



Photos courtesy Marty Welter

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

Out Cold

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

By Anne Christensen

He was so fast," Dino Loukas said of Charlie, the horse who in 2006 ended his intense yet freewheeling career as a professional cowboy—a steer wrestler, or "bulldogger." His voice is 60 percent admiration, 40 percent nostalgia, zero percent animosity. Loukas has no regrets.

Six years earlier, after graduating from Colorado State University and returning to his hometown of Chicago, Loukas competed in a regional rodeo association, where his horse Hoss picked up some bad habits. So in 2004, when Loukas rejoined the elite Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association,

Hoss took a while to relearn how to score—how to wait, motionless, in the "box" until Loukas signaled him to sprint out in pursuit of the fast-running steer and maneuver into position, so the cowboy could jump from the speeding horse onto the also-speeding steer and change its direction and momentum, wrestling it to the arena dirt.

Since Hoss wasn't ready for PRCA-level competition, 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 said 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"—jump out too early, before the rider signaled him that the steer had a long-enough head start.

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., offered 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 the rodeo's second event, 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 to the cowboy's left temple.

Loukas remembers nothing about his last run, but Joe Bob Locke, one of the PRCA event judges that day, remembers a great deal. It was a nice June evening, he said, twilight, with a crowd of a couple thousand ProRodeo 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 Dino 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 threatening types of traumatic brain injury, a depressed skull fracture—an injury which nearly always results in permanent damage or death, as was the case for fellow professional cowboy Brent Thurman, who died after being stepped on by a bull at the 1994 Wrangler National Finals Rodeo.

Doctors told Loukas that 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 not only had the family support he would need; he already had the skills and attitude to meet this unexpected challenge.

“With focus, discipline and good family support, you can do whatever you want to do.”

—Dino Loukas

Team sports teach athletes 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 compete at the (Dodge) National Circuit Finals Rodeo, and I did. I wanted to be on the Wrangler Million Dollar Tour (the most elite level of the PRCA), 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.”

RUNNING THE RACE

Nearly four years after the accident—200 weeks punctuated by those near-daily sessions of physical and speech therapy—Loukas stretched out before running a 5K race in Fort Collins, home of Colorado State University, 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 injury.

A six-footer who has worked his way back up from his “coma weight” of 160 pounds to his rodeo weight of 195 pounds, 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,” said 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.”



Photos courtesy Georgia Loukas

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.

That’s true, but Loukas is not self-conscious. Mentally, he’s in good shape—intelligent, organized, ranging comfortably and conversationally from practical to philosophical and back, although he is easily distracted when tired. His inflection is expressive. He doesn’t get frustrated or embarrassed when listeners miss a bit—he repeats, rephrases, perhaps 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 said, pointing between his front teeth and his lips.

But that doesn’t matter today. He and Baker plug in their headphones, stretch 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 altitude takes its toll, and Loukas and Baker huff in at 34 minutes, in the middle of the pack.

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

“That’s my last race,” he said to Baker. “I am not a runner.”

“You never were,” answered Baker. They laugh easily together; this must be another shared 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.



Dino Loukas, left, and friend Tom Baker near the finish line of the 5K they ran in March 2010 in Fort Collins, Colo., to support the Shared Journeys Brain Injury Foundation.

Photo Courtesy PRCA ProRodeo, Anne Christensen

He talks easily about 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 about his abrupt departure from the arena.

SOMETHING SAFER THAN BULL RIDING

“My mother was from a sheep ranch near Meeker, Colo., and we visited in the summers,” Loukas said. “In high school and college, when I was able to help, I worked with my uncle, Tom Kourlis, on our place, the Harry Koulis

Ranch. My uncle didn’t like rodeo, but I tried it a little bit at the fairgrounds 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. (When they opened the gate,) it 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 (steer wrestling) 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 the sport of rodeo. I competed for CSU for three years and was president of the Rodeo Club. Todd Suhn (a 13-time qualifier for the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo) was living near Denver then, and he became my mentor.”

After graduating with a business degree in 2000, 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 frater-

TRIUMPH OVER TRAGEDY

Dino Loukas is an inspiration. His goal now is to inspire others.

It took Dino seven months of intensive rehabilitation in a program that he and our mother, Georgia, designed to overcome a traumatic brain injury to the left temporal lobe. The program included six hours of daily speech therapy plus three-to-five hours weekly of physical therapy or working out with Dino’s personal trainer. Speech therapy was provided by private therapists and Northwestern University’s School of Speech and Language Pathology. Such an intensive program was unheard of but Dino and our mom knew it was necessary to accomplish his goals.

Walking and independent living proved challenges easily overcome by Dino. Speech however, has been an ongoing recovery that continues with three hours of speech therapy a week at Northwestern.

Throughout his injury and recovery, I did not witness Dino feeling sorry for himself or taking a break from learning. Instead, he used every moment as an opportunity for speech therapy. Dino would wake up every morning at 7, shower, dress, have coffee and “hit the books.” His discipline, hard work and positive mental attitude truly are an inspiration. His philosophy is to “work so hard on his speech until he perfects it or he is carried out in a body bag.”

Currently, Dino is writing a book on his journey and the values that pulled him through. He felt obligated to write about his experience for those who face similar life-changing accidents. Through his book, he aims to reveal to readers the values needed to overcome such challenges triumphantly and with grace. These values are focus, hard work and family support. “[I want] to inspire and give hope and to introduce the tools I used to overcome my life changing accident,” he said.

Dino hopes his book, tentatively titled *Chicago Cowboy: A Cowboy’s Ride Through TBI*, will be on bookshelves by next summer.

—Alexandrea Loukas Grivas

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nity. 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., and finished the year eighth in the 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 steer wrestlers in 2005, which qualified him as one of two bulldoggers to represent that circuit at that year's Dodge National Circuit Finals Rodeo. He finished 95th in the world among the PRCA's 1,255 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 Million Dollar Tour.

BREAKING THROUGH BRICK WALLS

Instead, Loukas presses on through events such as the 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.

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

"Don't be sad about yourself, don't feel sorrow, 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, and 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." ☺

This story was reprinted with permission from the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association's ProRodeo Sports News, where it ran April 16, 2010.

A FAMILY TRADITION

Discipline, commitment, dedication, hard work—and an inherent competitive nature—reverberate through the Loukas family. The desire to win every game, run the fastest or eat the last slice of pizza has created two generations of Loukas athletes.

The first generation, three brothers, were born in Tarsina, Corinthias, Greece, and moved to the south side of Chicago in 1953 with their parents and two sisters. Through hard work and discipline, Tony, Angelo and George earned college football scholarships to the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., and Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Ill., respectively. During their collegiate years, each brother was also named captain of their football team.



Photo courtesy Stella Yant (Loukas)

The first generation of Loukas Athletes. All three brothers played football at the collegiate level. Their children would later go on to follow in their footsteps.

Tony was a Blue and Gray Game team member and went on to play semi-professionally with the Chicago Owls until 1969.

Additionally in 1969, Angelo was a rookie on the Buffalo Bills with O.J. Simpson. His NFL career ended during the 1970 season with the Boston (now New England) Patriots. He played one more year semi-professionally with the Hartford Knights in Connecticut before retiring from the sport.

The youngest brother, George, set multiple records for rushing while playing for the SIU Salukis football team. Many of those records remain unbroken.

The brothers all eventually returned to Chicago, and used the same values to create successful real estate and restaurant businesses. However, they remained active in athletics through an array of private and public leagues, including the NHIBT (National Hellenic Invitational Basketball Tournament) in Chicago and AHEPA (American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association).

Of the five Loukas siblings there are 16 offspring, all of whom played sports. All of us were encouraged to play sports to learn and understand the values of discipline, commitment, dedication and hard work. And it's a family tradition!

Four of the cousins have applied their athletic abilities to collegiate and post collegiate sports. Most recognized is Christina Loukas, George's daughter. Christina competed with the USA Diving Team in the three meter spring board event at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China, and placed ninth in the world.

Most recently, in July, Christina placed fourth in the three meter spring board event at the FINA World Championship in Shanghai, China, which is one step closer to her goal of winning the Gold Medal in the same event at the 2012 Olympics in London. Prior to her Olympic and professional career, Christina competed at Indiana University where she was an eight-time NCAA All-American.

Her goal was always to become an Olympic athlete. Growing up, Christina's parents encouraged her to play an array of sports, such as gymnastics, before pursuing her passion. Christina attributes her success at such a high competitive level to her "dedication to her sport, strong family support, setting diving as her priority and sacrifice."



Diver Christina Loukas

Photo courtesy Hans Deryk/USA Diving

Angelo's son, Alexander Loukas, was quarterback at Stanford University from 2006 to 2011, where he also received his undergraduate and graduate degrees in communication. His tenure at Stanford culminated with a trip to the Rose Bowl last season. Prior to college, he was a tennis star and quarterback at Deerfield High School in Deerfield, Ill. With his partner, Alex won the tennis doubles Illinois State Championship in 2005.

He attributes his athletic success to being raised in a competitive environment and discipline to his sport. "[One can] learn so many lessons playing sports that transfer to life; teamwork, dedication and being competitive in everything you do," he said.



Photo courtesy Hans Alexander Loukas

Football Player Alexander Loukas

Alex will apply his competitive drive and dedication on the field to the European Federation of American Football. He will play the 2012 season with either the team in Barcelona, Spain, or Nice, France.

Yianna Marinos (Patronas), daughter of Diane (Loukas) Patronas played point guard on the women's college basketball team at Washington University in Chestertown, MD, between 2000 and 2004. She believes "being involved in athletics has helped me set and accomplish personal goals."

Finally, less conventional for a Greek guy raised in Chicago, Dino Loukas, Tony's son, was a member of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA). Dino competed in Steer Wrestling in the Great Lakes Circuit of the PRCA from 2000 to 2006.

Dino's love for bulldogging (steer wrestling) and the nomadic cowboy lifestyle developed from 1998 to 2000 after joining the Club Rodeo Team, while studying at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colo. Dino worked hard at perfecting his techniques and displayed his dedication as the club president.

His rodeo career ended abruptly on June 2, 2006, when he suffered a traumatic brain injury at a PRCA rodeo in Medford, Wis. However traumatic, Dino applied the values he was raised on to triumphantly overcome his injury.

The Loukas family tradition is one of hard work, dedication, discipline and commitment honed through athletics and applied to daily life, family, work and experience. When presented with opportunities and challenges, the generations have used these principles, which they will share and teach to future generations.

—Alexandrea Loukas Grivas