

The Story of Dennis George – Section Four

By Stephenie Tanguay

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 “guy” was K.C. Jones, and he wanted Dennis to make him a saddle like 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.”

“I’m K.C. Jones the timed event guy, not the steer wrestler,” K.C. clarifies at the onset of the interview.

The Timed Event Championship, an annual competition hosted by the Lazy E Arena in Guthrie, Oklahoma each March, is commonly referred to as the Ironman of Pro Rodeo.

K.C. won the Ironman five times. He was the youngest competitor to win the title, his first, in 1993, and one of the oldest cowboys to win the title, his most recent, in 2012. Finishing mid field in 2020, K.C. continues to compete in the prestigious competition and places tremendous pressure to perform on younger cowboys.

After a lifetime spent riding, “I had some ideas about saddles,” K.C. says. “I make my living on a horse’s back. I spend hours in the saddle every day.”

“A friend told me about Dennis, but I said, ‘heck, he’s not going to know about roping saddles. He builds bronc saddles,’” K.C. continues.

The friend convinced K.C. to try Dennis and the champion now admits the error in his initial assessment of the saddle maker.

Dennis learned much of his trade by tearing saddles apart, evaluating the various pieces, and then recreating a better version of the same saddle. The process allows him to learn another saddle maker's technique and then improve upon it.

Dennis, however, underestimated the complexity of the task for the first saddle K.C. dragged in. "I took that roping saddle and I couldn't tear the saddle apart." The original saddle maker had glued the entire saddle together with a substance stronger than the crowbar used while attempting to pry the pieces apart.

The glue obstacle forced Dennis to slow down the recreation process. He examined each piece as molded to fit the saddle tree then drew the section as it appeared on a flat surface.

"By looking at one and drawing it on another, my roping saddle was designed off of that one saddle," Dennis says. The design defects were clear from the beginning. "The first ones had doubled leather in the seat. I built two or three of them that way," he grumbles, "I didn't like making those at all."

"They had a padded seat in them, and I hate a padded seat because you work all that time on a ground seat and then you put a padded seat in it and that destroys the ground seat," Dennis lists one of many aspects of the sample roping saddle he found distasteful.

"I built those, and we tested them. The guy roped out of them and everything," Dennis says with exasperation. "He was wanting another one and finally, I just told him, 'I am going to build it, but I am going to build it the way I want to.'"

K.C. agreed and Dennis went to work. "I went ahead and built it with just a single seat. No padded seat, strictly a rough out seat. I narrowed it down a little bit and it broke in quicker, and I never looked back," he states.

"After talking with Dennis, four or five days, maybe a week later, my saddle was done," K.C. describes his first official saddle order placed a little before the 2012 Timed Event Championships.

As a professional horseman active in the industry, K.C. visited regularly with a wide assortment of equestrian professionals and enthusiasts. At some point he allowed one of his barrel racing friends to ride Dennis's new and improved version of the roping saddle.

"I have never found out who the girl was, but that K.C. called me up and said, "You have got to start making barrel saddles," Dennis says.

"I don't have a clue," was Dennis's first response to the request. While he was down in Florida Dennis had built a few barrel saddles, but he says, "All I did was, well, I narrowed down the swell front to back and I cut the skirts way down. They were just little envelope skirts, but I didn't have a clue (about barrel saddles)."

When pressed for specifics concerning the differences between a G Bar G saddle and other saddles, K.C. laughs, "I can't give away all my trade secrets, but I will say, Dennis was open-minded. He really listened to my ideas and that was crucial to me."

The saddle developed by K.C. and Dennis was deemed a success. "My friends kept taking them," says K.C., "they would lope a horse in one circle and say, 'I gotta have this saddle.'"

A partnership between the Wyoming cowboys continues, and K.C. may still be seen riding the old road next to Dennis's home, combining their strengths for the benefit of the horse.

The Barrel Racing Bug

In 2012, Jane Melby, a multiple NFR gold buckle winner, rolled into the National High School Finals Rodeo held in Rock Springs, Wyoming to watch her daughter, Cayla Melby Small, compete. Fresh from the rodeo in Calgary, Jane had been experiencing some difficulties with her go-to horse, RC Back in Black. "When she turned the first barrel, she was real powerful," explains Jane.

With decades of experience aboard some of the finest equine athletes in barrel racing, Jane analytically determined an issue with the fit of her saddle was causing the problem during her run. “When she (RC Back in Black) would get to the back side of that first barrel, she would either feel like she was going to blow me out of the saddle or I would have to grab for everything I had to get back in the saddle or she would take a step or two towards the timer and then come back,” Jane remembers.

“I had visited many saddle shops and many saddle makers, and I was very frustrated because I couldn’t get across what I needed,” Jane says. Therefore, when a friend told Jane, “This saddle maker wants to talk to you about building a saddle,” she was not interested.

“I was done with saddle makers. None of them understood where I was struggling, and I was just not interested,” Jane recalls.

Dennis remembers the day saying, “While (Jane) was there, I just come out and said, ‘I would really like to be able to talk to you if there is any way, I can.’ I told her, here is my situation.”

He explained his desire to build a barrel saddle with the same bar set up in the tree as the one he put in the roping saddle. He admitted his lack of knowledge in barrel saddles and asked for help.

Jane said, “Meet me at MY trailer and I will discuss the pros and cons of the saddles I have in my trailer.” Dennis jumped at the opportunity immediately.

“She pulled out the saddles. There was a wooden fence separating the trailers and she set them on there. Then she started down through them telling me what she liked about each one and why,” Dennis says.

Dennis spent about three hours quizzing Jane and presenting a variety of scenarios. “I wanted her to keep talking. (I was) trying to learn from anything she would say.”

Jane told Dennis, “If you can take the good qualities of these four saddles and put them into one and it sat in the middle of the horse and allowed the rider to get out of the turn then I am interested.”

Smiling Jane summarizes, “And that’s what we did.”

Upon his return to the saddle shop in Riverton, Dennis percolated on what Jane had told him. He looked at the front end of the cutting saddle tree he had designed before his fight with cancer and called the tree shop. “I had the tree shop send me a set of bars and a cantle. I told them just to lighten the cantle up that I had for my stock saddles.”

The tree shop sent the pieces and Dennis finished the prototype on the tree. “KC (Jones) come through about that time. We set it on a bunch of horses. He rode it up and down this road back here in the wood. I don’t know how many miles he has put on up and down this road on different horses,” Dennis says with a laugh.

The evaluation process involved a fresh one inch felt pad and the saddle tree. “After he would ride them, we would pull that pad off and see what kind of marks things were leaving.”

A few more adjustments were made, and the prototype was sent to the tree shop who in turn finalized the pattern. The proposed saddle tree was returned to Dennis who then built the saddle around the tree and sent it down to Jane for her evaluation.

Jane remembers the first saddle as comfortable to ride, but that it only fit a two-year-old. She suggested some changes to the bar set up to fill the need for a saddle which fit a wider variety of horses.

“The neat thing about Dennis, he talked a lot about a ground seat. He talked a lot about your balance points. And I think he could relate a lot of it back to bronc saddle,” Jane explains. “I just couldn’t find a saddle maker who could understand what I was trying to say until I came across him.”

The changes were made, and another saddle was sent south. A few months passed without word from Jane and Dennis grew concerned. About that time a visit with friends living near Jane’s place offered an excuse to stop in and pick up the saddle.

“She talked to me about the saddle, and she said, ‘Oh we love the saddle, but if you are going to build barrel saddles then you have to

make the skirts look like barrel saddles.’ And that was the only thing she said.”

The saddle came home with Dennis, and he replaced the skirts. Then he sent it to his son’s girlfriend who was running barrels at the time. “She just loved it and I had a hard time getting it back.”

After obtaining the input from several more girls, Dennis made a few more new saddles, one of which was sent to Jane. “That is one she still has and uses a lot,” he says.

According to Jane her review included recommendations on the aesthetics of a saddle. “I told him I am not into how pretty it is. We don’t need fancy, shiny, or blingy,” Jane says. “In fact, I told him I would never want him to make a seat that is slippery because that is not the point of the saddle.”

A mutual understanding of the purpose of equipment is the foundation and the core connection in the relationship. When Jane said, “The point of the saddle is for you to perform at your best, not be all pretty,” Dennis understood.

“After he got the bars of the saddle tweaked it was all up from there,” Jane remembers, then adds, “When he got it, he got it. Dennis’s saddles are made to win. There is a quality in the craftsmanship.”

Designing, building, and improving upon barrel saddles has suited Dennis well. “I enjoy making them because they make fairly fast, and it is a challenge to keep coming up with new looks.” He attributes any creativity to his mother who was a painter.

“It has been really good with Jane. We work well together,” Dennis says of his endorsee.

Looking forward brings up the past

Dennis expresses his vision for the future, “I am so torn between do I really want to keep fighting this. I like the challenge of it. But I would really like to get away, to get in the motorhome... and just go and

not make it where we have saddles involved.” Eyeing the calendar, he contemplates his age saying, “I may not have that many years left. You never know. My dad lived to ninety-four.”

The reverence once again enters his voice as Dennis remembers another story from his youth. “That year (his junior year in high school), I missed my first horse out. I had my feet in the front end, but I was real long legged, and my spurs was out in front of ‘em. They got me at the gate. But I made the highest mark ride on the second horse, and that got me in the short round. I was the only one that just had one head rode.”

Looking back, Dennis has his suspicions concerning his favorable luck when it comes to the draw in the short round. The stock contractor delivered a load of NFR bucking stock for the contestants to compete on. “I was on Sunnybrook which is an 8-time National Finals horse for the bareback riding. My folks hadn’t known I’d rodeoed. I’d forged their names on all the releases. And here I was in Douglas at the National High School Rodeo Finals, and I am in the short round,” Dennis laughs.

His intonation shifts to that of a teenager and Dennis continues, “Some lady calls my mom, and tells her. And of course, my mom just threw a hissy fit. Boy, she was going to nail everyone involved.”

“Finally, my dad bailed in with me and talked her out of it, got her settled down,” Dennis says. “He went down there with me. And was on the back of the bucking chutes. He got so excited, he fell off the back of the bucking chutes and never got to see me ride,” he says through his giggles.

The memory brings Dennis back around to his origins as a saddle maker. Although his parents eventually and begrudgingly supported the rodeo life the young cowboy adopted, his dad instilled the need for a backup occupation in Dennis - something Dennis could do if he were to become injured.

Then, in the blink of an eye, the wily craftsman introduces his next project and it is clear that he is not going to hang up his tools quite yet.

“Ann brought me her saddle to make some adjustments after a riding accident left her paralyzed and, in a wheelchair,” explains Dennis.

“Now she doesn’t just have a job, she has a life,” the father, coach, mentor, and friend says of his new employee.

To be continued...