationwide competition in 1949, the rodeo coach, Everett Turner, asked Harley if he would take his place. He couldn't resist.

At San Francisco, Harley drew the top off the bucking stock and walked away with All-Around Cowboy of the World of College Rodeo. Overnight, Harley May was a household word in the dorm rooms of college cowboys and cowgirls. Being a war veteran, older than most students, taller than most, and with his deeply rooted belief in the good life of rodeo, he was the next natural choice for president of the fledgling National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association.

As second president of the NIRA, he and fellow student Jack Ruttler edited and designed a magazine, *The Riggin'*, to promote and publicize college rodeo. Two more national all-around cowboy titles followed and Harley gave the NIRA the roots and publicity it needed to flourish. But it still wasn't the big time; it was only college, and even here he wasn't winning any steer wrestling. Gradually, the steer wrestling became an obsession. Hadn't people told him all along that he was a natural born steer wrestler?

He practiced constantly. A rancher at nearby Ft. Davis, Jim Espy, made him try to catch steers on a line Espy would draw in the dirt. This was a turning point. No longer did Harley blank out; he saw every move his horse, his hazer and the steer made. He saw every clod of dirt. He knew every move he had to make and how long it took.



FOXIE PHOTO

Known as "Ladder" and just about the game's tallest bulldogger, Harley has a unique style of getting down very low as shown here bulldogging at Salinas, California in 1973.

He learned that dirt on his boots could make a tenth of a second's difference, that the height of his boot heel changed his timing, that the slightest misdirection of his horse's head when leaving the box threw off the whole run, and that every horse gave a different approach.

He discovered he was too light for the size of his frame on the huge "Florida Brahmer" cattle being used for steer wrestling during those years and designed a vest with pockets to hold Prince Albert tobacco cans full of lead shot. After ten years of lesson-learning wrecks and grinding practice sessions, Harley May was indeed becoming a natural.

After college graduation, Harley had to make a decision: the May ranch or the rodeo circuit. Denver would give him the answer. He would try once more.

This time a few people knew of him; they had heard of the college hotshot and were mildly curious. They heard he bulldogged "wrong" and leaned forward in the saddle, going deeper into the well between the steer and horse and letting the horse carry his momentum, with his feet out in front of the steer.



JAMES CATHEY PHOTO



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Harley captures his first national championship in 1952 as World's Champion Bulldogger at the Denver Coliseum. He won the title again in 1956 and in 1965, at the age of thirty-nine.

In his long career, May has won every major PRCA rodeo and won or placed in every event. Here he rides saddle bronc in the 1951 Fort Worth Rodeo finals.

At the end of Denver's final go-round, Steve Heacock was in the lead for the steer wrestling. Harley May was the only cowboy left to compete. He had to throw his steer in an impossible 3.9 seconds to win, faster than any of the professional cowboys had been able to throw these big steers throughout the rodeo.

A light, cold fog was coming down around the high Denver Coliseum. Many cowboys were already congratulating Heacock, and only one or two were still watching. Harley May drew a deep breath. He knew his boots were clean, his concentration intense. He had talked to the cowboy who'd dogged this steer in a previous performance and knew exactly how it would run. He corrected his horse's head a half-inch, made sure the horse was ready to break on his left lead, nodded for the gate to open, and planted his steer in 3.7 with two long tenths-of-a-second to spare.

This time it was different. He'd just won enough money to pay off the new Buick he'd bought a few weeks earlier. Vern Elliot, the stock contractor, walked up and shook his hand and said he believed that was the most money he'd

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After being named all-around cowboy at Texas A&M, Harley is presented a horse by King Ranch owner Belton Kleberg.

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The three May brothers, Ross, Clyde and Harley, while attending Sul Ross State College. Ross joined Harley as a member of the 1950 NIRA championship team.



PHOTO BY WALT WIGGINS

ever seen anyone win on one steer. Everyone spoke to him. They all called Harley by name and dropped by his horse trailer as he was loading up to leave, asking him where he was headed and who he might be traveling with. A few weeks later, Harley May found himself traveling with the great Bill Linderman who, only a month ago, Harley wouldn't have had the nerve to speak to unless answering a direct question.

Harley May won Denver and the World that year, 1952. From then on, his RCA career became breathtaking. He was elected steer wrestling director of the RCA in 1953, '54 and '55; then vice-president in '56 and president of the prestigious Rodeo Cowboy's Association in 1957, '58, '59 and '61. Today he serves on the Rodeo Advisory Commission, giving sage advice to new, young officers.

Throughout his career, he won every major RCA rodeo and won or placed deeply in every event. He placed at the National Finals Rodeo six years in a row in fifth place or above.

In 1954 Harley rode the famous rodeo train from Dublin, New York to Boston, partying with the "sponsor girls" who were representing various western wear companies, horse product firms, and various other rodeo-related businesses. Cowboys loaded their horses in box cars following the Madison Square Garden Rodeo and found a seat on the train to travel to the eastern rodeos without worry of traffic and small, congested roads.

After the foul-smelling pens cramped under the Garden arena and the choking atmosphere of New York, where the cowboys hardly dared venture away from the protection of the Belvedere Hotel, the rodeo train was a time for horses and men to breathe fresh air and unwind. One year, a horse jumped off the train and killed itself, maybe never wanting to return to New York again.

Harley May thrived on pressure. Down on his luck in 1955, he wrote his first hot check to the RCA, grounds for blacklisting in the organization he'd worked so hard to become a part of. The check paid his entry fees into the Elko, Nevada rodeo.

To kill time before the rodeo, he entered a free black-out bingo game and won a Carson City silver dollar. Only a few had ever been minted, and the dealer told him to hang on to it — it was good luck.

Throughout the afternoon, he won several more dollars, enough for supper. That weekend he also wrote hot checks at Reno and Klamath Falls rodeos, but he also won the all-around at both, and the steer wrestling at the next rodeo, and the next — easily covering his checks by several thousand dollars. The RCA would never know what he'd almost done out of desperation, like so many other cowboys on the road, out of money and out of luck.

When the RCA decided to have a year-end National Finals Rodeo in 1959 in Dallas, Texas, Harley May was elected chairman. It was his expertise that helped combine stock contractors, sponsors, judges, clowns, announcers, awards and record-keeping into one of the most successful undertakings ever begun by the RCA.

During 1956-61, he took on three young cowboys trying to learn the rodeo business. They worked for him, hauling and taking care of his horses while Harley flew. In years to come, these boys — Bill Martinelli, Bob Eidson, and Jim Charles — would go on to make very respectable names for themselves, both in the rodeo arena and in promotion of the sport.

Harley May knows the rules; many of them he helped make. He understands the viewpoint of the stock contractor, the rodeo committee, the spectators and the competitors in every event. He has met with United States presidents, governors, humane society committees. He has fought for the sport in court and in bars. He lost many good women and a few bad ones to his mistress rodeo. He always had time to talk to a fan, explain rodeo, give an autograph.

In 1963, some of his employees at Harley May's Sullivan Creek Bar and Restaurant in Sonora, California were arguing over which one of them would win the bull riding at the local

As chairman of the first National Finals Rodeo Commission in 1959, Harley May presents President Dwight Eisenhower an honorary gold membership card from the Rodeo Cowboys Association. He is joined by NFR promoter John Van Cronkhite, left, and rodeo great Jim Shoulders.



COURTESY PROFESSIONAL RODEO COWBOYS ASSOCIATION

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Harley takes time out from his schedule of fifty-eight rodeos in 1978 to attend the *Rancheros Vistadores Trail Ride, Santa Ynez, California.*

rodeo. Harley said, "Well, you all go ahead and get in it, but I'm going to win the bull riding." They laughed, he entered, and he won.

In 1964 he decided to get a job. He'd lost the Sonora restaurant through employment of the wrong manager. He was tired of the hectic rodeo life and wanted out. He remembered friends who said, "If you ever decide to quit running around to rodeos, look me up. I need a man like you in my company." But that was when he was winning; now sliding, he looked them up. They fumbled nervously with papers and cleared their throats. He walked out.

He bummed around Hollywood, taking stunt parts doubling for Jack Lord and serving as technical advisor in the "Stony Burke" series to keep food on the restaurant table. He drank too much; he was out of shape.

John W. Jones, a fellow steer wrestler and friend, had a new plane. Harley had always loved to fly. John W. wanted to make a serious run at the World — would Harley fly him? Harley was broke, the pressure was on. A few months later, Harley collected his third World

May is bucked off of Quicksilver at Ellensburg, Washington in 1964. Harley is actually one of the toughest bronc riders to get on the ground in the business and is emerging as the all-time great bulldogger.

Champion RCA Steer Wrestler's buckle.

This time, he got out while he was on top and started his own real estate business selling ranches in southern California. He rodeoed now for a vacation and, able to stay off the highway, began enjoying it once more. In 1971, seven years later, almost completely out of the rodeo business, he entered the prestigious Salinas, California rodeo and, at forty-five, set a new arena record on four head of steers. He is a natural.

In 1974, at forty-seven, he won Calgary, the only big rodeo that had eluded him through the years.

Last year, promoting rodeo, he instructed steer wrestling schools throughout Australia, made friends, and was invited with expenses paid to compete at the Sydney Rodeo. With the money won there, he ended the year thirteenth in the Australian National Standings in calf roping and brought home an additional \$1300 in steer wrestling prize money.

Currently, at age fifty-three, when most men are ready to retire from a desk job, Harley May is still jumping off the back of a horse at forty miles per hour onto the horns of a steer. His friends tell him jokingly he is too old, but the PRCA's newspaper calls him "timeless." During a sixty-day period, he entered fifty-eight rodeos. He narrowly missed making the National Finals, winning over \$14,000. But when the pressure is on, the natural born steer wrestler is in a class of his own — at any age, on any cattle, on any horse. Harley May is a legend.

A free-lance writer with a degree in English from Sul Ross State University, Barney Nelson is currently at work on a book-length biography of Harley May which she hopes to complete this fall. She has a great interest in the history of college rodeo and was instrumental in the formation of the College Rodeo Hall of Fame in Alpine, Texas. Barney and her husband live on the 06 Ranch in the Davis Mountains near Alpine.

