

Harry Tompkins

1997 Texas Rodeo Cowboy Hall of Fame

By El Deano

Probably no one else, past or future, will ever have the style and balance that this great bull and bareback rider had during his days of competition. He won the bullriding titles in 1948, '49, '50, '52 and 60 ("I let Jim Shoulders win the 1951 title because I tore my right knee cartilage," tongue-in-cheek Harry stated.). He won the bareback riding title in 1952 and the all-around titles in 1952 and 1960. He was on his way to win the all-around title again in 1961 until he drew 554 of Beutlers at Las Vegas, Nevada. "He was hard to ride and bucked me off and I landed on my hands and feet on the inside and as he came around again he hit me with his horn right at my elbow and tore it all up. That in effect ended my career. I did start to get in some of the Old-Timers rodeos but never could get that elbow right again." He won the Old-Timers rodeo at Las Vegas in 1980 but was ruptured soon afterward at another show and that ended even the Old-Timers rodeoing.

Mr. Tompkins grew up in Peekskill, New York very close to the Hudson River where his dad made a living working heavy jack hammers and also worked for the county. "My dad was a giant of a man, about 280 pounds but my mom was small, probably one reason I was relatively small in stature.

"I was born circa 1927 and grew up in a small town where everyone worked hard. Most of my younger days were spent going ice skating in the winter. I would strap on my skates at home and walk to the ice rink on them. We played marbles and I walked every rail fence I could find and did gymnastics at the school. I could pull myself hand over hand all the way to the ceiling and do lots of chin-ups with only one hand." Do you think that any of those activities helped you to ride so well? "Well yes, I'm pretty sure both did as it takes quite a bit of balancing to ice skate and especially walk those rail fences and of course climbing the ropes to the gym ceiling developed my arms and hands."

Did you do any organized sports during your high school days? "I did the gymnastics and could have but I never had much interest in any of those because when I was fairly young I started working at a riding horse stable that was about four miles from our home. I would go there as soon as school was over and helped take care of about fifty horses. I loved that and of course came home every day smelling like horses." Did any of your family anywhere have farms or livestock? "No, none of my family then or since have ever had any interest in horses or livestock, that is except me." Harry said the family raised a few hogs to butcher for their own use and that was it.

When Harry was about 16 he started working at a dude ranch near their home. The dude ranch had a couple of hundred horses and it kept a good supply of Hereford steers and heifers on feed to feed the dudes when they came out every weekend. Of course the city dudes had plenty of money because of the defense jobs during World War II. Harry would help at whatever needed done with the horses and cattle. The ranch had a small rodeo arena with two bucking chutes. "I rigged the chutes up so that I could open them myself, flanked the steers, pulled my own rope (just a plain rope with a small loop) and started to ride the cattle. The Managers wanted some of their help to ride in the dude rodeos on the weekend so I started practicing. At times when someone else was there I would get them to help. Those steers weighed about 800 pounds so they would buck pretty good. Sometimes I would ride about 10-12 a day so I got pretty good at it."

How did you know how to do all this? "The dude ranches around the area would sponsor several of the best cowboys of those days at the Madison Square Garden and so I got to go and see them compete and was able to watch the cowboys behind the chutes getting ready and also see them getting on their bull/horses. By seeing them up close I could fairly well remember how to do it when I got back to the ranch."

Somewhere along during this time the rodeo associations in the area made a ruling that the cowboys had to work at a dude ranch at least 60 days before the rodeo. The regular rodeo cowboys didn't have time to do that so the dude ranches told Harry that he was going to get entered in the Madison Square Garden by them. The main reason for this was that the rodeo cowboys were putting down Peekskill, New York as their homes so everyone thought all of the best cowboys were from New York, but in actuality they were all from the West. I had only been on two regular rodeo bulls at Springfield, Massachusetts where Jim Esque, Jr. had the stock." How did you fare at Madison Square Garden? "They threw me off everything I got on but when

I got bucked off I didn't land on my head, I always landed on my feet. Mr. Colburn and the other cowboys were trying to get me disqualified because they thought I was too young and would get hurt. I was riding the horses but didn't look too good because my feet would be in the flank rigging while my hand was still in the bareback rigging but I started making the whistle. I've got a photo on a real good bucking horse they called him the "Lazy B" and that's how I looked when the whistle blew."

Did you attend any college? "Yes, I attended the College of Knowledge up and down the roads!" But of course Mr. Tompkins is not saying for anyone not to pursue an education, but in his day and for him that was not his goal.

What did you do after high school? "As soon as I turned 18, I was drafted by the Army and spent one and one-half years at Staten Island, New York which was real close to where I could get into the rodeos. The war was over when I got drafted so they stationed me there during the years of 1946 and 1947. As a matter-of-fact I went into the service the same day the Japanese surrendered."

When did you get serious about trying the rodeo game? "In 1947 I entered in Madison Square Garden again and drew a bull that Herb Dalton had in the 1st go and he jumped out high and threw Herb off pretty quick (I've got the photo of that). I drew the bull in the next go round and he jumped out about as high as the top of the chutes and spun into my hand and I rode him and won the go-round. Of course all of the big name cowboys didn't know me because I would come from the Army Base in my military clothes and go a hotel room and change my clothes and just walk up. After winning the go round they gave me a voucher and I walked up to the front window and they paid me \$316.00 in one dollar bills and I had enough money to stash under my mattress, go eat three meals and enjoy myself. That was big money because I only made \$8.00 a week at the dude ranch." I thought, "Man, if that is what this game is all about, well I'm going to do it!" That was in October and in January of 1948 he went to Denver and won Denver and won the world championship that year in '48. Mr. Tompkins entered bareback riding and bullriding at every show.

After that were you riding most of the stock that you got on? "Well, just overnight I went to riding just about all. I had this ability called eye contact. I could look off and still tell what the bull or horse was doing." About how many of those steers had you gotten on before this though? "I had probably gotten on over one hundred just that one summer. I also rode lots of saddle horses during those war years and we would be short of saddles so I rode bareback, so therefore, I had been on lots of animals." (The cowboys called him Yankee, Upstate, Uppy, Dude, etc. and a few other names, but they didn't know he had been on that many head of stock!).

Did you develop a style that was peculiar to you? "Well, it's really just eye contract, coordination with the animal, balance, etc. being able to think clearly while riding. I just sat right in the middle of his back, feet flat, ie; just like you would sit in a saddle, toes slightly turned out. I never took ahold of a bull in the chute, I just stayed ahead of him coming out and kind of 'bumped' him with my spurs on the opposite side of the way he was turning." One thing he could do was keep his rear right on the bulls back and close to the rope which is real hard to do at times. "On almost all of my photos my little finger is sticking out from a slightly closed hand as far as freehand description. I almost never lost my hat. If I did, I probably went with it. I did buck off of some of the very rank bulls but I never got on one that I didn't think I could ride.

"After one of the rodeos Mr. Colburn of Dublin, Texas (who also had one of the best bucking strings of those days) told me it was costing about \$50,000 to set up the bucking chutes and to design something less costly. A little later on I was in Chickasha, Oklahoma and was watching them put up a drilling rig and I saw those skids they were on and I said, 'Why there it is right there.' So I went to planning and built the first portable bucking and rodeo chutes on skids. That way you didn't have to set it all up each time and it was much easier and stronger than the old systems." Question, did you design those chutes to where they had a steel bar down on the inside to put your feet on? "No way," he said, "that would certainly ruin your legs with the bull banging against them."

Mr. Tompkins married Melba about twenty five years ago and they live at Dublin, Texas in a very neat, unique, partial underground home (when the TV operator and writer were leaving one of their beautiful white horses was walking around on top of their home). Melba informed the writer that Harry was the first cowboy to endorse and wear Wranglers in 1948. He has three children and one of Melba's grandchildren was there at the time we did the interview. Her name is Mindy and she goes to Tarleton.

Harry tries out bucking bulls at his pens and he and Melba raise horses and have some barrel prospects at present. One of his daughters is Martha Wright accomplished barrel racer and she helps train the barrel horses. Martha's husband Ed Wright is also a famous horse trainer and between them they have trained many champion horses. Martha has recently written a book with detailed information on training horses.

What do you attribute your great success to? "Knowing what was happening all around me while the bull was bucking and balance." Advice for young cowboys. "If you're going to ride do it for a living. If you're not good enough for that, better not try. If you can't get off in good shape, better not try because you'll end up hurt most of the time. I also was recycled in basic training and had to go through basic twice and that really strengthened my body tremendously.

Bulls today in the PBR as compared to the bulls in your day. "The best bulls in my day were just as rank as the best today. The difference is that now the bulls are more even and so many people are raising bucking bulls ie; the biggest percentage of the bulls today are all top bulls."

What was your most memorable ride? "At Great Falls, Montana they had a stage set right on the same level as the top rail of the arena. Casey Tibbs rode his horse and the horse got real close to the stage and he just stepped off onto the stage and the crowd went wild. I told Casey you're not going to out-do me if my bull gets close enough to the stage I'm going to get off there also. The bull got to about ten feet of the stage the whistle blew and I let go and landed on the stage also, on my feet and took my hat off to the crowd". Lew Quick said something like, 'Boys, these guys are even going to out perform us on the stage. I'm going home.'" Most memorable wreck: "One of the two times I wore chaps I got off the bull and somehow got tangled up in them with the bull on them and me and couldn't get away. I told the clown to get the bull off and he asked me if I was going to 'ante up', I said yes, get the bull off and it seemed like forever but he finally did". You'll have to ask Harry what 'ante up' means.

Harry Tompkins is in eight Halls of Fame as follows: National Cowboy Hall of Fame, Oklahoma City; Pro-Rodeo Hall of Champions, Colorado Springs, Co.; AKSARBEN Western Hall of Fame, Omaha, Nebraska; Texas Rodeo Cowboy Hall of Fame, Belton, Texas; Weatherford Cowboy Hall of Fame, Ft. Worth, Texas; Dublin Rodeo Heritage Museum, Dublin, Texas; Cowboy Capital Walk of Fame, Stephenville, Texas; St. Paul Rodeo Hall of Fame, St. Paul, Oregon. These are not necessarily listed in order of importance, if any.

Mr. Tompkins is constantly innovating and designing techniques for riding, spurs, chutes, etc. and currently has a truly revolutionary idea for hand and arm position. He has also designed a new type spur that at least one PBR rider is using and shows great potential.

Rick Tripp

By El Deano

Rick Tripp — A personal note. I knew Rick back in the days of Texas Tech as he was in the rodeo game. He rode bulls and worked some other events but he was primarily in the roping events. We lost contact over the years but I attended one of his estate sales in the early nineties and we re-established friendships only this time on a brother-in-Christ relationship. He had been drinking real heavy for years but he finally turned to that Name that is above all names and he finally found that true identity of himself that can only be found in Christ Jesus. He stopped thru Rocksprings when he could and I stopped at Brady and saw him as often as I could. I had last seen him sometime in April as some of our family was going to son-in-law's graduation. I found out on the day before he passed away that he was very ill. Tried to call on that same day but was unable to reach anyone. Finally got his wife Suzie the next morning and she emotionally told me he was breathing his last. He had been sick only a short time, about seven weeks.

Just a short time before his death Rick had an emotional visit with one of Rocksprings own Trey Smart. They had come to know each other very well during the few years that Trey had lived in that area. As a matter of fact anyone who knew Rick could not help but love him as his love for Christ just busted out all over him.