

BACK IN THE SADDLE

Invention frees disabled man to ride again

By Patricia Merritt

The Ledger

The result of a Texas preacher's prayer and desperation eight years ago has given a paralyzed Haines City man what he's longed for — the ability to ride horses again.

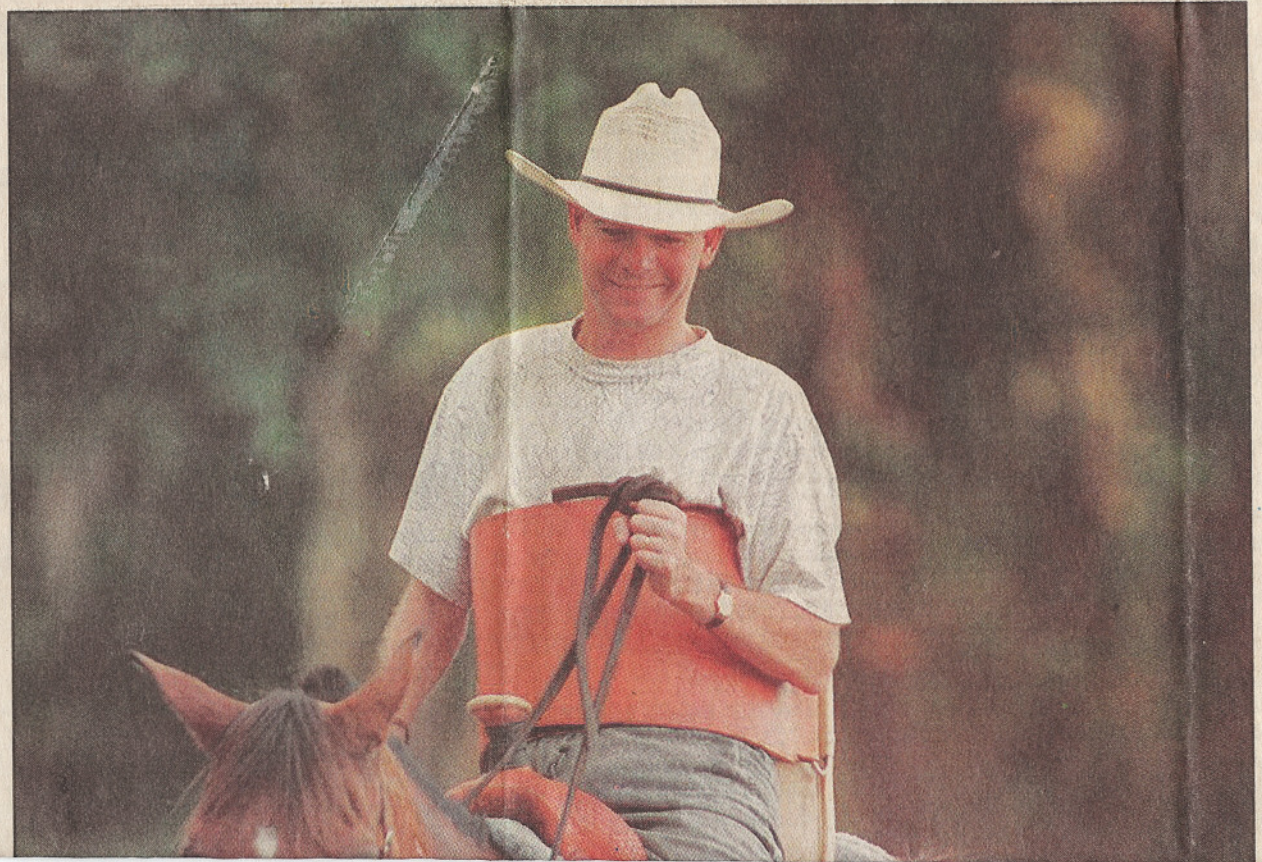
The Rev. Randy Johnson, a longtime rodeo man, has wanted to ride since the accident in 1975 that left him without the use of his legs.

Thanks to the Rev. Randy Bird of Quinlan, Texas, Johnson is back in the saddle again.

"It's like I have a new liberation," says Johnson, who is paralyzed from the chest down with limited use of his hands. "It was something that was a big part of my life and had been gone for 19 years," Johnson says.



The Rev. Randy Johnson is helped into a saddle for the disabled. From left: Aaron Hodges of Horse Haven Stables in Lakeland, Johnson's wife, Kitt, and Sue Hodges of Horse Haven.



TO LEARN MORE

The Rev. Randy Bird's saddles for disabled people range in cost from \$1,500 to \$4,500. For more information, contact Bird at 1-903-883-3357 or Route 4, Box 572, Quinlan, Texas 75474.

Since the accident, Johnson has formed the Reality Rodeo Ministry. The minister preaches during rodeo events throughout the Tampa Bay area.

Johnson will preach at services at noon Monday at the Aldine Combee Arena on Fish Hatchery Road in Lakeland. Reality Rodeo is sponsoring the event, which is scheduled for 2 p.m. Sunday and Monday at the Combee arena.

Donation for the rodeo is \$5 for adults and \$3 for children ages 12 and under.

Despite being around the rodeo, Johnson yearned for more; he wanted to ride again. "It was something I didn't think I could ever do again," he says. "And when it was made possible, it was very much a blessing," he says.

Johnson got his chance to ride through Bird, who recently perfected a saddle for disabled people that he's been working on for eight years.

The Florida Junior Rodeo Association and the Florida High School Rodeo Association bought Johnson a saddle from Bird.

"I got the saddle on May 8 and I was in it on May 10," Johnson says.

Johnson's saddle has a cantle that is 15 inches high to support his back. A wide "belly band" with velcro sewn on it straps across his chest area to keep him in the saddle. The seat is padded with a high-density foam that prevents the rider from getting sores and helps the circulation.

His hands don't open or close, but Johnson laces the straps of the reigns through his fingers.

Horse riding is not just a mental boost, but it has physical benefits, too, says Bird.

"It's not a miracle saddle by any stretch. But what it's done for me is to help me regain my balance, have better blood circulation. My legs are not flabby and fat, but toned," he says.

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Saddle

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"Riding a horse causes the blood to ride up the spinal cord like you're walking. The blood flow is the life line," Bird says.

"The horse becomes your legs."

Bird's saddles are used at five therapeutic centers, where thousands benefit from them. The therapeutic saddles are good for those who have such disabilities as spina bifida, paralysis and amputations, he says.

It takes about three months to make one saddle. Bird has made about 100 and shipped them to different parts of the United States, Germany, Australia, Canada and Israel.

The old adage is true about necessity being the mother of invention, Bird says. A vehicle accident in 1986 left him with a broken neck and back. He's paralyzed from the waist down.

Bird had been involved in the rodeo for 15 years, and the thought of not being able to ride again was too much to bear.

"When I came home from the hospital, I told my brother Jimmy to saddle me on my old saddle. Jimmy put me bodily on the horse. The horse walked real slow and I just wallowed all over the thing," he says.

"My brother led the horse and I held on. We went about 70 feet. I began to weep. He carried me back in the house. I began to cry out to God and said, 'Father, your Word says you would give us the desire of our heart. And I want to ride. I want to figure out a way to ride.'"

He did.

"I feel it's God-inspired," Bird says. "God never gives one person something for just himself."

Photos by Pierre DuCharme/The Ledger

Nineteen years after a paralyzing accident, the Rev. Randy Johnson can finally ride horses again. "It's like I have a new liberation," he says.

TODAY'S BEST BET
COUNTRY DANCE
Benefit dance for Florida Sheriff's Youth Ranches. Music by Southern
Nights Band and Austin Powers.
When: 8 p.m. to midnight
Where: Bartow Civic Center, 2250 S. Floral Ave.