



With 10 years of professional rodeo, seven Wrangler National Finals qualifications, and one AQHA Tie-Down Roping Horse of the

Year going into the 2014 NFR, Hunter Herrin has the recipe for success.

Since the Apache, Oklahoma native turned pro in 2004 he's roped alongside the best of the best from a 2010 match roping with Fred Whitfield to sharing a rig with current World Champion Shane Hanchey for most of the 2014 season. Hunter has striven for greatness, overcoming obstacles of green horses, bad calves, and a seemingly unlucky streak when it comes to the Thomas & Mack Arena in Las Vegas. "I don't know why I haven't faired very well out there. It's one of those deals where I think you've just got to get off to a good start. I got off to a good start in 2008 but then I let off the gas; I'd caught the world leader, was \$4,000 behind him in the world standings, and was 1<sup>st</sup> in the average at the NFR. My approach every night changed and there are three to four calves I should have won rounds on. When you do something like that you just open the door for someone else." While many stories exist about valiant battles between man and beast, few exist between man and rodeo arena.

Each trip to the NFR has proven to be a learning experience for Hunter. The seven times he's qualified he's gone into the Finals is solid standing; 8<sup>th</sup> his rookie year, 2<sup>nd</sup> four times, 4<sup>th</sup> once, and this year he heads to Vegas in the number six spot, "Each time you go in there you have a legitimate shot and you'd better hustle. You've

got to jump on it from the start by trying to win that 1<sup>st</sup> round with everything you've got."

Hunter's previous NFR experience has led Hunter to develop a new and improved game plan as well, "Right now what I need to do is practice. In the past I've jumped on practicing too early and I feel like I've peaked prior to the NFR, I need to be my absolute best on December 4<sup>th</sup>, not November 4<sup>th</sup>. I'm ready to start running and getting flexible, I've never gone to a gym and trained with a trainer so I don't see a reason to start now. I think just being a flexible, in-shape person gives you an advantage." In addition to upping his physical training, Hunter will do the same for his horse; Hunter is aware that his training is both mental and a physical feat.

In 2011 Hunter headed to the NFR on what he thought was the best horse he could have under him. Hunter had a strong season, but once again things didn't go as planned. Hunter's World Champion dreams once again evaded him due to poor horse performance, weak calves, and a variety of reasons. Fast forward to this year and Hunter's AQHA Tie-Down Roping Horse of the Year, "Rambo"; "This year I have a horse that's a lot better than the horse I had in 2011. You hate to start picking them apart but Rambo is either going to go in there and be a difference maker or a hindrance. It sounds weird saying that but it depends on what kind of calves we're roping, he's so strong and sometimes he just

jerks them down. He runs close and he brings things to a sudden halt. If the calves aren't strong and can't handle a horse of his caliber it's going to be hard to win, I'm going to have to be perfect. But going in there I have no doubt in my mind I have the best horse and leaving there I know I'll have the best horse."

Hunter also has a new horse that he got the 1<sup>st</sup> week of August, owned by Clay Cerny who previously owned "Rambo". Hunter feels that with the combination of the two horses he's set for the 2015 season. "They're both super hard stopping horses, they like their brakes." When asked if he's taking his newest equine addition to Vegas Hunter was open about his decision, "I think if I take him, the first little thing that goes wrong, I'll jump ship. I haven't jumped ship all year. He's green right now but come next year, watch out. For now I'm going to ride what go me to the NFR and that's "Rambo". We're going to have to be on point the whole time. I'm not too worried about it, if any horse is capable he is."

Hunter feels confident heading back to his #1 rival, the Thomas & Mack arena, "I'm in a different spot than I've ever been in before, other than the first year I made the Finals. All you want to do is go out there and do the best you can do, no matter when you finally make it or how many times you've been." Following a 2<sup>nd</sup> at San Antonio and notable wins such as Ellensburg and Salinas, Hunter has been on a steady roll all season long and looks to carry that momentum into the Finals.

Looking back over his career Hunter will admit sacrifices, generally financial, had to be made to get him where he was today. "My parents didn't always have money for me to go onto the next rodeo, but somehow they'd scrape it together and we'd go." Hunter remembers arriving home from high school sports practice around 5pm most evenings then he and his dad would start roping at 6pm and would not stop until 1 or 2am five days a week. Weekends didn't prove much different, "On Saturdays we might start at 9am and not stop until 9pm, unless we went to a rodeo. That's the kind of work I put into it and my parents put into it."

Hunter points out the numerous sacrifices his parents made for him then, "As a young kid starting to rodeo you've got to have people behind you who can support you financially because it's not always easy. I know guys that rope really, really well but financially they couldn't make it and they had to go home just because of the expense factor. If you're going to be a calf roper or you want to rodeo, you need to realize the financial side. You have people whose families can afford for you to rodeo, my family wasn't that way and it's still not."

Hunter credits his long-term sponsors Express Ranches for believing in him and supporting him from the beginning, "Without them sticking with me through all these years I probably wouldn't be rodeoing, they've been amazing to me." Hunter has picked up

sponsorships with Cinch and Rios of Mercedes Boot Company. The local Comanche nation tribe will sponsor Hunter's 2014 NFR trip, "It's a good deal. You have to get in locally with people who want to see you do well. I've been trying to make this happen for awhile and it finally has come together."

When asked what advice he would give to the next generation Hunter once again stresses the need to be financially aware and encourages up and comers to seek out many avenues of sponsorship, "My parents always helped me as much as they could, they always seemed to find a way to scrap fees together when it mattered. If this is what you want to do you need to bust it, get it where you need to get it, and people need to worry more about their horses and less about their rig. And don't cut your ties with anybody because at some point you're going to need them, I promise, and I say that from experience."

Hunter additionally stresses a work ethic and a love for the sport, "Say there are 200-300 guys who've tried to make the NFR in the past 10 years and only 30 of those guys have probably ever ended up making it. But a 100 of them have been hustling and competing aggressively for seven years, they're the ones who started in Fort Worth or Odessa and went right to the end of the season. You need to have your ducks in a row because it starts getting down to just 10% of guys making it, and it's usually the same guys over and over." For some it may be hard to stomach

the idea of being among the elite, right there in the middle of the top 15 best ropers in the world, and not win that gold buckle. For Hunter Herrin it's been a cruel reality his past seven trips to the NFR.

The top 15 tie-down ropers heading into Finals are made up a close-knit group of guys, guys that Hunter has traveled with, befriended, and trusts. "You want to be out there with people that you like, that you'll hang out with, and that don't expect you to change your routine." Competition levels exist though, friends or not, "There are some people you dang sure want to rope against because you just to rope against them, with any event you're going to with be friends with people, or even not friends, but you want to dominate. You can't focus on whoever is doing what, it makes you do stuff you wouldn't normally do. I've just got to focus on 'Rambo' and myself. Hopefully it'll get started off right and things will just keep rolling."

But while many people are striving for a gold buckle Hunter has a different perspective, "I'm not focused on winning the world, I've had my chances to go in there and I have failed. This year I'm going with a whole different mindset and we'll see how it turns out. I can rope the best I can and win my fair share. It's hard to look at those 10 calves like they are just 10 ordinary calves and you're going to tie them all down no problem. Facing things with that mentality just isn't who I am. You've got to be aggressive but

you have to know when to be really aggressive and when to just do your job. 2008 was probably the closest I came to things. I'd have thought after '08 I would've really matured out there at the Finals, it's just never clicked since. That's going to change this year though. "