



ALL COWBOY & ARENA CHAMPIONS

HALL OF FAME



Don Graham

2006 Texas Rodeo Cowboy Hall of Fame



I was born on August 15, 1951 into a rodeo cowboy family. My dad, Dwight Graham, roped calves and rodeoed throughout the 50s and 60s. My mom, the former Frances Newton, grew up running barrels, and actually “broke” my very first horse that I got the day I was born. My grandfather, Arthur Newton, roped calves, “tripped” steers, and was the foreman of the Josey Ranch in Carrollton, Texas for fifty years. With the combined efforts of Dad, Mom, and my granddaddy, I had plenty of opportunity and good teachers to get me started cowboyin’.



Watching my dad and granddaddy rope and compete, it was only natural when they put a rope in my hands and taught me what they knew. I learned to ride very early on my granddad's horse "Booger" there on the ranch and soon started ropin' breakaway on him when I was around 8-9 years old. Later, after Dad had started working on my own pony "Spooky", I learned to rope and tie-down calves on him. I got to start entering junior rodeos when I was 11-12 years old and actually roped at the Texas State High School Finals in Hallettsville, Texas in 1964. When our family eventually moved to East Texas (when I was about 15 years old) and bought a place out in the country, Dad built us the finest ropin' pen you ever saw and kept calves for us all the time. This is where I really started to develop what skills I had and really began to enjoy roping.

It's here that I have to go back to when I was much younger and growing up with a good friend of mine, Monny Mullins. My dad and his, Bill Mullins, rodeoed and roped a lot together and were best of friends. It seems like there was a time when we spent virtually every weekend of life either going to their place in Durant, Oklahoma or having them down at our place when we lived in Justin, Texas north of Ft. Worth. Bill had a roping pen at his place in Durant and when we were about 6 or 7 years old, Monny built a little buckin' chute at one end where he and I took turns playin' bullrider by getting on the ropin' calves. This is my first recollection of ridin' anything that bucked. I continued to get on calves, but as I grew I graduated up to ridin' bulldoggin' steers, and got on my first "fullgrown" bull when I was 12 at a junior rodeo in Gatesville, Texas. A couple of years earlier, I had met and come to be friends with Bobby Steiner whose dad, Tommy, produced the big rodeo in Ft. Worth, Texas for many years. We were about the same age, our families knew each other socially, and the summer I turned 13 I got to go to a bunch of A.J.R.A rodeos with them. They were always very nice, not to mention very generous with their time, teaching, and "resources".

Throughout the rest of high school, I continued to compete in youth rodeos and various jackpot ropings and when I turned 16, I got my first R.C.A. (Rodeo Cowboys Association) permit. After hauling hay most of the summer, Dad finally let me enter my first pro rodeo at Carthage, Texas, and I placed second in the second go-round of the roping and second in the average. A week or so later, my mom "hauled" us to Springhill, Louisiana where, again, I placed in a go-round and the average. It so happened that we ran in to Dalton Emerson and Mack Nesmith at Springhill who were both good friends of my

dad.

Well, I was also entered at a rodeo the following weekend in Crossett, Arkansas and when we all figured out that we were all going, they volunteered to “hitch up” my horse trailer to their rig and take me with them. This allowed my mom to get back home and take care of my little brother, Joel, and Dad who at this time was working for the Moorman’s Mfg. Co. as the State Sales Mgr. for Texas. Crossett was a four go-round ropin’ and they were using big red Brahma calves that weighed about 285-300 pounds. However, by this time, Dad had bought a big sorrel horse for me to rope on, that could “do it all”! Even though it rained just about every day and the arena was ankle-deep in mud, I roped all of my calves placing in all four go-rounds and picked up second in the average there. By this time I was “hooked” on the rodeo business because it was a lot more fun than “haulin’ hay” and the money seemed to come a little easier!

The summer was over, I’d turned 17 and it was time to go back for my senior year in high school. We still roped every day, but I was quickly becoming more interested in my bull riding and was even getting on a few bareback horses. When we went to school the year dragged on because that isn’t where we wanted to be. When I graduated, I couldn’t wait to “hit the trail” but Mom and Dad weren’t quite as excited as I was. Although Dad had provided a very comfortable lifestyle for us as a family, I know he wanted me to work for a living and to “learn the value of a dollar”. I argued that I was young and needed to experience a little life on my own, so Dad gave me \$100.00, took away my gasoline credit card, and told me to rodeo all I wanted to but when the money ran out, I had to come home and get a “real job”. My first rodeo to enter that summer was Ft. Smith, Arkansas, I placed 3rd in the bull riding there for a check in excess of \$600.00, and never figured to see a poor day!

From then on, I’d go to R.C.A. rodeos in the summer, go to college (Texas A&M) in the fall, winter, and spring and work all the college rodeos, and still get to the nearby pro rodeos that I could without missing school (much). I finally graduated from A&M in the fall of 1973 with a degree in Marketing and immediately put it to use by entering Odessa, Texas and everything else I could get to for the rest of 1974. It paid off with my first National Finals Rodeo qualification in the bull riding that year. I went to the N.F.R. two more times, in 1975 and again in 1977. It was about this time that I met my future wife, Jane Livingston, and I had always promised myself if I found someone to marry, I’d get a job and settle down. We married in

February of 1978, honeymooned at Houston during the rodeo, and went back to Carrollton, Texas, where we first lived as a couple on the Josey Ranch where I'd grown up. Within a couple of weeks, I was hired by the Justin Boot Co. where I have been employed for 20 years.

Chronology of Rodeo Career for Don Graham:

*Began competition in junior rodeos in 1964 at age 12 (roping events and steer riding)

*Acquired R.C.A. Permit in 1968, entering calf roping event (placed at all three rodeos entered)

*Filled Permit with first bull riding check in 1969 and joined R.C.A. as full member

*Member of Texas A&M Rodeo Team 1972 and 1973

- 1972-All-Around and Bull Riding Champion of Southern Region/N.I.R.A.; qualified for National Intercollegiate Rodeo Assn. Finals/Bozeman, Montana (worked five events)

- 1973- worked six events; qualified for National Intercollegiate Rodeo Assn. Finals in Bareback Riding and Bull Riding; at Bozeman, Montana Finals, won first in Bull Riding average and placed second in Bareback Riding average; named Reserve All-Around Champion

*1974- Graduated from Texas A&M with B.B.A. degree in Marketing; named to Outstanding College Athletes of America; qualified for first National Finals Rodeo

*1975-Continued rodeo competition; qualified for second N.F.R. in Bull Riding

*1976-Continued rodeo competition

*1977-Continued rodeo competition; qualified for third N.F.R. in Bull Riding

*1978-By virtue of N.F.R. qualification, earned invitation to U.S. Tobacco Copenhagen/Skoal Rodeo Superstars Competition (matched Bull Riding format); Retired from competition; hired by Justin Boot Company as Sales Representative

*1998-elected to Gladewater Round-Up Rodeo Committee and still serving

Although the financial opportunity did not exist in rodeo during my era to the degree it does today, I would never trade for the experience and comraderie that I got out of it. I grew up with Pete and Donnie Gay (as kids, riding the clown barrel behind the chutes at Mesquite) and later (as an older kid), spent many nights in their home. Neal and Kay Gay afforded many "learning" opportunities, not to mention lots of practice stock. Bobby Steiner and family took me

with them to many, many junior rodeos and I learned a lot from them. I learned how to ride (and enter and get to rodeos) from many of the top bull riders of my time. Dan Willis, Randy Magers, and later David Glover took me with them to some of my first pro rodeos. I traveled with Bobby Steiner, Sandy and Butch Kirby, and Bobby Berger, but I never had more fun than goin' down the road with Pete and Donnie Gay, Monty "Hawkeye" Henson and Mike Bandy. They're all still friends today.