

Roping Champ Shane Hanchey Readies His Next Run At NFR Glory

The rodeo cowboy talks life on the road, the importance of friendship and horses, and what it takes to win.

BY MARY MCCASHIN



PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY GAC

It's early in the morning at Outlaw Equine Clinic and Rehab Center in Decatur, Texas. Shane Hanchey waits patiently poolside as his horse, Reata, undergoes hydrotherapy, the compact sorrel gelding swimming laps back and forth soaking up his salt-water treatment. In 2012, the rodeo star wasn't sure what the future held for Reata and him following a close call with colic that resulted in surgery for the gelding. Today, however, a grin emerges on Hanchey's face, a sign of the relief of knowing that he and his horse can both overcome any obstacle thrown in their path and achieve gold buckle dreams.

After finishing fifth in the world following the 2012 Wrangler National Finals Rodeo, riding Clint Cooper's Sweetness and Tuf Cooper's Jag, 2013 started off well enough for Shane, as he won at Denver's National Western Stock Show in January. The next eight months would prove to be a rocky road for the then 23-year-old Louisiana cowboy; he hit a couple of earning dry spells. Hanchey tried to stay focused, rehabbing his horse and keeping the 2013 National Finals in sight. "It's life and hard knocks exist. You can't avoid them." And change the last part to: Thanks in part to Cody Ohl and Trevor Brazile, Hanchey competed the majority of the 2013 season on borrowed horses. "I was really struggling and Cody loaned me his horse Pearl and Trevor Brazile loaned me his horse Rio. It helped knowing those guys had my back."

Things began to click in September 2013, and with Reata back in action, the road to the 2013 NFR looked a little brighter. "I'm just a student of the game," Hanchey says. "I knew what it would take to not only win but to break records. It's such an emotional game. After the eighth or ninth round, you're just mentally exhausted and all you can do is focus on making your run your best one. "You've got nothing to lose and everything to gain."

On December 15, 2013, Hanchey gained it all. He walked away the tie-down roping world champion, shattering two world records in the process. It took him four trips to the NFR to make his dreams come true, but he didn't let his previous history rattle him.

"Each trip to the NFR is different," he says. "I got there three different ways before, so I just tried to stay focused on No. 4."

Taking photos alongside Shane and his family in the media room that day was Tuf Cooper, Hanchey's longtime friend and two-time tie-down roping champion. Comparisons between Hanchey and Tuf Cooper have been thrown around for years, some going as far as to trying to pit the two friends against one another in every way possible.

"You know, Tuf and I have been friends since our junior rodeo days. We didn't grow up with the same means but we always talked about getting to this point. It never really gets to us.

"If I'm struggling, Tuf keeps me thinking positive and vice versa. He's part of my family." With so many variables in the sport of tie-down roping, Hanchey says, you can't start dwelling on who's making more money at the moment and you can't pick small battles. "I just knew if I hung out with a winner I'd become a winner too," Hanchey says. "We just want each other to perform our very best. We don't let the competition talk eat away at our friendship."

Road life is certainly a large part of rodeo, and having a traveling partner you can rely on makes things easier. However, Hanchey's primary focus is on his two horses.

"I can take care of myself and make sure I'm good to go, but I have to pay attention to them more. I constantly worry about my horses and their quality of life on the road."

In addition to Reata, Hanchey travels with a roan gelding he got from Blair Burk. "It's always good to have a backup, just in case," he says. "I need Reata to last as long as possible, so I don't want to stress him out."

Hanchey certainly feels as though he's sitting on top of a stronger, fitter horse as he aims for the 2014 NFR.

"He always kind of had it easy, and now he's leaner and stronger than he's been before. I can feel the difference."

These days, Hanchey is focused on making his way to the 2014 NFR and winning back-to-back titles. He's traded baseballs in for

golf balls, catching 18 holes whenever he can on the road. And, unlike many cowboys, Hanchey has chosen to live a sober lifestyle. "It's not like I distance myself from guys that drink; I have plenty of friends who have a good time. It's hard enough to win and stay on top — I just don't need anything in my way."

So the next time the lanky Louisiana cowboy backs the muscular, powerhouse gelding into the box, sit up and pay attention.

Together the two represent a true partnership between a cowboy and his horse, and together they'll keep chasing another gold buckle.