

The breaks of being a bronc rider

Bobby Mote bucks the perils and hangs on for glory

By Alyson Ward
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Bobby Mote remembers sitting in his window seat on a plane to Seattle, helpless. The pain in his stomach was bad and getting worse. A buddy was just a row in front of him, but Mote couldn't lean forward or even raise his voice to ask for help.

"I really, truly thought I was dying, and I couldn't tell anybody about it," he said.

The world-champion bareback rider was leaving California and the Rancho Mission Viejo Rodeo, where a horse named Diaper Duty had reared up and slammed him against the chute just before his ride. Mote had been trapped between the wall and his bareback rigging, which bored into his abdomen.

"It knocked the air out of me," said Mote, who will compete this week in the semifinals at RodeoHouston. "I figured I had probably broken some ribs. But a lot of times in a case like that, if you hurry up and ride before the adrenaline runs off, you'll do fine."

He rode that horse, scored a respectable 76 points, then caught a plane to the next rodeo.

A few hours later, Mote was having emergency surgery for a lacerated pancreas. The rigging had pushed his internal organs up against his spine, and his pancreas was so damaged, the surgeons had to remove half of it.

He spent two weeks in the hospital. But just three months later, Mote made it to Las Vegas for the 2011 National Finals Rodeo, the Super Bowl for rodeo cowboys. He couldn't sit up until 30 days before the finals, but he got on a horse in Vegas and finished the year ranked third in the world all-around standings.

"I'd lost so much conditioning and so much core strength," Mote said. "It turned out fine, but that was a scary deal."

Victory at a price

Mote, 37, is one of the elite bareback riders in the world. The Oregon native - who lives with his wife and three kids near Stephenville - has won the world championship in bareback riding four times, and he holds the lifetime earnings record in his event with more than \$2 million.

Mote's career has been a series of big wins and broken bones, victories and surgeries. But as often as he's been hurt, his fitness and core strength have probably saved him a few times, said Rick Foster, program director of the Justin Sports Medicine Team, which provides medical care and physical therapy to rodeo competitors.

"Bareback riding is definitely the most strenuous sport in rodeo, and the most physically demanding," Foster said. To compete these days, cowboys have to be at peak strength and fitness.

Rodeo is changing, and bareback riders today are more athlete than daredevil.

Mote was skinny and unathletic as a kid, and in the early days of his rodeo career, guys like him didn't do a lot of conditioning. Bareback riders are supposed to be light on their feet, agile and small; nobody wanted to bulk up.

But in the past decade, rodeo cowboys have started taking their diets and workouts seriously, Foster said. They've started building up lean muscle, endurance and stability. Now success in the arena is equal parts technique and fitness level.

"The more fit they are, the more they can ride with the technique," Foster said. "They're more in control."

Now, more than 20 years into his career, Mote's trying to improve, not maintain.

"The only reason I have to get better is because my competition is," he said. "There's guys now that weren't around when it was easier for me to win. So I've got to ride better. They're obviously younger, but I mean, the level of competition keeps getting better."

Mote juggles constant travel - he competes in dozens of rodeos each year - with regular workouts to build up strength, agility and balance. At any given time, he's rehabbing one injury or another, and that calls for more specific exercises.

"I've seen it change quite a bit - the quality of the stock, the quality of the events, the quality of the riders," Mote said. "I work way harder at it now than I ever used to."

Hooked from the start

Mote remembers the first time he got on a bucking horse as a 15-year-old in Oregon.

"There was a guy who had an arena about 30 minutes from where I lived," he said. "On Thursday nights, he would buck out horses and bulls, and you could pay \$8 to get on one." Mote had a learner's permit and couldn't drive to the arena by himself, so he talked his grandmother into riding along in his dad's truck.

"I didn't know what to expect," he said of that first ride. "It was kind of a blur. Which it was for the first couple hundred horses."

Eventually, Mote dropped out of high school to pursue rodeo fulltime. He married in 1999, and for a long time the young couple put all their money into rodeo entry fees. Kate Mote worked two jobs and helped him chop firewood to earn a living. Every week, they'd pool their money and he'd go to the rodeo. "And I wouldn't win," he said. He'd come back empty-handed, and on Monday they'd start earning rodeo money all over again.

"It was that way for a few years," Mote said. "And, in between, there I was getting hurt all the time, so not only did I have rodeo bills, I had hospital bills."

Mote has broken so many ribs, he doesn't keep count. He's had a rod and three screws in his right leg since a high school rodeo. He broke his collarbone at RodeoHouston, his left foot in San Antonio. He once broke two vertebrae in his back when a horse crushed him in the chute. He still finished the year as the world champion runner-up.

Early in his career, a horse tossed Mote into the side of an arena. "I hit my head on a post, which knocked me out, and I guess that's what fractured my skull," he said. "I guess I was in ICU for three days. I still don't remember it."

When Mote finally began to win, he won big. He won a couple of big rodeos in 2000 and was reserve world champion - the runner-up - the next year. In 2002, at age 26, Mote won his first world championship. He's done that three more times, in 2007, 2009 and 2010. Only two bareback riders have ever won more than four titles. And even though he's approaching 40, he's not about to stop chasing that fifth gold buckle.

It's unusual for a bareback rider to last so long, said Joe Bruce Hancock, general manager of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo.

"I liken it to (the career) of a prizefighter," he said. "You don't see a lot of prizefighters in their 30s anymore. The wear and tear and the blows to all parts of your body, your head and everywhere else - it's just difficult, it really is."

That goes for all rough stock events, Hancock said, but it's especially true for bareback riders.

"There's no stability for them," he said. "They're just tied on by a hand and doing the best they can to stay in rhythm with the animal."

Not ready to quit

More than one doctor has told Mote he should wrap up his rodeo career, that he's too hurt to get back out there and do more damage to his body.

"That news is never easy to take," he said. "But then, once the shock has wore off, I guess I always went and got a second opinion or a third opinion until I found somebody who was willing to tell me something different. I just keep asking until someone says, 'No, I think we can do something for you.' "

That's what happened with his neck, which developed bone spurs from years of repeated whiplash. In 2010, the bone spurs started pressing on a nerve and making his left arm go numb. The first doctor, Mote recalls, told him, "I've reviewed your MRI, and the bottom line is you've had a good career. What do you have left to prove? Why don't you just hang it up?"

That didn't sit well with a guy who'd been chasing a rodeo dream for 20 years. Riding bareback was all he'd wanted to do since he was a kid listening to Chris LeDoux songs.

So he got an appointment with the spine consultant to the Dallas Cowboys, who said, "I think we can fix you." Four days later, Mote was having spinal surgery. Later that year, he won his fourth world championship.

That was the win that "meant the most," Kate Mote said. "He had gone through so many injuries. Doctors had said, 'Well, you're done, let's call it a good career.' And then he wins another one."

That's why she hasn't once tried to talk her husband into listening to the doctors, maybe consider another line of work.

"I always am behind him," she said. "He just says that nobody's going to tell him when (to quit) - he's going to be the one to decide. He's just not taking no for an answer, so neither am I."

But then, Kate Mote's a barrel racer. She understands how it is.

"I've had a few injuries myself," she said, including a broken leg and a broken collarbone from horses that fell while she was riding. That hasn't stopped her from competing whenever she has the chance.

Eyes on another prize

To be a bareback rider as long as Mote has requires some grit, some determination and some listening to your body.

"A lot of injuries kind of creep up on you," he said. "Wear and tear. Pretty soon, this doesn't move right or work right." When he wakes up in the morning, something usually hurts. "My back ... my neck. You just kinda take some Advil at night before you go to bed. That helps."

A few years ago, Mote took up team roping. It's easier on the body, an event that may let him stay on the rodeo circuit for many more years. But he's not planning that transition anytime soon. He still has goals. He wants to win another championship. And he's putting in the time, working on strength and conditioning to avoid more injury.

Foster, a clinical trainer, has treated a lot of Mote's injuries over the years, and he's seen how stubborn he can be about returning to the arena.

"It's like anything else," Foster said. "You only want to hear what you want to hear." But Foster doesn't think Mote's even close to reaching to end of his bareback riding career.

"He's still where he can win," Foster said. "He is not there (at the end) yet; he still has the ability to put another championship together."

Mote believes that, too.

"If I felt like, 'Man, that is it, that is all I can do, ' then you wouldn't see me around anymore," he said. "But I don't feel like that's the case."

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