

TUFF HEDEMAN



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Before he even started school, Richard Neale “Tuff” Hedeman earned (literally) the nickname that would stick with him for life. According to Tuff, Tater Decker, a horse trainer and friend of the Hedeman family, began to call him “Tough Nut” after he slammed the boy’s hand in the door of his pick-up. As the story goes, young Tuff never shed the first tear.

“I was about 4 or 5 years old,” remembers Hedeman, “when he slammed my hand in the door. He nicknamed me ‘Tough Nut’ and it was later shortened to Tuff.” So began the life of a legend.

Hedeman grew up on the racetracks of west Texas, but quickly realized his true calling; the rodeo. As a boy, he won many junior rodeos and, in 1980, took the New Mexico High School Rodeo Bull Riding and All Around titles. His success continued the following year, when he was awarded the Team Roping and All Around titles. Upon graduation, Tuff attended Sul Ross State University, where he was a member of the rodeo team, competing in bronc riding, team roping, steer wrestling and, of course, bull riding.

In 1983, Tuff turned pro and filled out his PRCA permit as a bronc rider. He developed a reputation for riding bulls that had never been ridden, with an all-or-nothing style that amazed rodeo fans. He often traveled with his fellow bull riders (and close friends) Lane Frost, Cody Lambert, Jim Sharp, Clint Branger and Ty Murray, to save on travel expenses. Over his career, he would qualify for 11 NFRs, winning two NFR titles. Tuff would also win three PRCA titles, and go on to be inducted into the Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame, earning more than \$1 million in prize money along the way. He won the National Finals Rodeo in 1993, with a stand-out 95 point ride atop the infamous Charbray Bull, Bodacious. This would not be their last meeting.

A neck injury sustained at the NFR in ‘93 kept Tuff from competing at all the following year. However, he remained involved in the industry, and eventually found himself in an entirely new spotlight - on the set of a movie. The film “8 Seconds” documents the life of Hedeman’s closest friend, Lane Frost, who lost his life in 1989 when he was gored by a bull at one of the most famous rodeos of all, the Cheyenne Frontier Days. Stephen Baldwin signed on to play the role of Tuff Hedeman, and Tuff himself was hired as a stunt double for the actor. The final scene of the film shows Tuff at the National Finals Rodeo, riding for the world championship. After the 8 second bell sounds, he continues to ride and stays on an additional 8 seconds as a tribute to his fallen friend.

“That title was for Lane,” he told one reporter. “I just wanted to finish what we started out together.”

In 1995, Tuff returned to the sport he loved, and came face to face, yet again, with Bodacious. It was a ride that would mark his career. Bodacious was known for his own special “power move”, that consisted of bringing his rear end high in the air while his head was down, forcing the rider to shift his weight forward. The beast would then jerk his massive head upward, smashing whatever happened to be in its path. This time, it was Tuff Hedeman’s face.

It took six hours of reconstructive surgery (to repair 11 shattered facial bones) and less than two months of recovery time, before Tuff Hedeman was back on the circuit. He would place second and third in the PBR Finals in 1996 and 1997, respectively. His last ride was in Odessa, Texas at the PBR event, where he was thrown off and landed on his head, exacerbating the old neck injury. Although he was leading the PBR World Standings at the time, Tuff knew his past injuries were bound to have an effect on his performance and his quality of life. In 1999, after much consideration, the legend retired from the spotlight. He did not, however, take leave of the industry.

Tuff’s exploits atop some of the meanest bulls in the business made him an icon, but he is revered equally for his work outside the arena. He was instrumental in the creation of the Professional Bull Riders (PBR), and served as its main attraction for years. In 2005, Tuff left the PBR to officially join CBR, Inc. (Championship Bull Riding) as President and stock holder. Why the switch? Tuff has a love for the sport, but also for the athletes, and he was inspired by the CBR philosophy.

“We treat them the way I wanted to be treated when I was competing,” he says with a handsome smile. “The CBR produces one of the best professional-level bull riding competitions in the country.”

Through the years, the CBR tour experienced unprecedented growth and, in 2004, made its debut appearance on national prime time television. Labeled the “fastest hour in television”, the CBR tour has a rapidly expanding fan base. Today, more than 14 million viewers tune in annually for the mad adrenaline rush that can only be inspired by the best bulls and bull riders in the world.

According to Tuff, the popularity of the sport has been aided by the television coverage, but the true key to its success is its simplicity.

“It’s easy to understand; it’s just 8 seconds and the highest score wins,” he said in an interview. “Beyond that, bull riding is non-stop action; it’s just entertaining and fun to watch.”

When Tuff isn’t working, he lives a quiet life with his wife, Tracy, and their two boys on a serene and beautiful ranch near Morgan Mill, Texas. He also works as a “color” commentary announcer on many rodeo television broadcasts. Given his achievements and his dedication to the sport, it is not surprising that he was inducted into the Texas Rodeo Cowboy Hall of Fame in April of 2010.

So what’s next for Tuff Hedeman and the CBR? Only one thing is for sure... the sky is the limit.