

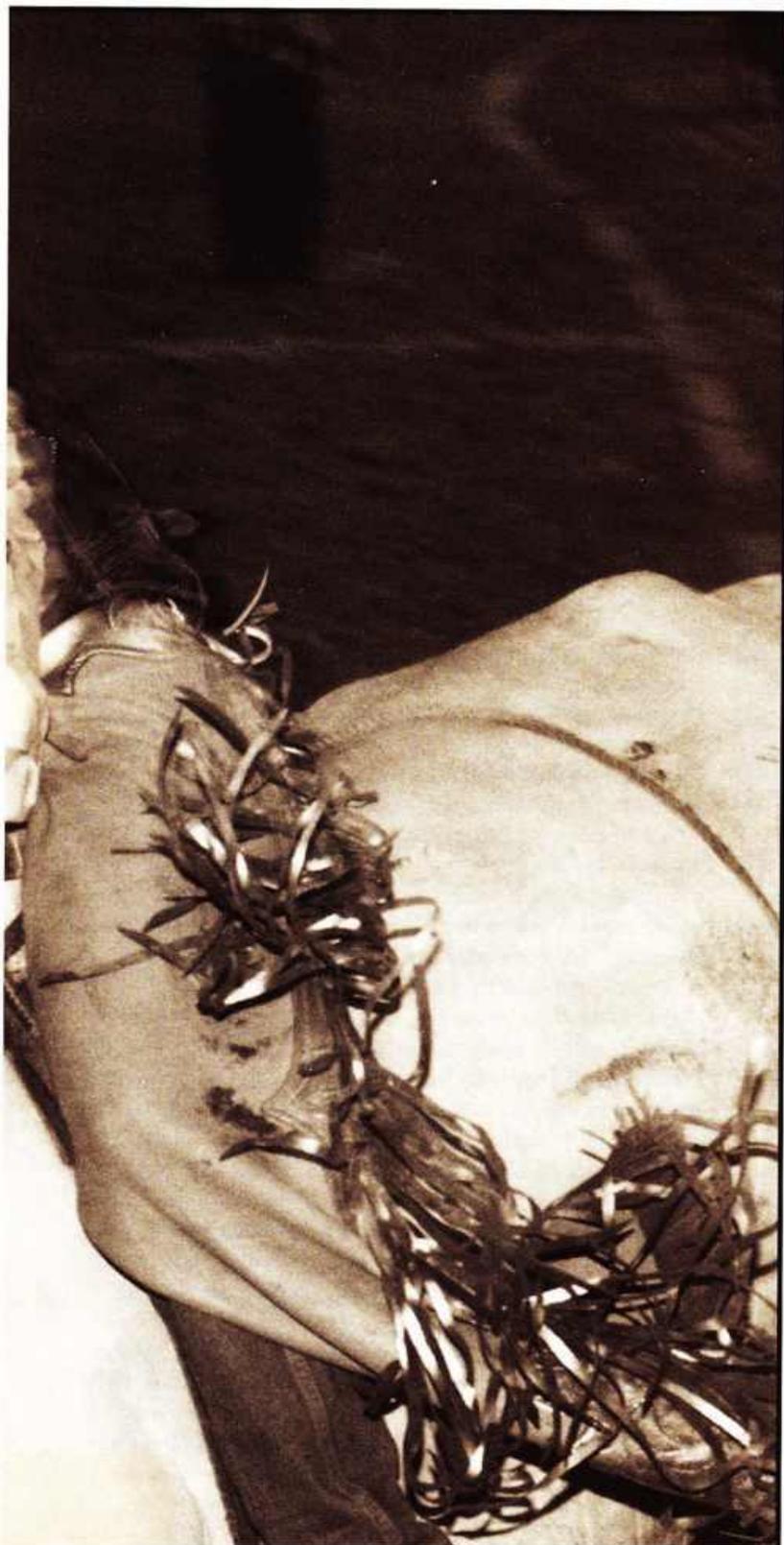
A TIME TO HEAL



Injured bull riders and other rodeo cowboys seek on-site treatment in the Justin Sportsmedicine trailer (inset).

Go behind the chutes with Justin Heelers as they tape, ice, and wipe the blood off cut, battered, and bruised rodeo cowboys

BY ANNE LANG
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
SKEETER HAGLER



TO THE RODEO FAN, IT'S A HEART-stopping scenario. A bull rider beats the buzzer, but on the dismount he gets hung in his rigging, the bull still bucking wildly. Flopping like a rag doll, he desperately struggles to free his captive hand. Finally, he breaks loose—only to feel the bruising crush of hoof and horn as he rolls to safety.

On this particular cool night in Austin, the downed rider is Mike Petty, who's sprawled in the dirt, dazed. Rushing to his aid is a husky man in a distinctive black vest. He helps Petty to his feet and out the gate as the crowd applauds.

In the shadows behind the chutes, Petty's face glows like a pale moon. A bloody gash oozes over one eye. The black-vested man hustles the injured cowboy to a nearby semi. He is Bill Zeigler, a Justin Heeler.

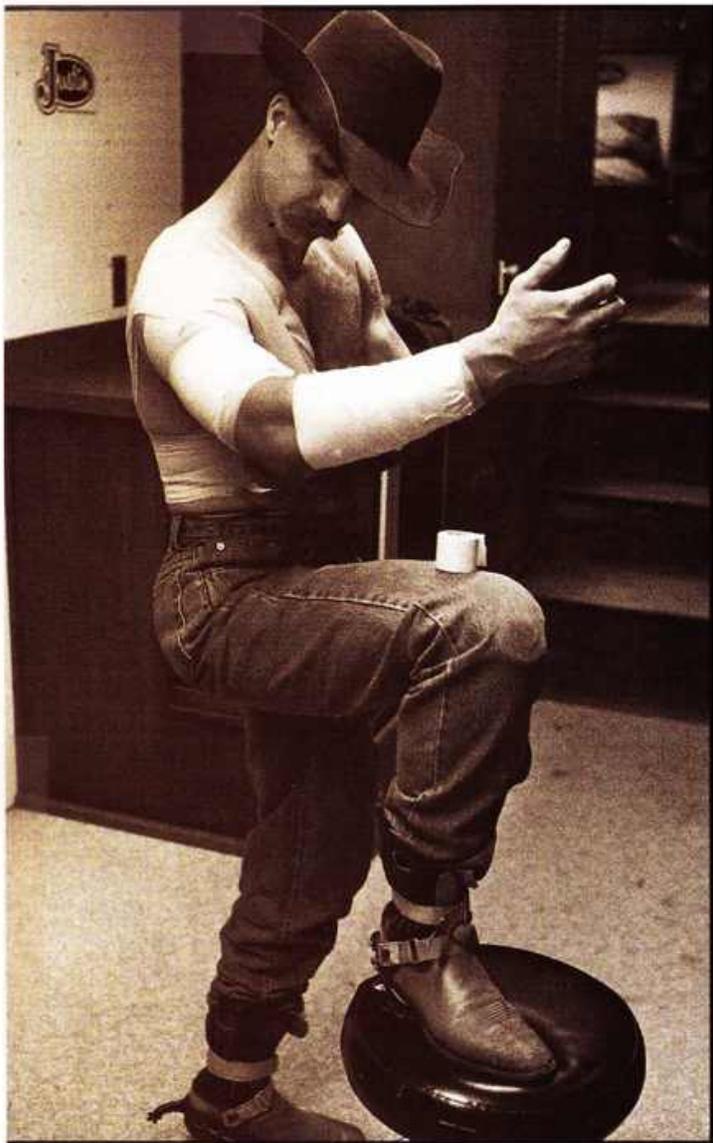
The Justin Sportsmedicine trailer resembles a small, well-equipped emergency room. Inside, Zeigler eases Petty onto a padded training table. Less than two minutes have ticked by since the cowboy hit the dirt. A volunteer doctor aims a glaring light at his sweaty face. Petty's eyes are closed, his breathing ragged. Zeigler gently shakes his arm. "How you feeling, pardner?"

"Okay," Petty mumbles. His eyes open, glittering anxiously. His boots tremble slightly as the doctor applies anesthetic.

"You want me to sew this up here, or do you want to go to the hospital?" the doctor asks. Petty opts to stay, and Zeigler quickly shoos everyone else out.

A half-hour later, Petty emerges wearing a white bandage and a weak smile. A handshake for the doctor, a thank-you to Zeigler, and off he goes into the night. He owes not a single cent.

Zeigler straightens up the trailer, smiling with satisfaction at tonight's smooth teamwork. "You know, I probably shouldn't even get paid for doing this job," he muses. "That's how much I like it. I'm one lucky son of a gun."



IT'S RODEO COWBOYS WHO TRULY LUCK OUT. THEY'RE THE beneficiaries of this unique sports medicine program, launched 15 years ago when the Justin Boot Company stepped forward to foot the bill. Co-founders were Dr. J. Pat Evans, a North Texas orthopedic surgeon and team physician for the Dallas Cowboys, and Don Andrews, athletic trainer for a National Hockey League farm team. The two met when Andrews brought some injured hockey players to see Evans, who was then a volunteer doctor for a local rodeo.

Andrews began accompanying Evans at rodeos, where they gladly assisted injured and sore cowboys who had no idea how to treat their ailments. In those early days, the duo set up makeshift quarters behind the stands or in cramped dressing rooms.

"During those times of utter chaos," Evans recalls, "rodeo was the only pro sport I knew of that didn't have full-time doctors, trainers, or a sports medicine facility. These guys are very nomadic, but they *are* in a certain place at a certain time. I knew there had to be a way."

Underneath a cowboy's Wranglers and Roper shirt lurk yards of athletic tape, which cost the Justin program around \$20,000 per year.

Some influential folks at the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association hooked up Evans and Andrews with top executives at Justin, who immediately pledged full corporate sponsorship. "The Justin Boot people really care about the rodeo athlete, and this is how they show their respect," Andrews says. "It's a win-win-win situation—for the cowboys, for the company, and us. Justin gets the exposure, and their support gives us a great opportunity to apply our respective trades to a unique group of athletes who used to be virtually ignored by the medical profession."

AUSTIN, TWO NIGHTS LATER, THE GOOD-LUCK GODS HAVE abandoned six-time all-around champion Ty Murray, at least for tonight. Low scores in both bareback and saddle bronc riding have put the Texas cowboy in a funk, made worse by an aching knee. His chaps peeled back, Murray slumps on a hay bale behind the chutes. Zeigler crouches beside him, expertly massaging.

"You probably bruised it—it's all muscle around there," he tells the grimacing Murray. "You know how to take care of it, right?" Murray nods glumly. "Yeah. Thanks, Zig."

Zeigler heads back to the trailer, where half a dozen cowboys await his help with taping ligaments and joints, and other preventative measures. Discarded boots, rigging bags, and clothing litter the floor.

Rodeo veteran Cody Custer, in his own pre-ride ritual, strips to his boxer shorts and perches on a folding chair at the back of the trailer. With his eyeglasses, smallish frame, and gentle voice, he more closely resembles an accountant than the former world champion bull rider he is.

"This trailer has been my second home for a long time," Custer cheerfully announces as he deftly tapes a knee. "I had reconstructive surgery on this knee in 1987, and the Justin Heelers taught me how to take care of it. Then, in 1992 [the year he won the world], I had an injured back and groin muscle going into the finals—but these guys kept me together. If not for them, I don't think I would have made it as far as I did."

A few feet away, Zeigler efficiently tends to the crush of cowboys. He hands bareback rider Jon Brockway an ice pack for his rigging arm. Steer wrestler Jim Smith gets a foam pad taped beneath a sore heel. Roughstock rider Pete Hawkins complains that last night's head-snapping ride left him feeling a bit nauseated, and Zeigler gives him a neck roll.

Brockway chats as he ices. "A sore arm is just part of the business, and it's made worse by strong horses. Last year at Houston, I had the same horse I drew tonight. I separated my shoulder. But thanks to Justin, I was able to ride again the next afternoon. Ol' Zig here, he fixed me right up."

"Every time I come in here, I learn something new about my body," chimes in bullfighter Matt Lucking, who awaits his turn for tape. "And I *always* have a sore body! Last year, there was a guy who popped his knee—he couldn't walk at all. By the time these guys got through working on him, he was walking. It was amazing."

One by one, contestants file in—but most are reluctant to leave after treatment. The cowboys joke and tease one another while taking care to stay out of Zeigler's way: They know he'll boot them out if they get too rowdy, or if the trailer gets too crowded. But most of the time, Zeigler accommodates their

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need to flock together, away from the fans, the sponsors, the hangers-on, the media types, and the tension near the chutes.

"An athlete has to have someplace to get away from it all, especially if he's just gotten hurt," Zeigler says, reaching for an umpteenth roll of tape. "Sometimes, they come here just to escape.

"I've seen it coming for awhile now in rodeo," he continues as he rapidly scrawls names in a logbook. "These guys are getting better-known publicly, and they're expected to interact more often with the fans and the press. That's all good for rodeo's image, and guys like Ty Murray are handling it well. But I've seen firsthand what it can do to someone."

THE JUSTIN SPORTSMEDICINE PROGRAM SET UP ITS FIRST official treatment site in the training room at the 1982 National Finals Rodeo, then held in Oklahoma City. At first, business was slow. Then the word spread that free expert medical treatment and advice was available to all contestants. By mid-week, the Justin trainers were inundated—and the flow of cowboys hasn't abated since.

Now the program consists of two state-of-the-art mobile clinics and two permanent sites. Evans acts as medical director and Andrews as program director. Each year, program managers—all of them athletic trainers or physical therapists—collectively travel to about 150 rodeos nationwide. "But this is not just a job for them," Andrews insists. "They all truly enjoy the rodeo athlete, the sport, and its Western heritage. Most of them have or ride horses. This is a labor of love."

There are limits, however. The program can only cover about 18 percent of the 800 PRCA-sanctioned rodeos per year, leaving Andrews with the difficult challenge of choosing which

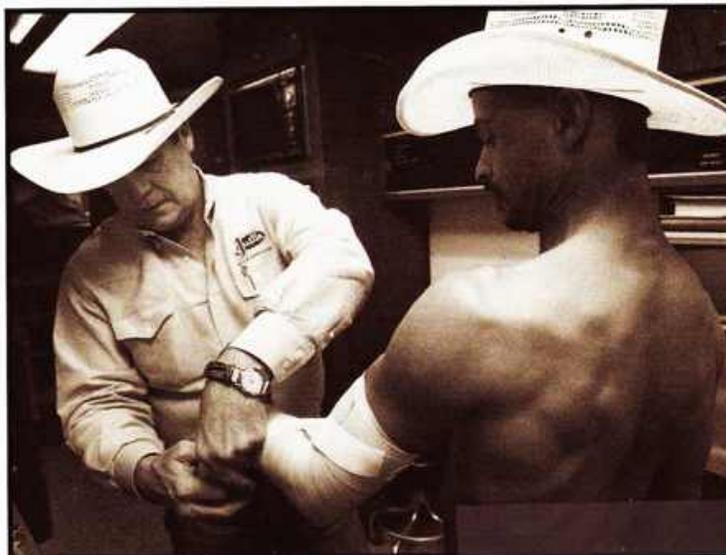
"It's tough for some guys to admit they're hurt," notes trainer Bill Zeigler, taping an elbow (right), while another cowboy goes on ice (above).

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TIPS FROM A PRO

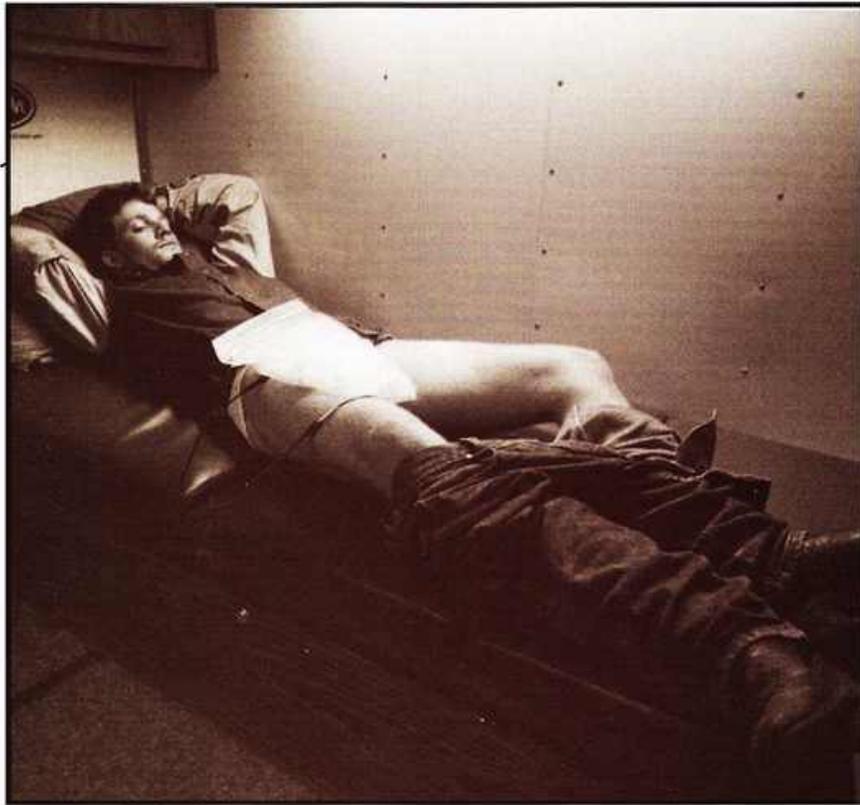
Having treated just about every type of sports injury, Bill Zeigler offers the following general advice to *anyone* who engages in physical activity.

- **Talk to a doc:** Consult your physician before starting any new sport or exercise program.
- **Stretch it out:** Limber up from head to toe before beginning. Keep going until your body feels good and loose.
- **Cool down:** Stretching is as important *after* exercise as before.
- **Beware of hydration:** Drink plenty of water before, during, and after sports or exercise, even if you don't feel thirsty.
- **Keep it moving:** Keep limber during the week, even if it's only 20 minutes of stretching and aerobic exercise every other day.
- **Binding benefits:** Athletic tape around primary joints (wrists, ankles, knees, elbows) provides added support; but don't wrap so snugly that you cut off circulation. Use *pre-wrap*, a non-sticky bandage, between skin and tape to avoid pain when you remove the tape. If you experience pain in your joints—or have joint problems of any kind—see a physician.
- **RICE is nice:** If you're injured, apply the RICE treatment—rest, ice, compression, elevation. Get off your feet and rest; ice the injury; compress the ice bag on the injury by either holding it firm or wrapping it snugly with a cloth bandage; and elevate the injury to a level higher than your heart. Apply ice as soon as you can; even several hours after the injury occurs, it will at least reduce inflammation, if not swelling.
- **Cold beats hot:** Almost without exception, treating with ice is more effective than treating with heat. If you expose the injury to heat too soon, you actually can cause more damage. Ice daily throughout recovery, but don't apply ice for more than 20 minutes at a time—and no more than once an hour.
- **Get serious:** See a doctor if you experience any pain or if you are injured, especially if the injured area turns black and blue. Bleeding under the skin means something is torn rather than just strained.
- **Take it slow:** Returning to activity before the injury is healed can end up sidelining you for an even longer period. If you're still favoring the injured area, stay off it.



A TIME TO HEAL

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Hurt athletes seek treatment—and solitude—in the Justin Sportsmedicine trailer.

get coverage—and which don't. "Our mission has always been to provide quality care," he says. "We'd rather be at our best at a small number of events than to try to cover a large number and not be able to provide that quality."

One bright light has been the huge network of volunteers. Over the years, Evans has tracked down dozens of physicians and trainers who willingly donate their time and expertise. "Many of them have never even been to a rodeo before," Evans explains. "But once they've been exposed, they're usually hooked for life."

SIX WEEKS AFTER AUSTIN FINDS ZEIGLER and his mobile unit down in the southeastern Texas coastal city of Beaumont. Forty minutes to rodeo time, and the trailer starts to fill with contestants, many of them seeking a cowboy's most oft-used item: athletic tape. Andrews estimates that the Justin program spends \$20,000 annually on tape alone.

Tonight's arguable prizewinner in the taping event is bareback rider Gary Bullock. Zeigler wraps his entire upper torso in the white stuff. "I'm fine once

these guys get to work on me," Bullock maintains. Later, he gets thrown and appears to re-injure his shoulder. Zeigler hurries out, but Bullock dismisses him with a wan smile.

"There's a lot of macho in this sport and it's tough for some guys to admit they're hurt," Zeigler later remarks. "Sometimes their buddies will say: 'So-and-so's behind the chutes; you better come take a look.'"

For the professional cowboy, being hurt can trigger a cash-flow crisis. Case in point: Tonight, 19-year-old Royce Jennings comes off his bull and gets his foot stomped. He limps with pain toward the gate, and Zeigler rushes in.

Outside the arena, Jennings sinks to the ground near his rigging bag, clutching his boot. Zeigler coaxes him to the trailer, where Jennings lies down with an ice pack on his ankle. Forlornly, the young cowboy admits that Zeigler advised him to get an x-ray. But he's not going to go.

"I'm broke," he declares, "and I need to ride in Brownwood tomorrow night."

The average cowboy's insurance funds get eaten up fast. And even the Justin Heelers can only do so much. 