

COWBOY TRAINING



Hugh Forsyth switches from soldier to cowboy

In October I boarded a 747 to Dallas Fort Worth for what was to be the most challenging experience I have had since serving in the British army. My final destination, the Predeaux family ranch in Loving, Texas for a two week clinic with Bruce Logan. After a 9½ hour flight and a three hour drive I, along with six others, arrived at the ranch in the dead of night. Bruce sat in front of a fire blazing on the porch, rocking in his chair, with spur clad boots resting on his fireside table. He greeted us with a firm cowboy handshake and the obligatory "How yaawl doin'?"

Only three years ago I was introduced to horses as a client of the charity Dare to Live and now here I was as the charity's operations manager and qualified equine facilitated learning practitioner, about to push my expectations and abilities once more. Was I going to cope with my disabilities? Did I have the grit and horsemanship skills to call myself a horseman? These were the questions I asked myself as I

lay in my bunk that first evening.

At six am we were all wide awake due to the time difference so we sat in the bright Texan sunrise allowing the warm rays to penetrate our bones. I suffer from chronic pain due to spinal injuries I sustained during my time serving with the Royal Engineers Bomb Disposal teams, so the heat was very soothing.

We spent the first morning looking around the ranch and were allocated our horses. Mine was a bay 15 hand quarter horse called Spoon. We bonded instantly. The first afternoon was a familiarisation ride to get to know our horses, then it was horsemanship instruction in the mornings and cattle work in the afternoons.

On day one we trotted out around the smaller pastures of the 7000 acre ranch which brings in an income from clinics like ours, cattle, deer hunting, buffalo breeding and oil. Four hours and a very sore bottom later we returned home and slept like logs. Over the next few days we rode out and increased the difficulty

and distances of the rides by adding in climbs up rocky outcrops and swimming on horseback through waterholes, much to the entertainment of Bruce.

By day two we were already moving 100 head of cattle from one pasture to another. Then we practised separating calves from mothers and steers from heifers, all on horseback. The days were long in the 30 degree heat but on day ten we were taught to cut cattle (blocking a separated member of the herd from escaping). When this is performed correctly, the co-operation between man and horse as they instinctively dart left and right becomes a sight to behold. What a buzz and a brilliant feeling when I eventually mastered it.

As the two week experience ended I looked into the mirror and definitely saw myself as a real horseman and even a cowboy. Yeehaw!

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