

Richard “Tuff” Hedeman: The Michael Jordan of Professional Bull Riding

By Patricia Renee Tapia

He was only four years old when it happened: that old rodeo cowboy slammed the little boy's hand in the truck door. The tyke never made a sound, not even a whimper. Once the old man realized what had happened, he dubbed the youngster “Tough Nut.” As the little boy grew, it was eventually shortened to “Tuff,” and the name suited him well because he proved to be one of the toughest professional bull riders the sport has ever seen.

Professional bull riding has become “the toughest sport on dirt,” a phrase coined by Professional Bull Riders, Inc. Josh Peter, lead sports enterprise writer for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, commented that even in the beginning, the bull-riding event always came last in the rodeo because the possibility of seeing a cowboy get battered or, even worse, killed, would keep the fans there for the entire show. What else could make an audience wait to watch an event where each ride lasts for only eight seconds? No other cowboy understands the danger or the attraction better than four-time World Champion Bull Rider, Richard Neale “Tuff” Hedeman.

In a phone interview, he provided some insight as to how it all started. Hedeman made his debut in the world on March 2, 1963, at Providence Hospital in El Paso, Texas. He is the youngest of seven children born to Red and Clarice Hedeman, and he grew up at La Mesa (Raton), Ruidoso Downs, and Sunland Park racetracks where his dad and mom both worked. Hedeman got his first job at the young age of eight as a groom at the Ruidoso racetrack. Hedeman said that at 15, he began galloping and working the race horses before school.

This led to the dream of becoming a jockey someday, but that dream went up in smoke after he started college and grew too big. Hedeman said his weight rose to 135 pounds, and although that does not seem very heavy, it is a considerable amount for someone wanting to become a jockey. The average jockey weighs between 108 and 118 pounds. Once Hedeman realized his chances of becoming a jockey were doomed, he focused on the only other thing that excited him: rodeo.

According to Hedeman, he rode his first “bull,” which was just a calf, at the age of four in the Upper Valley Arena, which was built by his father and some of the other men that worked at Sunland Park Racetrack. He continued to ride as he grew up, and while attending Coronado High School, he won a couple of high school rodeo titles his junior and senior years. Hedeman said, “I competed in saddle bronc riding, bull riding, steer wrestling, and roping while in high school.”



Bullrider Tuff Hedeman at Cheyenne Frontier Days Rodeo (Courtesy of Hubbel Rodeo)

Graduating from Coronado High in 1981, Hedeman won a rodeo scholarship to Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Texas. In an article published in *American Cowboy*, Kendra Santos wrote that he captured the bull riding title at the National Collegiate Finals in 1983. He rode a bull that no other professional cowboy had been able to ride at the National Finals Rodeo.

That same year he bought his Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) permit, which was the first step to becoming a professional rodeo cowboy. PRCA commissioner Karl Stressman explained on the Wrangler Network website how to obtain a PRCA permit. The competitor must be 18 years old, complete the permit application and pay the initiation fee. Once the performer has received the permit, he needs to compete and win \$1,000 to be eligible to become a PRCA cardholder, which makes the rider an official PRCA rodeo cowboy. The cardholder does not have to win \$1,000 within the first year, but each year he does not reach his \$1,000 earnings he must pay the permit fee. After winning \$1,000 in PRCA events, he may apply for his PRCA card.

In the first year after purchasing his permit card, Tuff Hedeman fulfilled the conditions of the permit.

According to Jan Reid, author of 10 books and senior writer for *Texas Monthly*, Hedeman won \$2,000 at one rodeo in El Paso, which was twice the amount needed to fulfill his permit and become a contestant cardholder, qualifying him as a professional rodeo cowboy.

In his book *Fried Twinkies, Buckle Bunnies, & Bull Riders: A Year Inside the Professional Bull Riders Tour*, Josh Peters wrote that “Hedeman turned pro and attacked the circuit like a starving man would attack a buffet.” Richard “Tuff” Hedeman lived up to his nickname and went on to become a world champion bull rider despite the heartache he endured and the injuries he suffered.

Hedeman's career as a professional bull rider took off in 1984. Reid noted that in Hedeman's second year as a professional bull rider, he won almost \$50,000, and at an event in Oklahoma City he qualified for the National Finals. The National Finals Rodeo (NFR) is held in Las Vegas, Nev., at the end of every year and is always a sold-out event. Only the top 15 regular season finishers in each event, which includes saddle bronc riding, bareback riding, calf roping, team roping, steer wrestling, barrel racing, and last, but not least, bull riding, have a chance at the prize money at the National Finals Rodeo.

Not only did Hedeman's career take off that year, but so did his love life. According to Reid, Hedeman met Tracy Stepp in Oklahoma City, a professional barrel racer from

Pilot Point, Texas. The following year he placed second in the bull riding standings. Then came 1986, a great year for Hedeman. He won his first bull riding world championship title in the PRCA, and he also became the first bull rider to earn \$137,000 in a year, unheard of at the time. To top it off, he and Stepp were married on May 20 of that year.

Tuff Hedeman soon learned that with the success of bull riding came hardships interwoven with the friendships made along the way. Reid explained that it was common for rodeo cowboys to team up and travel together to events in order to split travel expenses and make time on the road much less lonesome. According to Hedeman, the first year he traveled with Bart Wilkinson, a college acquaintance. Over the next several years, he would travel with Cody Lambert, Clint Branger, Jim Sharp and Lane Frost.

Lane Frost began traveling with Hedeman in 1985. According to Santos, Hedeman and Frost first became acquainted in 1980 at the National High School Rodeo Association Finals. Jan Reid said that Jim Sharp joined them in 1986, and according to

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Josh Peter, that was “more bull riding talent than anyone had ever seen in one vehicle.” Reid confirmed this in his statement, “For six straight years, either Tuff, Lane, or Jim was the world champion.”

Hedeman and Frost developed a close friendship, and according to Santos, “An all-out passion for riding bulls was what drew Lane and him together.” They became the best of friends, and according to Hedeman, he spent more time with Frost than he did his wife. Peter pointed out that although Hedeman had won more championships than Frost, Frost had been the more popular rider with his “lanky frame and an undeniable charm.” Hedeman and Lambert would threaten to leave Frost behind after an event because Frost always took the time to sign autographs and chat with fans.

Then came Frost’s untimely death. The tragedy occurred on July 30, 1989, in Cheyenne, Wyo. According to Jan Reid, Lane Frost rode a bull for the required eight seconds, but when he dismounted, he landed on his hands and knees. The bull gave Frost a jab with a blunted horn. Hedeman watched from 30 feet away. Frost got to his feet but then collapsed on the ground and remained motionless. The bull’s horn had broken a rib which, in turn, had severed a coronary artery. Frost bled to death within a matter of minutes.

Josh Peter wrote that “with Frost gone, Hedeman became the sport’s number one Ambassador.” He began staying after the events to sign autographs just as Frost had. Though many people would have quit after witnessing a tragedy that amplified the brutality of bull riding, Rick Cantu, a veteran sports writer for the *Austin American-Statesman*, recounted what Hedeman told him in a phone call. Hedeman said, “if I had quit bull riding when he died, I wouldn’t have been happy. I surely wasn’t happy about losing him, but to say I wouldn’t do this anymore wouldn’t make any sense.”

Proving the solemnity of this statement, Hedeman won his second PRCA World Champion Bull Rider title at the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas, just months after his best friend’s death. After successfully riding his last bull of the night and clinching the world champion title, Hedeman rode for an additional eight seconds in honor of Lane Frost.

It was that kind of determination that drew the respect and admiration of fans and fellow bull riders. Hedeman had worked hard to get where he was. Santos explained in her article that Hedeman was not a natural at bull riding. She said he gave some of the credit for his abilities to riding racehorses, which gave him good balance. Jan Reid explained that there are bull-riding schools to help teach riders the technical skills to stay on the bull, but according to Hedeman, the sport is really basic. In Reid’s article Hedeman claimed, “Riding bulls is about ten percent talent. The rest of it’s balls.”

According to Reid, Hedeman projected this attitude in his prime. Reid explained that Hedeman had the physique of a “light-heavyweight boxer.” And though he was bowlegged and pigeon-toed “to the point of slapstick comedy,” he walked with an air of confidence. Willard H. Porter, rodeo journalist and former rodeo director of the National Cowboy



Tuff Hedeman with his former Coronado High School Principal, Charles Murphree
(Courtesy of Charles Murphree)

Hall of Fame, declared that even at the beginning of Hedeman’s career, the PRCA riding director, Bryan McDonald, noticed the mental toughness Hedeman had. It was his mental toughness that led him to win his third PRCA World Championship Bull Rider title in 1991.

In 1992, Tuff Hedeman and 19 other professional bull riders organized the Professional Bull Riders, Inc. (PBR). Hedeman was president of the PBR until 2004. Kendall Hamilton, a writer and editor for *Newsweek*, pointed out that until the early 1990s, bull riders had been risking their lives for the chance to win a small amount of money and a trophy belt buckle. He noted that it was the goal of these 20 bull riders to make bull riding a stand-alone event and increase the prize money, keeping the cowboys’ interests at heart.

The PBR succeeded in doing this and took bull riding to an entirely new level. One way it made the Professional Bull Riders Tour a success was to give fans what they wanted: danger. The PBR matched the best bull riders with the toughest bulls, or as professional bull riders like to call them, “rank” bulls. According to Josh Peter, “The ranker the bull, the more dangerous and the tougher to ride.”

Peter explained that early on, many bulls would not buck, so a couple of rodeo promoters introduced a crossbreed of Brahmas, which were known for their mean streak and ungovernable hankering to buck. Riding one of these rank bulls gave the rodeo cowboy a better chance for a high score, “and no one had wanted to win more than Tuff Hedeman.” He was known for riding the rankest of the bulls, and that is why many of the fans admired him.

To draw one of these rank bulls at a rodeo meant there was a chance that the rider would get seriously injured, and up until 1993, Hedeman had never been seriously injured. He had gotten hung up once and booted around the arena, but nothing serious enough to keep him from riding for a lengthy period of time. Santos wrote that this changed in 1993 at the National Finals Rodeo when Hedeman was paralyzed for the longest ten minutes of his life after being thrown from a bull. Although he regained feeling, he underwent surgery to remove a bulging disk and the doctors fused his neck with a steel plate and a bone graft from his hip.

The irony was that earlier that year, Hedeman had accomplished what no other rodeo cowboy had done before: he had accumulated \$1 million in his career as a rodeo cowboy, according to Reid. Santos said that Hedeman was out the entire year of 1994, recuperating. He returned to bull riding in 1995.

It started off as a good year for Hedeman, but as Kendall Hamilton said, “Injuries and bull riding go together like cowboys and hats.” According to Josh Peter, Hedeman had already earned enough points to win the 1995 PBR World Championship title. For those who do not understand the concept of winning the PBR World Champion title, here is a brief explanation.

According to the PBR website, each ride in a PBR event is eight seconds long. If the bull rider stays on the entire eight seconds, he can receive a score of up to 100 points. Fifty of those points are for the rider and the other 50 are for the bull. The bull is judged on his

athleticism and difficulty to ride, and the rider is judged on his control during the ride. If the rider does not stay on for the full eight seconds, he receives no score. Based on points earned throughout the season, the top 40 bull riders in the world compete at the PBR Built Ford Tough Finals at the end of the year.

At the PBR Finals, the bull riders compete in six rounds of competition over a period of five days. The bull rider who accumulates the most points throughout the season, to include the PBR Finals, becomes the PBR World Champion. Tuff Hedeman had one final ride at the 1995 PBR Finals although he had already clinched the PBR World Champion Title. He had drawn Bodacious, considered one of the rankest bulls in the world. In fact, Bodacious had only been ridden successfully six times out of the 135 times a cowboy had been on his back, one of them being Hedeman, according to Peter. They were now paired up again.

In a documentary video on YouTube, Hedeman described what happened next. Not long after exiting the chute, Bodacious jerked his head back and Hedeman’s face smashed against the bull’s head. Hedeman’s face was shattered and he lost teeth. He underwent six and a half hours of reconstructive surgery and six titanium plates were placed in his face. Hedeman lost his sense of taste and smell.

Kevin Simpson wrote in an online news article for *The Denver Post* that just after Hedeman’s run-in with the bull, he promised his then 3-year-old son, Lane, that if he drew Bodacious again, he would “chicken out” or forfeit his opportunity to ride the bull. As luck would have it, Hedeman did draw Bodacious six weeks later at the 1995 PRCA National Finals.

Josh Peter said that Hedeman climbed on top of the bull, but when the gate opened, he “turned him out,” letting the bull leave the chute without him and tipping his hat to Bodacious. According to Peter, Hedeman continued to ride bulls until 1998 when another neck injury made him realize it was time to retire.

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reading this article would know most of this history because they have either grown up here or have been told the stories by congregants who are long time members. The Temple is driven by lay leaders and congregation participation and commitment, and the commitment to its history and existence was fostered by the leadership and teachings of the rabbis that came before. He states that not all rabbis or temples have been successful in this, and other congregations around the country are struggling to have a sense of self as an organization, but Temple Mount Sinai has always had that. It is one of its strengths.

The history of the Temple is celebrated throughout the building. In a literal and figurative expression of continuity, the chapel entrance houses the cornerstone of the first temple which serves as the physical base of the stand that displays the Temple's Centennial Commemorative Torah book. The pages of this special book are turned as it is read through the year.

The second temple's cornerstone is in their beautiful courtyard. Panels from the first Zielonka Memorial Hall were transferred to the new temple, and plaques, photos and memorials line the halls showing important people in the life of the congregation. The building itself commemorates the tradition and history of Judaism.

The curved lines on the inside ceiling of the Hayman Krupp Memorial Chapel represent the curved lines of a tent, memorializing the long years of Israelite exile in the desert, and it can also represent the inside of a prayer book. In the striking stained glass, the yellow Hebrew numbers one through ten represent the Ten Commandments and the Ark that holds the Torah scrolls, the Lectern and the Eternal Light are inspired by the revered Tree of Life symbol.

The pointed shape of the outside of the temple also represents the outlines of a prayer book. When the building was being erected in the 1960s, the TV show *The Flying Nun* was very popular, and the story goes that the neighborhood kids thought its shape was a nun's headdress, based either on their Catholic experience or on the TV show! In keeping with other stained glass installations, Zielonka Memorial Hall was graced in 2001 by congregant Hal Marcus' *Torah in Glass*, a five panel stained glass mosaic depicting the stories of the Torah, or first five books of the Bible.

Tradition is carried on in other ways, including the commitment to providing space for other faiths

when they need a place of worship. In recent years, Protestant congregations that have met in the temple have included Westside churches Christ the King and St. Francis on the Hill. Wonderful friendly relations and shared worship experiences have occurred as an outgrowth of this cooperation.

Judaism has many shared concerns with the broader interfaith community. Rabbi Zeidman said in a recent personal interview that the Reform Jewish heritage teaches the extreme importance of social justice and social action. "We view ourselves as being taught to care for people no matter where they are. We are taught to be 'a light to the nation,' and I interpret that as we are to be a role model on what it means to live a life of value and meaning." He also explained that from the arrival of Jews in America, it was important to let non-Jews get to know them as people, to not see them as different or strange, and to create a space for themselves that was different from the anti-Semitic experience. Being part of the broader community is not only part of Reform Judaism values, but it is also partly influenced by the violence the Jewish community has experienced, especially in Europe.

He continued by saying that "our shared narrative as Jewish people is that we were slaves in Egypt and that's what teaches us to care for the stranger, the widow, the orphan." There are three congregations in El Paso, all on the Westside which is where most Jewish people settle, plus a chapel at Fort Bliss. The congregations are the Chabad Lubavitch, the Congregation B'nai Zion and the congregation Temple Mount Sinai. Each fills a niche for people who want to experience or live their Judaism in different ways. The distinction lies in how each interprets Jewish law, whether literally, as in the case of the Chabad, or with exceptions codified into conservative law at the B'nai Zion synagogue, or the Temple's evaluation of the context and spirit of the law and how each individual chooses to apply that to their own meaningful life. In addition, the worship experience is different in each, based again on interpretations of ancient laws.

The relations among the congregations are very cordial, especially between the Synagogue and the Temple who have congregants with dual membership or have family branches that worship at one or the other. Competition between groups in town is not an issue here, as it may be in other large cities, and all participate in celebrations and activities fostered by the Jewish Federation of El Paso, the local chapter



Rabbi Ben Zeidman (Photo courtesy of Temple Mount Sinai)

of a national group that provides a meeting place for practicing and non-practicing Jews to gather.

Temple Mount Sinai has provided more than a century of commitment to its congregation and the broader community, with many of its leaders focused on interfaith dialogue, commitment to social betterment and social justice and listening to the concerns and views of all groups of people, whether Christian, Jew or Muslim. As Rabbi Weiss said of El Paso in a 1998 *Times* article during the 100th celebration of the Temple, "The truth is that we build bridges here instead of walls between religious groups ... It is certainly not as in other places." The words of Rabbi Zeidman add to this fact: "Whether or not you see the Temple name or logo on an effort, we as Jewish individuals are involved in almost everything in our community. This is part of what we teach: the importance of being part of the larger community and to speak out and to live our values." ✡

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Hedeman settled down in Morgan Mill, Texas, with his wife Tracy and their two boys, Lane and Trevor. According to Peter, Hedeman resigned as president of the PBR in 2004 because he felt the riders were no longer the main concern of the PBR. Hedeman then became president of the Championship Bull Riding (CBR) organization in May 2005, which was founded in 2002 by a stock contractor, Terry Williams, and a businessman, Joel Logan.

The CBR is a stand-alone bull riding organization like the PBR. Hedeman explained his mission as ambassador for the CBR when he stated, "My goals are the same as they have always been and that is to create a system based on merit

only — with no politics or favoritism. I want to create events that guys want to come to, not that they have to come to."

In May 1997, Hedeman was inducted into the El Paso Athletic Hall of Fame. Later that same year he was inducted into the Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame. Then in 1999, he was inducted into the Professional Bull Riders Ring of Honor and in 2002, into the Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame. With four professional bull riding world titles and a number of business accomplishments, he has definitely earned the status of the "Michael Jordan of bull riding."

Hedeman has certainly lived up to the nickname "Tuff," and despite the heartache of losing his best friend and the serious injuries he suffered in the

latter part of his career, he managed to become one of the most revered World Champion bull riders. Hedeman was instrumental in helping make professional bull riding what it is today. With its tremendous increase in prize money and broadcasts on national television, bull riding has grown into an international sport.

Although Hedeman no longer competes, he is still active in the bull riding community as ambassador of the CBR and broadcaster at numerous bull riding events. The tale of Richard Neale "Tuff" Hedeman is an inspiration to all. Despite injury and loss, champions do not quit. With heart and determination, Tuff truly showed he was — tough! 🤠