

Cody Jessee: cowboy at a crossroads

PRINEVILLE — Cody Jessee propped his cast-cased left arm on the edge of the table and proceeded to talk about — of all things — how fortunate he'd been with regard to injuries in his rodeo career.

"I ain't complainin'," he said, in that distinctly cowboy way. "Been pretty lucky, really."

I asked him to elaborate on that "luck."

"Well, let's see," he mullied. "I've broken both ankles, some ribs, my wrist — twice."

He wasn't finished.

"I've fractured my jaw, my shoulder ... and lotsa teeth."

In the world of a champion bareback rider, that passes for lucky.

Jessee chatted with me one sunny midday this past week on the front porch of his home on a little spread south of Prineville. He's on pro rodeo's version of the disabled list, waiting for his latest injury to mend.



Cody Jessee

Two weeks ago, at the Clovis (Calif.) Rodeo, he tumbled off his horse at the end of a ride and broke two bones in his left forearm. He's healing now after surgery, during which doctors repaired the breaks with six screws and a metal plate.

"I've never had any hardware before," the 26-year-old said with his boyish smile. "I'm lucky."

How's that?

"If it was my riding (right) wrist," he explained, "I'd probably be out all year."

Which would mean Jessee would miss the opportunity to defend the world bareback aggregate championship he won last December at the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas. As it is, he will miss another important Vegas stop — the Pro Rodeo Cowboys Association's Winter Tour finals this week at the \$500,000 Pace Picante ProRodeo Chute-Out.

"This year was one of my best starts ever," he said. He won big at RodeoHouston in March, cashing a first-place check worth more than \$15,000. Jessee's 2004 winnings to date total \$32,439, putting him fourth in the world bareback standings and well on his way back to the national finals. So the disappointment of being sidelined for a month or more is understandable. But things could be a whole lot worse.

In fact, they might be already.

In addition to the breaks in his arm, Jessee's spill at Clovis resulted in a head concussion. It wasn't his first. That one happened about 10 years ago, when he was bullriding and somehow knocked noggins with his bull.

"It's just been adding up," he said of the concussions. "This is about 12 now."

Six times, he said, he has been knocked "totally out."

The head injuries have had his doctors' attention for some time. Now Jessee, too, has taken notice.

"I'm just worried how many more knock-outs I can take," he admitted. "It's not something to mess with anymore."

So later this month, Jessee is scheduled to travel to Houston, where he has an appointment with a top neurologist. The whole trip — air fare, lodging, medical bill — is courtesy of the SBACA (Shoulda Been A Cowboy Association), a Texas-based nonprofit group that, in short, raises funds for the assistance of PRCA cowboys who are injured or otherwise having a rough ride through life.

"Hopefully, the news will be good," Jessee said.

But he is bracing himself for the worst-case scenario.

"This might be a career-threatening thing," he said. "And it is ... it's gonna be tough."

"I'd still like to rodeo," he continued. "It's my life, what I've dedicated my life to."

He knew he'd probably face a crossroads like this one day, a decision about when rodeo had taken enough of a toll on his body and he would hang up his spurs and turn his hobby — engraving headstones — into a new career.

"I just didn't expect it to happen," he said, "when I'm 26."

If Jessee feels bitter that it's come to this, it doesn't show. In conversation, he is as upbeat as he was that day back in December when he clinched the NFR aggregate championship.

"You can't feel sorry for yourself," he said. "You could cuss anything you want, but where does that get you?"

He seems good with whatever his future holds — including a bride when he and his fiancée are wed at the end of this month.

"A lot of times, you think you make your own plans in life," said Jessee.

"But God has plans for everybody. And maybe the Lord has other plans for me."

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