



ED SACKETT/THE ORLANDO SENTINEL

Full circle. These days former rodeo rider Randy Johnson, with wife Kitt, finds himself on horseback again — in a special saddle because he is quadriplegic — preaching the gospel on the rodeo circuit.

Life dedicated to God, cowboy ropes in souls

By Jovida Fletcher

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

HAINES CITY — Randy Johnson's life changed drastically on Aug. 28, 1975. At the time, the 21-year-old thought the carefree days of a rodeo rider were gone forever.

Injuries from a diving accident left Johnson a quadriplegic who had to use a wheelchair. It was the start of a life rededicated to the Lord.

He didn't know it then, but the path he was on eventually would lead him back into rodeo life. Now, two decades later, he finds himself on horseback again — in a specially made sad-

dle — preaching the gospel on the rodeo circuit.

"When I broke my neck, I surrendered my life to the Lord that very day. I had made a commitment when I was 12 but had been running since I was 15 from doing what was right. That was when I made a rededication to the Lord," said Johnson, 43.

Johnson was born in Kissimmee and grew up in Avon Park. He started riding horses bareback and bulls in local rodeos when he was 16. He had just competed in a rodeo in Lake Placid at the time of the accident that changed his life so dramatically.

Please see **JOHNSON, 2**



Cobras schedule

For ticket information, call the Osceola County Stadium on Bill Beck Boulevard in Kissimmee at (407) 933-5500. Monday through Saturday, games are at 7:05 p.m. and Sunday games are at 2:05 p.m. unless noted.

- TODAY — Clearwater
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- 9 — Clearwater
- 10 — Tampa
- 11 — Tampa
- 12 — Tampa
- 13 — Tampa
- 14 — Tampa
- 15 — at Brevard

Doris Spencer and Gerald Abramson, 69, are suing Philip Morris Inc., Publix, The Tobacco Institute and The Council for Tobacco

'The Lord began to tug at my heart'

JOHNSON from 1

"I had always been healthy and involved in physical activities. I had had a few broken bones and stitches from playing football and was hooked by a cow but had never been in a hospital until then," he said.

After the accident, Johnson began to read and study the Bible and became active in the local church. He taught Sunday school and helped with youth outreaches and youth functions. Eventually, the son of James and Betty Johnson earned a degree from Emmanuel Baptist University in Shelby, N.C.

Later, Johnson decided to start his first youth ministry.

"In 1980, there was an old theater in Avon Park which had been vacant for a couple of years. And I leased it and started a ministry called Salvation Station.

"It was an outreach to the youth in that community. We had a free movie every Saturday night and we had a Christian band that played Christian music that the youth could relate to," he said. That's where he met his wife-to-be, Kitt Meredith.

"My brother Larry and my sister, Elaine, who I had prayed for for years, went there and were saved. I thought that something was going

on down there and I'd better check it out," Kitt Johnson said.

Once there, she volunteered to help with the work they were doing.

"I told them I could sing, so they put me to work — cleaning the popcorn machine," she said. "I cleaned the popcorn machine for three years and also did some singing."

The couple married in 1982 and have two children, Sarah, 10, and Jesse, 6.

Randy Johnson put his past behind him and didn't go to a rodeo for 16 years. He said he didn't feel there was a need to be there.

He focused on the Lord and forgot about the rodeo life until, by chance, he read about the Fellowship of Christian Cowboys in 1990.

"I knew a man briefly who had a chapter in Lake Placid, and the Lord began to tug at my heart, and I decided to get in touch with that man. I found there was not an active chapter in Florida," he said.

Randy Johnson called the national headquarters in Colorado Springs to see what he needed to do to start a chapter. He soon started a sub-chapter of the fellowship. That's when he began to wonder if anybody was doing any kind of outreach at rodeos.

The winter Silver Spurs Rodeo was coming up, so he asked whether anyone had such a ministry. He learned no one had done one since the mid-1980s.

"We volunteered our services and their committee approved us and we held Cowboy Church there in February of 1991."

Things took root and spread from that effort.

A girl in the High School Rodeo Association heard about what the Johnsons were doing through the commission. She asked Randy Johnson to hold Cowboy Church at the High School Rodeo in March 1991.

"We got in touch with the adult director of the association and told him what we were doing. He was glad for us to come. We finished out the 1991 season with them and were in Gainesville at the high school state finals and were approached by some of the officers of the Florida Junior Rodeo Association.

"They asked if we would do the same thing for them as we had done for the high school in the coming year. We agreed," he said.

At the time, Randy Johnson was

working full time for Teen Challenge of Florida, a Christian-based drug and alcohol recovery program based in Winter Haven. On week-ends, he ministered at rodeos. But in 1993, Teen Challenge moved to Sanford, and Randy Johnson decided to leave the ministry to focus on rodeos.

"I felt that God was calling us into the cowboy ministry full time and that we were to stay in Polk County where we would be centrally located."

The Johnsons moved to Haines City, and he has been in his special ministry full time since then.

The ministry takes them as far north as Tifton, Ga., and as far south as Davie. But their main role is with young people through the Florida High School Rodeo Association and the Florida Junior Rodeo Association. The two groups allow them to work with children ranging from first through 12th grades.

Randy Johnson said each service in the rodeo arena displays "Cowboy Bibles" and all kinds of Christian literature with a rodeo theme.

Kitt Johnson plays guitar and sings, and he preaches the sermon.

"Our main focus is youth rodeo, but we do the PRCA Silver Spurs Rodeo and the rodeo at Okeechobee," he said.

Three years ago, the Florida High School Association and the Junior Association got together and raised money for a special saddle for Randy Johnson.

"I hadn't ridden for 19 years up to that point, but now I can ride again," he said. "We have a platform for my horse trailer and a platform here. The saddle is such a blessing. They gave it to me at the Junior Awards Banquet in Kissimmee.

"We minister wherever God opens the doors. We preach at churches, youth meetings, individuals, ranches, and on trail rides. We attend a Southern Baptist Church, but our ministry is nondenominational and we are not sponsored by the church," he said.

The Johnsons have a vision for the future.

"We are working on it right here. We have a little less than 10 acres, but we are using what we have," he said. "We want to have a place like an arena and large barn so that kids who may not have the opportunity elsewhere can come and be involved with livestock and learn to ride a horse. It will be an outreach for kids.

"Our ministry is called Reality Ministries. We are forming Reality Ranch, where we can minister to inner-city kids. We hope to see churches in Miami or Jacksonville bring a group of kids out for the weekend or a couple of days where they could have opportunity they might not have somewhere else.

"It will not be a summer camp but like a three-day deal where they can have contact with animals.

"We hope one day to have a larger place where we could do that type of ministry."

For more information on the Reality Rodeo Ministries or the Reality Ranch, contact the Rev. Randy and Kitt Johnson, 4670 Lake Lowry Road, Haines City, 33844. Phone: (941) 422-7132.

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