

# OUT COLD

A split-second impact changed Dino Loukas' life and prospects, but not his character

Already unconscious as he fell to the ground, above, Dino Loukas sustained a severe traumatic brain injury in a June 2006 steer wrestling accident in Medford, Wis.

—Marty Weller photo

BY ANNE CHRISTENSEN

**H**e was so *fast*," Dino Loukas says of Charlie, the horse who, in 2006, ended both his steer wrestling career and his intense, yet freewheeling life as a cowboy working his way up to the Wrangler ProRodeo Tour. His voice is 60 percent admiration, 40 percent nostalgia, zero percent animosity or regret.

After graduating from Colorado State University in 2000 and returning to his hometown of Chicago, Loukas had competed in a different rodeo association, where his horse, Hoss, picked up some bad habits. In 2004, when Loukas returned to the PRCA to compete in the Great Lakes Circuit, Hoss took a while to relearn how to score – to stand motionless in the box until signaled to go.

Since Hoss wasn't ready, Loukas rode Charlie, who belonged to traveling partners

Noel and Jim Strahan. He knew the horse had an attitude, but he wanted speed, and Charlie could deliver.

"He was *so fast*," Loukas says again amiably, still respectful of the horse's athletic ability. "But he had a screw loose. He had never kicked anyone, but if he was mad, he would flip over in the box or (deliberately) break the barrier."

But on June 2, 2006, Charlie broke more than a barrier. Apparently, he broke Loukas' skull.

## "Face down in the dirt"

The North Central Rodeo in Medford, Wis., was offering more than \$83,000 in prize money that weekend. The crowd had reason to be fired up – eight bareback riders had scored higher than 82 points, and steer wrestling was well under way.

Loukas and Charlie got out a fraction of a second late, a little off the barrier, but they flew down the arena. After Loukas made his jump to the steer, he said, Charlie took one step to the right and landed a kick with his steel horseshoe



Stitches outlined the large flap of skull that neurosurgeon Christopher MacKay of St. Joseph's Hospital in Marshfield, Wis., lifted just three hours after Dino Loukas' steer wrestling accident so that his brain could continue to swell without causing additional injury.

—Georgia Loukas photo

to the cowboy's left temple.

Loukas cannot remember the run, but Joe Bob Locke, one of the judges that day, remembers a great deal. It was a nice June evening, he says, twilight, with perhaps a couple thousand fans in the stands.

"That steer really ran hard," Locke said. "They were almost three-quarters of the way down the arena, but it looked like he was going to make a good catch. Then he didn't get locked up on the steer well enough, and the next thing you knew, the steer ran away and Dino landed face down in the dirt.

"I knew he was knocked out before he hit the ground, like when a boxer gets knocked out standing up, because he didn't try to help himself as he fell," Locke said. "No one actually saw the horse kick him, because they were running so fast and so hard, and it happened so quickly, but everyone knows that's what happened."

After 17 days in a coma, Loukas awoke. He remembered nothing about the accident and could not speak a word. The impact, landing squarely outside the left frontal lobe of his brain, had severely damaged his speech center. Even six weeks later, he could not understand what was going on around him.

"My brain was not ready to understand that I had been in a rodeo accident," Loukas said. He had suffered an epidural hematoma and one of the most serious kinds of traumatic brain injury, a depressed skull fracture – an injury which nearly always results in permanent damage or death, as was the case for Brent Thurman, who died after being stepped on by a bull at the 1994 Wrangler National Finals Rodeo.

Doctors told Loukas only five of 1,000 people with his degree of injury ever walk again. But Loukas is an athlete; he played defensive end on his high school football team and catcher on local Park District baseball teams, then took up rodeo in college. He had the skills and attitude to meet this unexpected challenge – and the family support.

Team sports teach an athlete to set a common goal and to have respect for others, Loukas said, while his chosen individual sport, steer wrestling, added focus and discipline. He has relied on all those tools during his recovery.

"I've always had a plan," Loukas added. "I wanted so badly to be a bulldogger, and I got it. I wanted to go to the (Dodge) National Circuit Finals Rodeo, and I did. I wanted to be on the (Wrangler) Tour, and I was very disciplined about trying to get there.

"Now, after my accident, I am very disciplined, too. For physical therapy, I started at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, and they are the best in the world. I (still) work out three or four times a week to build muscle mass, and I usually go every day to my grad student speech therapists at Northwestern University – they are awesome."

## The race

Nearly four years later, Loukas stretched out before a 5K race in Fort Collins, home of CSU, where his rodeo career began.

The March 28, 2010, run was a fundraiser for the Shared Journeys Brain Injury Foundation, which works to provide residential and rehabilitation programs to people with acquired brain injuries. For Loukas, it was another step in his own journey – a personal accomplishment – and the beginning of his effort to support others with brain injuries.

A six-footer who has worked his way back up from his "coma weight" of 160 pounds to his rodeo weight of 195, Loukas walks with a gait so normal that you wouldn't notice anything amiss if you passed him on the sidewalk. His CSU cap almost completely hides the remaining shallow concavity in his skull. He's wearing his 2005 Great Lakes Circuit Finals Rodeo t-shirt.

His grin is the only thing about him that stands out in the crowd assembled at the starting line.

"He's exactly the same guy as he was before his accident," says Tom Baker, his best friend since college who is running with him today. "For sure, he's just as goofy. He just can't talk quite as well as he used to."

That's true, but Loukas is not self-conscious. Mentally, he's in good shape – intelligent, organized, ranging comfortably from practical to philosophical – although easily distracted when tired. His inflection is expressive. He doesn't get frustrated or embarrassed when listeners miss a bit – he repeats, rephrases, perhaps even borrows a pen and paper to write down a word that escapes him. The letters C, P and B, in particular, still cause him problems. It's as though they get stuck right here, he says, pointing between his front teeth and his lips.

But that doesn't matter today. He and Baker plug in their headphones, stretch out a bit, join the jostling crowd in the parking lot where the race will begin, and listen to instructions. They take off, expecting to run the course in about 24 minutes, which is what Loukas has been doing in training. But the Colorado altitude takes its toll, and Loukas and Baker huff in at 34 minutes, in the middle of the pack.

After the race, Loukas is tired; his arms move more stiffly, and his speech is more halting. But he is satisfied.

"That's my last race," he says to Baker. "I am not a runner."



Dino Loukas, left, and friend Tom Baker cross the finish line of the 5K they ran last month in Fort Collins, Colo., to support the Shared Journeys Brain Injury Foundation.

—PRCA ProRodeo photo by Anne Christensen

"No, you never were," answers Baker. They laugh at this inside joke from their six years as roommates.

Returning to race headquarters, Loukas bypasses the pizza and doughnuts, grabbing eight clementines and a cup of coffee to go with his Gatorade. He recalls how he, a Greek-American born into an athletic family and raised in urban Chicago just three blocks north of Wrigley Field, got into rodeo – and how he departed so abruptly from the arena.

## "Something safer than bull riding"

"My mother was born on a sheep ranch near Meeker, Colo., and we visited in the summers," Loukas says. "In high school and college, when I was able to help, I worked with my uncle, Tom Kourlis, on our place, the Harry Kourlis Ranch. My uncle didn't like rodeo, but I tried it a little in Craig and Steamboat Springs, and that's where I won my first buckle.

"I moved sheep and cattle, leveled roads on the ranch, checked camps – I was learning to manage the ranch, and I hoped to do that some day. I went to CSU and took animal science classes, and a friend there named John Warren, who was a bull rider, showed me some videos. I thought, 'Oh my God, that is so cool.'

"So I went with him to the CSU rodeo arena. I sat on my first bull – the rodeo adviser there, Dr. Russell Anthony, tried to scare me with his name, Widowmaker – and I nodded my head. It

## SPECIAL REPORT

was one jump and out. So I said to myself, 'Let's find something safer than bull riding.'

"The bulldoggers on the CSU team told me I was too big to be a bull rider anyway and that I should try bulldogging instead, so I started practicing with them. It was so good – like football, you get dirty, and it's a full-body event, (so) you get to use all your muscles and a lot of different skills.

"At my first college rodeo, in Sheridan (Wyo.), riding Brad Kreikemeier's horse, I got my first check, and that started my love for rodeo. I competed for CSU for three years and was president of the rodeo club. Todd Suhn was living near Denver then, and he became my mentor."

After graduating with a business degree, Loukas returned to Chicago to work in his father's real estate development company, but he missed the rodeo arena and the camaraderie of the bulldoggers' informal fraternity. He rounded up some cowboys to travel with and won a check at his first PRCA rodeo, in Marion, Wis. In 2004, he tied for first in Galena, Ill., winning \$951, and finished the year eighth in the Great Lakes Circuit with \$8,137.

The following year was highlighted by a win in West Allis, Wis., a \$1,033 paycheck in Stanley, Wis., and more victories in Charlotte, Mich., and Waterloo, Iowa – all of which contributed to his No. 1 ranking among Great Lakes Circuit bulldoggers in 2005 and sent him to Pocatello for the Dodge National Circuit Finals Rodeo. He finished 95<sup>th</sup> in the world among PRCA steer wrestlers that year.

Loukas' 2006 PRCA season got rolling with a tie for the win at Millington, Tenn., in May, and he was ranked eighth in his circuit at the time of his accident. In less than two years, he had earned \$24,681 in the arena, and he was determined to join the ranks of career cowboys chasing glory in the PRCA's Wrangler ProRodeo Tour.

### Breaking through brick walls

Instead, Loukas presses on through today's 5K race, through his days, weeks and years of physical and speech therapy, through reimagining his future. He's writing a book, tentatively titled *Chicago Cowboy*. He wants to start his own foundation, possibly to help cowboys with brain injuries. He wants to inspire others.

Loukas doesn't shy away from discussing the risks inherent in the sport he still loves.

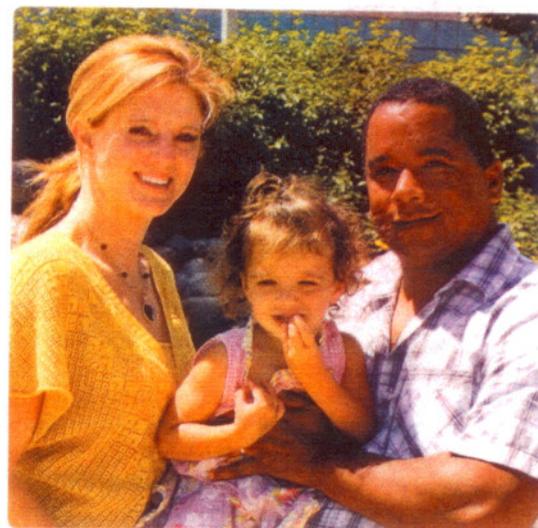
"Don't be sad about yourself, and don't call your mom to hug you if you get hurt," he wants to tell other cowboys. "Get your ass on a bull or a bulldogging horse, do it hard and do it right, or you'll never get back that chance.

"With focus, discipline and good family support, you can do whatever you want to do. Discipline is the most important thing you need. I've had a bumpy road from my accident to now, but I take it as it comes and I hit it – I find a way to break through the brick walls."



Cody Jessee owns a monument and stone-cutting business, Jessee Monuments, in Prineville, Ore., near where he and wife Stephanie live with their daughters, Savannah and Sidney.

—Photo courtesy of Cody Jessee



Mary, Jada and Lee Akin visited the ProRodeo Hall of Fame in July 2008; his recovery from traumatic brain injury continues.

—PRCA ProRodeo photo by Brenda Fuchs

## UPDATE: OTHER PRCA COWBOYS WHO HAVE SUSTAINED TBIS

### CODY JESSEE: when one door closes, another opens

Cody Jessee retired from the arena in June 2004 after taking lumps on the head during many years of competing in both bull riding and bareback riding since high school. But after 10 concussions in 2½ years, four of which rendered him unconscious, doctors warned him of accumulating damage.

"If I was going to do it all again, I'd do it the same way," said Jessee, the 2003 bareback riding reserve world champion. "I'd done my best while I had the opportunity, but it was time to stop taking a chance on brain damage. By then, I was married and had a kid on the way. When you're a competitor, it's hard to sit at home, but you have to take care of yourself. Things happen for a reason, and God said it was time."

Jessee still works out at least three times a week and has no concussion symptoms today.

### LEE AKIN: still continuing to improve, with a "great outlook"

Bull rider Lee Akin sustained a severe injury to his left frontal lobe when a bull bucked him off and then stepped on his head March 8, 2007.

After multiple brain surgeries and months of rehabilitation, Akin now walks and talks, sings with his daughter, Jada, and prays with wife Mary. Occasionally, he hits the rodeo road or the gym with former

traveling partner Corey Navarre, who says Akin is doing well.

"He still has a little trouble with his speech – he can't come up with the right word sometimes," Navarre said. "But he gets around really well, takes care of their little girl, and has a great outlook. He's happy-go-lucky and thankful for his family."

A recently installed electronic stimulator has countered chronic leg pain, caused by scar tissue in the brain, so he's off pain medication, Mary said.

"Lee uses a computer program from Cognitive Systems that is helping reprogram his brain for hand-eye coordination, memory and auditory/visual gains," Mary said. "We've been really happy with that, and we thank the people who have prayed us through all this, because it's working."

### CORD MCCOY: fame in another arena – your family room

Cord McCoy was unavailable to talk about his recovery from brain injury, presumably because he has so thoroughly recovered from being kicked in the head in September 2004 by a saddle bronc horse, and his subsequent brain surgery.

At press time, McCoy and his younger brother Jet are still contestants on CBS' *The Amazing Race*.

—Anne Christensen

# LISTEN UP

## Rodeo and brain injury

The *ProRodeo Sports News* quizzed a couple of experts in sports injuries and recovery about traumatic brain injury (TBI): certified athletic trainer and physical therapy assistant Mike Rich is executive director of the Justin Sportsmedicine Team, and Dr. Tandy Freeman is its medical director.

### Is TBI an inherent risk of rodeo, and if so, will it always be?

**DR. TANDY FREEMAN:** While there may be ways to try to reduce the risk of brain injury in a collision activity like rodeo, there is no way to eliminate it. The vast majority occur from deceleration – the athlete is moving in one direction at a high rate of speed, the head stops suddenly, but the brain doesn't stop as immediately as the skull, so the brain slaps against the inside of the skull. That results in concussion. You can pad the outside of the skull and decrease the forces involved, but as long as people move at a high rate of speed and stop suddenly – which is a large part of rodeo – you will have concussions. So yes, it's an inherent risk.

### What is a typical rodeo-related TBI?

**MIKE RICH:** Most are basic concussions, and about 60 percent of those are Grade 1, in which the cowboys are dazed and have to be helped out of the arena, but they're good to go in 15-30 minutes. Another 30 percent are Grade 2 – they're not really 'getting their chickens gathered.' We hold them for 30-60 minutes outside the arena, even if they try to drift off, saying, 'I'm fine, I'm fine.' We want to make sure their symptoms improve rather than get worse, which

might mean there is dangerous bleeding in the brain. The cowboys know that we won't transport them to the hospital if they don't need it – they trust us when they see our Justin Sportsmedicine Team shirts. The last 10 percent are Grade 3. They're unconscious for a little longer while we're checking for other injuries and palpating their spines out in the arena.

### What are some current developments in treating TBI at rodeos?

**RICH:** We use online medical records now. If I see a guy who had a moderate concussion at Logandale, the Justin Sportsmedicine guy at Red Bluff (Calif.) the next week can read about it, and if he has another one, we suggest he take some time off. A contestant who wants to get back out there might omit something like that when he talks with us.

### How do you know that a cowboy has recovered enough to return to competition?

**FREEMAN:** If you sprain your knee, it's stiff and sore; it hurts when you try to do things. But you can't push on your skull and tell that your brain hasn't recovered yet. We determine whether the brain has recovered based on two things: symptoms and testing. Symptoms are where we have the largest problem, because the athlete has to be honest about what's going on with himself. In testing, we look at brain function; we measure several components of brain function using our SCAT (Sport Concussion Assessment Tool) card. But you can test well and still have symptoms – passing the test does not mean you're ready to compete.

We don't have the perfect way to tell someone they have recovered – it's not like an X-ray that tells us a bone has healed. Giving everybody neuropsychiatric testing would be logistically difficult in terms of rodeo, so we're focusing on education now. We have a very straightforward handout on 'return to play' that we give to cowboys with concussions.

—Anne Christensen

# 'RETURN TO PLAY'

## How long after a concussion does a cowboy have to wait?

The Justin Sportsmedicine Team has developed a rodeo-specific assessment tool called SCAT to quantify concussion symptoms faster and more specifically than the Grade 1-2-3 system devised by the Brain Injury Association and used by most medical personnel.

SCAT, the Sport Concussion Assessment Tool, includes several questions and observations a first responder can use immediately to identify the cause and degree of the concussion. The last item on the SCAT is designed for an athlete to use with a partner to determine whether he or she is able to resume

competition safely.

"The biggest problem we have in taking care of rodeo athletes is their tendency to minimize their symptoms," Dr. Freeman said. As medical director of the Justin Sportsmedicine Team, he's seen enough cowboys to know.

The SCAT protocol lists five progressive steps; an athlete should not move to the next step until a full day after the conditions of the previous step are met. If symptoms recur within 24 hours of completing a step, the athlete should return to the previous step and try to move up again after another day or two of work at the step that caused recurrence of symptoms.

1. Physical and mental rest until no concussion symptoms are present while at rest;
2. Low-impact aerobic exercise for 20-30 minutes with no recurrence of concussion symptoms;
3. Light resistance training for all body parts for 20-30 minutes with no recurrence of concussion symptoms;
4. Sport-specific training, such as saddle horse riding, riding bucking barrels or mechanical animals (no live bull riding), starting with slow motions and increasing speed every two to three minutes, with no recurrence of concussion symptoms;
5. Medical evaluation for return to rodeo participation.

To contact the Justin Sportsmedicine Team and request a copy of the complete "Return to Rodeo" handout, call Rick Foster at 303.651.7193 or e-mail him at rick.foster.jsm@gmail.com.