

## **The Story of Dennis George – Section Three**

By Stephenie Tanguay

### **1989 to 1995 - Coaching Central Wyoming College Rodeo Team**

Family obligations called Dennis and Barb back to Wyoming. “The kids were grown, our family needed us, and the coaching job was available,” Dennis says.

The interview for the coaching job corresponded with the start of the National High School Rodeo Finals where Dennis once again, had a booth featuring his saddles. Central Wyoming College did not waste time, quickly providing an offer letter to their new rodeo coach.

The timing allowed Dennis a serendipitous recruiting opportunity. “I started the season with 14 bronc riders when most schools start with 2 or 3,” Dennis says. “We had 32 kids the first year and went to the Nationals every year.”

During his tenure coaching the rodeo team at Central Wyoming College, Dennis made the rough stock riders take English riding lessons from the other instructors at the school. “English riding is like riding bareback because you are riding the horse rather than the saddle,” Dennis explains.

Laughing at the memory, Dennis says, “One time they were in the round pen. They had to ride with their head back like this and their eyes closed and their arms out.” Mimicking the students Dennis chuckles as he continues, “They were falling off.”

According to Dennis, he was laughing and poking a little fun at the students when a couple of them challenged him to get on and try the exercise himself. And he did just that. “Well, it was natural for me. I didn’t have any problem doing it,” Dennis says. “It shut them up,” he says with a wink.

## **Reason for leaving.**

“I was on three-quarter time, but I spent time and a half. I wore my pickup out pulling their big heavy trailer down the highway. And never received so much as a thank you,” Dennis remembers the frustration he felt towards the end of his tenure at the college.

In 1995, the college changed arena directors. Access to the facilities and in turn the rodeo team’s practice cattle was limited to standard business hours by the new director. “He left at 5 p.m. and that is when my practice started,” Dennis explains. Dennis cut the padlocks placed on the gates so that the rodeo team could access the practice stock.

Continued friction eventually resulted in a conversation between Dennis and a vice-president at the college. No intervention occurred and “after a time” Dennis elected to tender his resignation.

“I still had the College National Finals in June and a team each, men’s and women’s, and one individual qualified,” Dennis remembers. While preparing for the trip, Dennis was approached by the vice-president. “He asked me if I would go before the board and get my job back,” Dennis says. Reluctantly, Dennis did just that, but to his surprise, the request was denied.

“It made me look like a total stupid idiot, asking for my job back,” he explains. The college refused to reinstate Dennis’s former employment arrangements stating precedent as the reason for inaction.

“I said, ‘that’s fine.’ I refused to play the politics.”

The disappointment Dennis felt at the time of his departure still lingers. “We really had a good scholarship program. We had about \$32,000. I broke that up between 20 or 21 students. I had some good students, some good cowboys and we got a lot of things accomplished. I was sick when I had to quit,” Dennis says. The arena director was fired a year later.

“I walked away from a job I loved. For a long time, I would not even go back into that arena. I would not even drive past it. I was just

so upset,” Dennis recollects. Time has softened those feelings, and in recent days he was able to walk through the arenas, pens, and barns he designed and built for the school.

## **Back to Building Saddles**

Disenfranchised by the separation, Dennis returned to his shop and building saddles. He had maintained the business during his coaching days but did not expand it. One of his college students helped him prior to his departure on a part-time basis. Serendipitously, the young man graduated at the same time Dennis returned to the saddle shop full time. Both men settled into the routine of building saddles for roughly two years.

“I was building bronc saddles, and I built a saddle for myself to pick up bucking horses in,” Dennis shares. Everybody who rode the saddle liked it and the requests for more started to roll in. “At first I said, ‘No.’ because I didn’t want to build them. I had done a little of that in Arizona and it was just a pain,” Dennis states. “People were not appreciative. They were hard to please. They had to have it right now, then they wouldn’t pick it up. It got to be a real headache.”

## **Rain in the Sunshine State**

Eventually, the requestors wore Dennis down and he started building stock saddles. “I met a guy from Florida that was a bareback rider. His daughter was competing at the National High School Finals Rodeo,” he says.

Dennis and the man, Matt Condo, got to talking about the pick-up saddle and Matt said, “You know, I would love to try that saddle.”

Dennis replied, “Well, let me build you one. I’ll send it down and you can try it.”

“And I did,” Dennis continues. Astonished by the quality of the saddle, Matt invited Barb and Dennis to Florida. Always about building strong relationships with his clients and friends, Barb and

Dennis headed to Florida, spending a couple of weeks with Matt and his family.

“Over three years I probably sold more than 40 saddles down there,” Dennis states.

The following year Dennis returned to Florida once again, this time for about six weeks. The time period is ingrained on Dennis’ mind.

“That was a rude awakening. It was a year of an El Nino. Well, I had never heard of that before,” the Wyoming cowboy says.

An outdoorsman at heart, Dennis was astonished by the differences between the waterways in Florida and Wyoming, “Down there you can have a little creek and it’s this wide,” Dennis states while exemplifying the width of a few feet with his hands. “And that son of a buck will be that deep, and it’s straight up and down,” he says marveling at the deep creeks along the roads in the sunshine state. Southerners call them bar ditches, slang for the borrow ditches created when permanent roads were installed.

## **Partnership with Son**

Dennis spent the next few years building up the business in the stock saddle side of the company while also continuing on with the bronc saddle business. Well-known for the quality of his bronc saddles, the list of G Bar G bronc saddle customers includes such legacy families as the Wright brothers.

He attracted new clients by attending numerous trade shows such as those surrounding the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas, Nevada, and the National High School Rodeo Finals each year.

Randy, Dennis’s son, was working down in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Tired of the hustle and bustle in the city, Randy turned to his dad. “He asked me if I thought that we could make it work - if he came up here and went to work for me,” Dennis says. Naturally, Dennis said yes. Passing the bronc saddle side of the business over to Randy, Dennis was able to focus his attention on the stock saddle side of the business.

## **A quick dip in the Cutting Saddle pool.**

About this time a friend in Gillette wanted Dennis to build a cutting saddle for his daughter. “I didn’t know anything about cutting. We sorted out at the ranch, but that’s not cutting,” Dennis states. Although his knowledge of cutting was limited, Dennis, who is always analyzing how something works, listened closely to his client. “I really spent a lot of time trying to figure out this cutting thing,” he says.

Dennis spent hours with the client going through videos and looking at still pictures. The research transitioned into the first cutting saddle built by Dennis George.

The saddle maker then turned to a cousin who worked as a cutting judge all over the country. “He kind of critiqued it a little bit, and then we spent about 6 months building some saddles up,” Dennis says. “Different ones with different looks. Different sizes with different ground seats. I just tried to mix it all up.”

A good friend with significant ties to the cutting horse crowd around Weatherford, Texas encouraged Dennis to head towards the Lone Star State. “He made a deal with all of them to try these saddles so I took them all down there,” Dennis explains the arrangement.

Over the course of about ten days, “they would ride my saddles on several different horses all day long and then they would critique them.”

One of the test riders was an Australian. “He got all through and he came back and said, ‘You know what?’ Of course, he knew G Bar G Saddles and he related it to bronc saddles because that is what I am known for. The guy said, ‘Riding this was just like riding my bronc saddle.’ Well, that told me what the ground seat needed to be like. So I came back and I cut a new ground seat and it was totally different. It felt more like a saddle that I could ride. The rest of them, those cutting saddles, it felt like sitting on a 2x6,” Dennis grimaces.

## **The Battle with Hodgkin’s Lymphoma – 2011/2012**

Upon his return home from Texas, Dennis started not feeling so good. “Walking out across the arena, I just had no strength, what so ever.” Prior to the Texas trip, Dennis’s doctor had put him on iron because he felt Dennis was deficient in that area.

In the doctor’s office once again, another blood test was performed. The results were unhelpful. The doctor was mystified and instructed Dennis to keep on the iron.

Dennis recalls the appointment, “As I was walking out the door, I stopped and said, ‘Doc, look at this on my neck. That god dang bump came up and boy, I mean it is sore.’”

The doctor turned around and looked at the bump. “He kind of dropped his head and said, ‘I know what is wrong with you now. We need to do a biopsy.’”

The procedure was scheduled for the next day. Two days after that the doctor called Dennis back into his office. Dennis and Barb sat down with the doctor and heard the news.

The doctor said, “Well, I have some good news and bad news. You have got Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. The good news is that it is one that they have had fairly good luck in treating it if they catch it quick enough.”

Dennis sat there for a moment and then asked the doctor, “Well, what is the bad news?”

The doctor looked at Dennis and replied, “You have cancer.”

“I just started laughing,” Dennis recalls, “I have no idea why.” Continuing on Dennis stammers and chuckles, “It just - his look and the way he said it. He told me I had cancer, but I didn’t know what in the hell Hodgkin’s Lymphoma was. I had no clue.”

Diagnosed with stage 4 Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, Dennis was referred to a doctor in Casper, Wyoming for treatment. As luck would have it, the doctor in Casper knew a blood specialist from Denver who was in the area working.

During their initial consultation, the specialist spoke with Dennis describing the treatment process. He told Dennis that if the first course of treatment did not work then there were several additional alternatives.

After the specialist finished the list Dennis said, “Doc, basically, you got me dead. You are wasting a hella lot of my time and yours. We will do the first one first, and see if it works. If it doesn’t, then we will talk about what we are going to do.” The specialist left the room never to be seen by Dennis again.

Dennis credits the nurse that day with providing him information about not only his cancer but also the backstory on the specialist. “She was the only one who really made sense,” Dennis said.

After some additional testing, the doctor from Casper developed a treatment plan for Dennis. Able to do his treatments near his hometown of Riverton, Dennis started on a Tuesday. The following Tuesday he repeated the process. With 10 days before his third treatment, Dennis felt well enough to attend a leather show in Sheridan.

“I never thought anything about it,” says Dennis. He mingled among the vendors not realizing the extreme state of compromise his immune system was in due to the cancer treatments. By the time he returned from the leather show his white blood cell count was nearly zero.

A series of injections helped boost his immune system and the experience convinced Dennis that he did not need to be around people. “Anytime I went out, I wore a mask and when Barb did anything with me she wore gloves.”

After approximately six months of treatments and a clean scan, Dennis assumed he would be returning to work once he regained his strength. The doctor informed him otherwise, explaining that only the first half of the treatment was complete.

“You talk about a panic attack because I thought I was done. At that time I could still get around fairly good.”

The second round of treatment was significantly more destructive to Dennis’s everyday life. “That chair that’s sitting right there, I lived in that chair 24 hours a day. There were times when I couldn’t lift my arms. My wife had to feed me. I was so weak,” he remembers.

A poster left by Cody Wright and two of his brothers hangs on a wall in the saddle shop. The trio visited Dennis while he was sick. “It really helped that they came by to see me. That was a big lift for me,” Dennis says.

At one point Dennis told the doctor he needed an extra week between treatments. “I just knew that if he gave me one more treatment then I would not survive it.”

Dennis describes the pain saying, “I couldn’t lay down to sleep. It felt like someone was stabbing me in the stomach with knives.”

The doctor changed the formula and Dennis completed the treatment. “Everything checked out good. They did a PET scan and there wasn’t anything.” Every six months Dennis returned for additional scans until 2016 when the doctor declared him clean.

## **From father to son**

Dennis’s son, Randy, kept the saddle business going during the year Dennis was receiving chemotherapy. Randy also met his wife, Carrie, during this time. Carrie’s family resided in Minnesota. Once Dennis completed treatment and was deemed cancer-free, Randy and Carrie decided to move closer to her family.

“When he moved up there I said, ‘I will just give you the bronc saddle business and you can just go ahead and set it up and take it and run with it.’” Dennis explains.

After a couple of years of Minnesota weather, Randy and Carrie returned to Riverton. Similar to his dad, Randy experienced a major setback in the form of a fire in the saddle tree shop, once again losing

many of the patterns. Fortunately for Randy, he had a father experienced at rebounding from such a business catastrophe guiding him out of the challenging time.

## **Last booth in Vegas**

Dennis decided to make one more trip to Vegas with his saddles. “It had gotten so expensive. They had opened up so many more different booths and spread everything out,” Dennis explains. Between the added competition and increase in costs, participating in the trade show which accompanies the National Finals Rodeo became unfeasible.

One day during that final trade show and while he was taking care of the booth, Dennis felt an extremely uncomfortable sensation in his leg. “All of a sudden my right leg caught on fire, and I mean on fire,” describes Dennis.

Barb took a look at the leg and the decision was made to head to the nearest hospital. Randy, also in town for the rodeo, manned the saddle booth while Dennis and Barb sought medical attention.

After seeing several doctors it was determined that Dennis was suffering from a debilitating bout of shingles extending from his groin to his ankle. A couple of days later Barb put Dennis in the car and took him home.

Barb made an appointment for Dennis with a specialist who immediately understood the level of pain his patient was experiencing. “I was to the point where I was fixing to pass out,” Dennis says.

“The first words out of the doctor’s mouth were, ‘Do you own a gun?’ I thought he was just making conversation.” Dennis continues. The doctor then asked Dennis if he wanted to sell his guns. “At about that time it went “ding” in my mind,” Dennis explains.

“I told the doctor no, I didn’t want to sell the guns, but that if it would make him feel better, then I would have my son put them in a safe and lock them up,” Dennis confesses. The pain was intense. “I couldn’t lift my leg. It completely killed that muscle and the nerves in my leg.”

For six weeks Dennis used crutches to move around. Another two years of fighting the agonizing pain have left him fearful of the disease's possible return. "It scares the hell out of me," Dennis reveals.

The doctors opposed getting him vaccinated against shingles for the next couple of years. By that time Dennis had heard stories of obtaining the disease from the vaccination. "So I have just said no," Dennis says firmly.

Facing the loss of all feeling in one of his legs and a physician treating him as if it would never return, Dennis coincidentally came across a company producing a neuropathy support supplement. "Something high in vitamin B and some acid. I still take it today," Dennis says. "The doctor had done nerve tests on my leg and I was at zero. I was starting to lose feeling in my hands," he says. "Probably six months later the doctor and I were talking and I told him 'I think I am getting some feeling back in my legs.'"

The doctor responded stating that the recovery was not possible and the damage was permanent, but Dennis disagreed. "I could wiggle my feet and do all kinds of things."

Repeating the nerve test the doctor disbelievingly reported that Dennis did indeed have an increase of about 15% in nerve response. He told Dennis to keep doing what he was doing and Dennis never went back.

## **Roping Saddle to the Rescue-Back to Building**

"At that time I thought, well, I am just going to go back to the shop and do the best I can," Dennis remembers. "And not too long after that, a guy comes packing that roping saddle in."

The customer wanted Dennis to make him a saddle similar to one he had been riding. Still very weak from his cancer treatments, Dennis was leery. "But it was a challenge," he states, "and right then, I needed a challenge."

To Be Continued...