

Discipline helps rodeo star recover

Berglund, M. (2009, February 19). Discipline helps rodeo star recover. *The Star News - News*, pp. 9.

Even before he could say the word, Dino Loukas knew discipline was the key to recovery from a traumatic brain injury. "The therapist said, 'how do you win on the rodeo circuit.' I couldn't even say the word yet. So I wrote it down - discipline. It's the same thing in baseball, rodeo, construction or speech, it is discipline." Loukas was severely injured June 2, 2006 while competing in steer wrestling at the North Central Rodeo in Taylor County. The accident took a 16-inch piece of his skull, and for a time his ability to walk and talk. It left his determination intact. "I wore a helmet 24 hours, seven days a week anytime I went outside for the first 16 months. It was a big punch to my ego," Loukas said. "Every day must be a goal. Tomorrow you must say a sound. Every day must have goals and for me that means speech sounds."

While his days of competing for rodeo championships may be over, a lifetime of goals remains for the 31-year-old Greek-American cowboy who calls the Wrigleyville neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois home. "Number one, I want to speak cleaner ... clearly," Loukas said as he pauses to say the correct word. "Number two, I want to write a book about my injury and my recovery. I want the same American things - to make a family, make money and be an American. Why the book? "It was a negative moment. I want to make it a positive moment. How positive can I make it in my whole life?" he said.

An injury as severe as the one Loukas suffered is rare in steer wrestling. Before that day, his list included a chipped tooth and stitches. "I've had maybe one day off in my whole life," Loukas said.

"I never thought I was invincible, but I never thought a horse would kick my head," Loukas said. "I thought I could break an arm or leg, but I never thought about having the severity of my injury. Guys get hurt, but not in my event. Of course, it is rodeo."

After the injury, Loukas was transported from Memorial Health Center in Medford to St. Joseph's Hospital in Marshfield.

"I opened my eyes June 17. When I opened my eyes, I was still in a coma. My eyes were open, but I couldn't understand what was going on," Loukas said. "The first time I hugged my family was two days later."

Loukas still does not remember what went wrong to cause his accident. He started going to therapy on July 15. He still has trouble with the word, so he writes out 'status' to explain the report he saw there. "I saw my name on a status report. It said

rodeo injury. I said, 'what?' I had no idea. I knew I was in rehab, but I didn't know why. I knew it was some kind of accident."

Loukas underwent speech, physical and occupational therapy. "I did not walk," he said. "My mom said if you want to go home, you can't take the walker home. On August 1 I walked and a week later I was home."

Loukas weighed 200 pounds before the accident, but he dropped to 160 in the following months. He has returned to trainer he worked out with before the accident and looks solid again.

Loukas was moved from St. Joseph's Hospital in Marshfield to Rush Memorial in Chicago on June 18. He moved to a rehabilitation center July 1 and did not return home until August 10.

Loukas was taking 22 hours of speech therapy per week after the accident and still works six hours per week with Northwestern University and two more hours at home with a private therapist. "My speech therapists are like my angels," he said. "When I lost my speech, I lost everything 100 percent."

Speech is an ability we often take for granted. It is a human skill most learn about the time they toddle around. Loukas has an adult vocabulary, the area most noticeable is the pause he takes when he wants to make sure you will understand his message.

"Any student who thinks they want to be a therapist should understand, when a patient moves an ability level, the patient wants to go back to their own level."

"Right now I am 2-1/2 years into my recovery. My personal goal is to make it about four years. I'll work my ass off until I am done," Loukas said. "In rodeo, in baseball, in football, I was very focused like I am with my speech. I'm very focused now to get a clear speech."

Even in Chicago, a close look says rodeo is still part of his life. He wears his belt buckle and boots and his preferred vehicle is a F-350 pickup. "I still love rodeo," he said. "The last time I saw a rodeo was last year in Las Vegas. It was nice to see the steer wrestling I competed against."

"The hardest part now is knowing that whatever I used to put into the rodeo, it gave it back. If I worked my ass off, I won. Now physically and mentally I won't do it."

Loukas returned to Taylor County last July to visit the site of the injury. "I went to the site just to see what happened and see if I had any feelings about it," he said. He plans to return in June to take in the rodeo. The return trip also reunited him with Dr. Christopher McKay, the neurosurgeon who operated on him in Marshfield.

"My mom said he saved my life," he said. "One thing he said that my other neurosurgeons never said was 'yes, it is a traumatic brain injury, but I don't know what will happen.' The others said he might never walk or he might not talk again. He said I don't know, it is a brain injury. I say thank you to Dr. McKay every day. He saved my life. His hospital was awesome."

Loukas continues to work in the family real estate and construction businesses in Chicago. He manages apartments and retail properties. Prior to the injury, he was managing four construction jobs, including one new construction. "We're all Greek. Being Greek, you do everything with the family," he said.

Loukas got his start in the rodeo life with the family connection to Colorado. His mother was born and raised on a sheep ranch and his Colorado family members are all ranchers. "Love the rodeo and the life on the ranch. I worked on the ranch from the age I could work and helped my uncle," Loukas said. "My uncle was not in rodeo, but the whole community [Craig, Colo.] is a rodeo town and the people living there all befriended me."

Loukas was a business major at Colorado State University and joined the CSU rodeo club. "I started in bulldogging and made it my goal to be good in steer wrestling," he said. Loukas had his first PRCA rodeo in 2000 and moved to Chicago in 2002. He won the Great Lakes Rodeo Circuit in 2005. "The guy who I was training with lives 70 miles south. I boarded my horses at his dad's. He has a rodeo arena to practice in and we practiced one or two times a week," Loukas said.

Loukas has returned to the ranch many times since the accident. Wearing a helmet, rode his horse for the first time in September. The Loukas family has a strong athletic record. His cousin Christina was a member of the United States Olympic diving team in 2008 while another cousin, Alex, is a quarterback for Stanford University. His father, Anthony, played football at the University of Wisconsin while his uncle George played at Southern Illinois and uncle Angelo played at Northwestern University and later in the National Football League.