

Beating the Odds to Be in Vegas

SHANE HANCHEY'S SORREL GELDING, Smokin Reata, has been a bridesmaid several times in the AQHA-Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association horse of the year balloting. But make no mistake, the 14.2-hand powerhouse of a gelding is a world champion in his own right, overcoming pitfalls such as illness and colic surgery to making a comeback at the 2013 Wrangler National Finals Rodeo and helping Shane clench the world championship in tie-down roping.

Today Shane is headed to his fifth consecutive NFR, sitting seventh in the world.

"I don't really feel any pressure heading into the NFR," he says. "I'm just excited for this December and to do it with 'Reata.'"

That hasn't always been a sure thing, due to some serious ups and downs throughout their time together.

Shane met Reata when he was just a freshman in high school. A baseball-obsessed teenager, he'd traveled to Florida to visit his brother, Jason Hanchey, who was working for legendary breeder Buck Daniel.

On that visit, Shane climbed aboard Reata and won two back-to-back high school rodeos.

Buck sensed a unique connection between the teen and Reata, telling Shane that if he found a way to get the gelding back to Louisiana, Reata was his to keep.

In 2009, their first year together on the PRCA circuit, Reata became violently ill and barely survived. Shane was later told that only one in four horses could have been expected to make it, and Reata was one of the lucky ones.

"He's tough, he's tougher than any other horse I've met," Shane says. He went on to win the tie-down roping rookie of the year award but was eager to get Reata back out on the road with him.

2010 and 2011 rolled like a dream, with Shane and Reata making their way to the National Finals every year. Reata was third in line to be the AQHA-PRCA horse of the year in 2010 and was a runner-up in 2011 and 2012.

But before the 2012 National Finals could even begin, everything changed.

Reata had a grim encounter with colic and had to undergo colic surgery to save his life.

Shane powered forward on borrowed horses, finishing 5th in 2012 and knowing he'd be forced to compete most of the 2013 season without Reata.

Thanks to friends who loaned horses, Shane made it through the first nine months of 2013.

Finally, thanks to the top-notch staff and care at Decatur, Texas' Outlaw Equine, Reata was ready for a comeback. At the 2013 NFR, he helped Shane shatter two world records and achieve his lifelong dream in the process, to be a world champion.

On December 15, 2013, Shane tied his final calf and was crowned the 2013 tie-down roping world champion.

"Obviously, you dream about doing what I did, but you can't really put it into realization until it happens," he says. "I always worked toward a gold buckle and doing it off of him (Reata), so it just made it that much sweeter."

So before hitting the lights of Las Vegas this year, Shane is taking every necessary precaution when it comes to Reata's care.

"I don't sleep when he's here. I check on him maybe three to four times at night before I go to sleep," he says. "I just hold my breath because he has colicked before. Luckily, he has only had to have the surgery once, but I know there's that chance. He's pretty much under 24-hour surveillance when he's with me and when he's at Outlaw Equine."

A few weeks before the National Finals, Reata will make his way back to Outlaw Equine for hydrotherapy and quality time in the swimming pool to make sure he's at his peak and ready to perform.

Once the 2014 NFR gets rolling, Shane will entrust Reata's care to his brother Jason and his vet.

In the meantime, Shane's hitting the gym and roping every day to make sure he is as fit and ready as he can be himself. And he's thankful that he has his dependable partner with him.

"I'm always going to be more confident on Reata than I am on any other horse, just because he has helped make

me who I am," Shane says. "I set an average record and a new NFR earnings record last time I was in that arena on Reata. My confidence is at an extreme high. I'm just ready for things to get rolling."

No matter the outcome at the NFR, Shane and Reata are ready for the 2015 season, although with the 15-year-old gelding getting older, Shane is starting to think about finding a successor. It won't be an easy task.

"No horse is going to be Reata," he says. "Every day, I'm looking for that next top-notch horse. I know Reata's days are numbered, that's just part of it and how life goes. I'm always looking, and I've got a few in mind. Nothing is going to reach the same level as Reata, though. It doesn't matter what horse I'm on, the feeling I have when I ride Reata is irreplaceable."

BY MARY MCCASHIN

