

CLOSE UP

HEART OF A HERO



*Scamper
and owner,
Charmayne
James Rodman*

His legions of fans know him as Scamper, greatest barrel horse on the planet. But owner Charmayne James Rodman knows him as the horse who simply never gives up.

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THE PLAIN BAY GELDING nibbles at fall stubble, keeping a close eye on his Paint pasturemate. A quick look tells you the bay's of Quarter Horse descent—compact build, forearms the size of a sprinter's thighs, a well-muscled hip that hints of power. Let your look linger, and you'd see that the years have left subtle calling cards. An enlarged knee. A puffy hock. Slightly sunken back. Droopy lower lip. Marble-sized hollows above each eye.

Chances are you'd size him up as "just another bay horse." But then, you'd have no way of knowing that the gelding's ordinary brown exterior packages a living—and still competing—legend. Maybe you've heard of him: Scamper, 10-time world champion barrel horse; winner of over \$1 million in his 11-year "pro" career. And you'd never guess that he's just a few short weeks away from vying for an 11th world title—at the age of 17—at the National Finals Rodeo, in Las Vegas, Nevada.

But he hasn't always been the one to beat. If not for the gust of fate that blew an adolescent named Charmayne James into his life, Scamper might well have raced down a road to complete obscurity, if not destruction. There is the ultimate movie-script story—one that inspires daydreams in every young girl who aims her home-trained horse at a set of barrels, and respect in anyone who's learned how much harder it is to stay on top than to get there.

HELLO, WORLD

The year 1977 produced an eclectic mix of American milestones. Jimmie Carter had just claimed the White House, rock 'n' roll icon Elvis Presley met his untimely demise, and moviegoers from coast to coast were flocking to George Lucas' "Star Wars." And, although it wasn't considered an historical event at the time, 1977—May 1, to be exact—was when the horse destined to shatter every barrel racing record known to rodeo came slip-slidin' into the world.

Sired by Gill's Sonny Boy, by Sonny Gill, and out of the mare Drapers Jay, by Headed West, the plain little unmarked foal was registered with the American Quarter Horse Association as Gills Bay Boy, and called "Bay" for short. Gills *Bad* Boy might have been a more fitting moniker, as his somewhat cantankerous personality emerged.

Bay's breeders, Buddy and Jerry Draper, of Pueblo, Colorado, have

vivid memories of his first 2 years. Buddy breaks young horses on the Drapers' cattle ranch, and he intended to turn Bay into a rope horse. But for 30 days straight, the horse wouldn't quit bucking. In one particular training session, Bay blew up and fell over backward on top of Buddy, landing him in the hospital for a week. At that point, Buddy hollered "uncle": The incorrigible horse would be sold.

"Knowing what we know now, naturally we always wonder what might have happened if we'd kept working with him, especially as a barrel horse," says Jerry, a barrel racer herself. "But he just wouldn't stop bucking, and we figured one of us in the hospital was enough. We took him to an auction at La Junta, and didn't even stick around to see who bought him."

Well, the buyer was Tom Ferguson, who nabbed the bay buckler for \$550, and put him to work moving cattle at an area livestock sales yard. He remembers the year or so that he owned him.

"He was all horse. He knew when he was mounted, and he made it clear that you were *not* to mess with him," Ferguson says. "You know, he had a lot of heart, even then. And he's still runnin' on that now, isn't he?"

Heart, hot head and all, Bay was sold again, at age 4, to a hand who "rode pens" at a Clayton, New Mexico, feedlot owned by Charlie James and family. And that's where Gills Bay Boy would meet his fourth and final owner—Charmayne, the fearless, riding-crazy daughter of Charlie and his wife, Gloria.

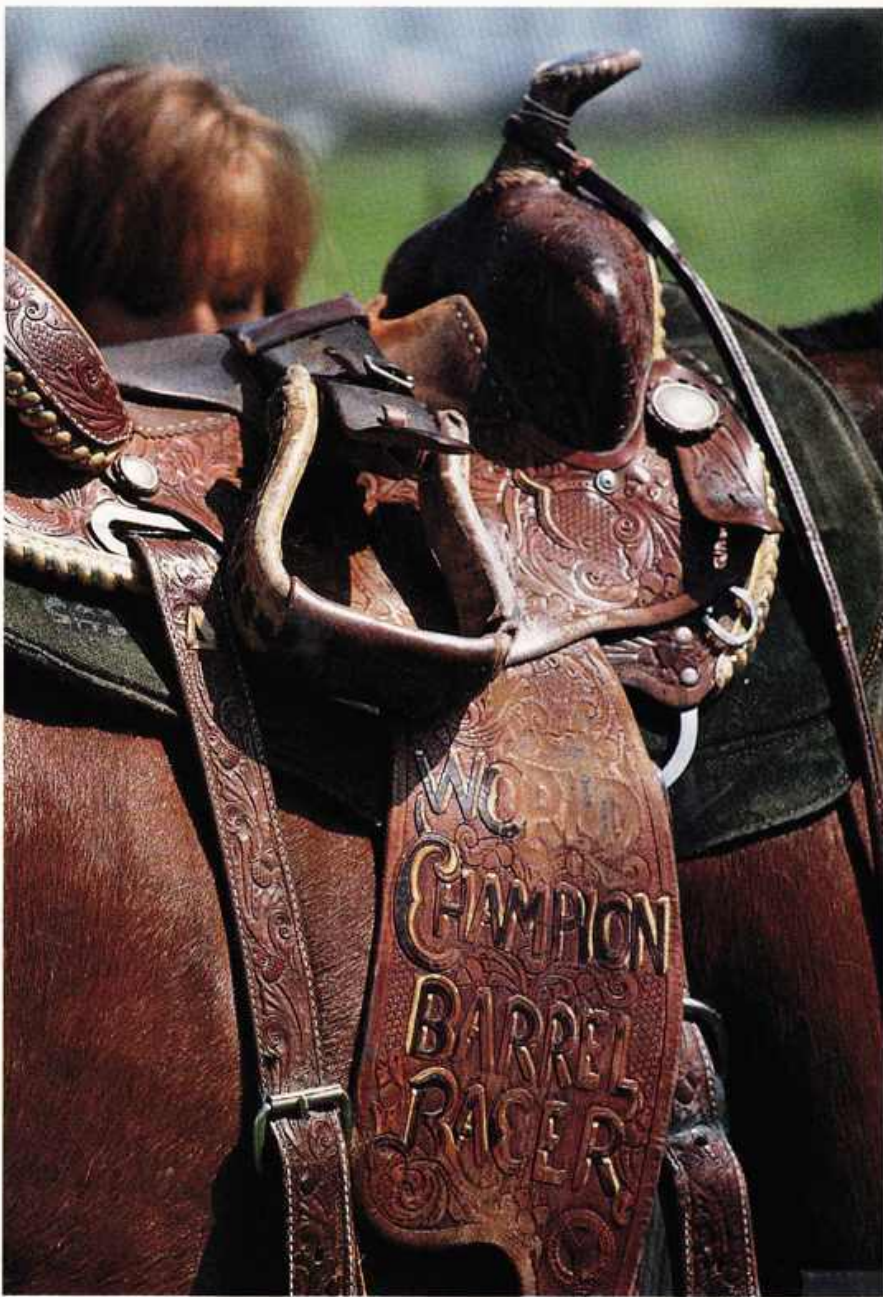
By that time, Bay's reputation as a smart-but-spooky, high-strung mount was locally renowned. But Charlie thought the horse would provide just the kind of challenge the 12-year-old Charmayne would relish.

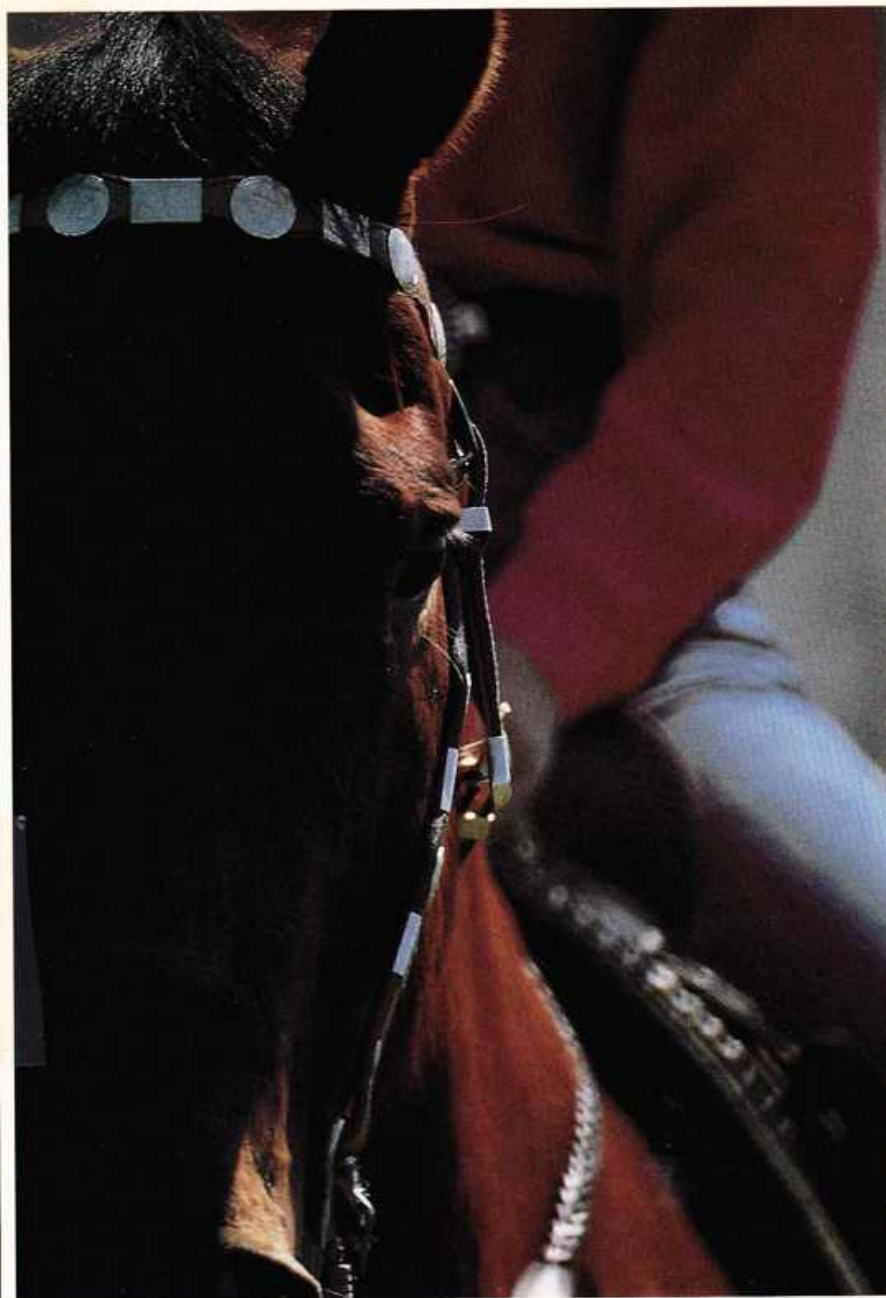
HELLO, PARTNER

He was right. Now, over a dozen years later, Charmayne has vivid recall of the day when she was introduced to her horse of a lifetime.

"My dad said, 'There's a little bay horse down there in the pen. Go get on him and ride. But be careful, 'cause he bucks.' So I get on and start loping him. He's wanting to buck, and I'm just laughing. I think Scamper sensed right then that I was no threat to him, that I was just a kid. He kinda liked me."

From the first day she climbed onto the rowdy young horse's back, and laughed when he tested her grit, Charmayne and Scamper have been a team.





She maneuvered him around some barrels on that very first ride. "He was real well broke, and he had a good stop, slide, and spin from working cattle," Charmayne explains. "He got his nickname from my dad. He said, 'You oughta call him Scamper, 'cause he sure scampers around those barrels.'"

Charlie bought Scamper for his daughter, giving \$1,100 for him. Charmayne, like so many other young girls, was in love with the notion of barrel racing, and when she wasn't helping with the feedlot cattle, she was practicing barrels. Within a month, Scamper was running barrels full out, and he soon began taking home the top prizes from local jackpots and small rodeos throughout New Mexico.

It didn't take anyone long to see that Scamper was developing into an exceptional barrel horse, as he started racking up wins on the amateur rodeo circuit in New Mexico and surrounding states. In 1983, at age 13, Charmayne was issued a permit to compete on the pro circuit, and then the real fun began. Six-year-old Scamper won at Dodge City, Kansas, in only his second pro-rodeo competition.

"I knew then that I had a horse who could run with the professional girls' horses," says Charmayne. "But I still didn't realize exactly what I had."

In 1984, Charmayne obtained her full-fledged pro card, and with her mom behind the wheel of the family's pickup, hauled Scamper across the country to more than 70 rodeos. Win after win followed, netting \$53,499 in earnings, and the whole enchilada in barrel racing achievements: the Women's Pro Rodeo Association World championship (based on year-long earnings); the National Finals Rodeo championship (based on monies won at the NFR); the WPRA Rookie of the Year award; and a Dodge truck that Charmayne wasn't old enough to drive.

Scamper and his diminutive cowgirl pal had proven their right to run with the best, and from that point on, they've lived their lives on the rodeo trail. Charmayne even finished high school while on the road. Halfway through her sophomore year, she switched to a certified correspondence program (American Schools), from which she received her diploma.

BACKSTAGE WITH SCAMPER

Fast-forward to early 1994. Despite widespread speculation that he was too old, too sore, and too outweighed by the odds to pull it off again, Scamper recently has won his sixth NFR—and his 10th consecutive world title. He's surpassed the

\$1 million mark in earnings and, with this the year of his 17th birthday, the gutsy little horse still is exhibiting the fire and drive of a 4-year-old. Over the years, Scamper and Charmayne (now 24, and married to pro roper Walt Rodman) have smashed Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association records for the most consecutive world titles, and the most titles won in a single event.

It's the end of February, and the famous duo is competing at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo—boasting the highest purse money, biggest arena, and greatest all-around hoopla on the entire pro circuit. This is the final weekend, and the last of four go-rounds. Scamper has steadily improved through the two-week period, progressing from 10th place in the first go, to sixth, then to fourth.

Behind the chutes in the Astrodome, the 15-hand rodeo veteran seems unfazed by the cramped, chaotic space that's overflowing with parade wagons and ponies, restless saddle bronc riders milling about, and numerous other barrel racers trying to warm up their horses. A calm-looking Charmayne jogs Scamper in tight circles and figure eights, lightly spurring him to keep him sharp.

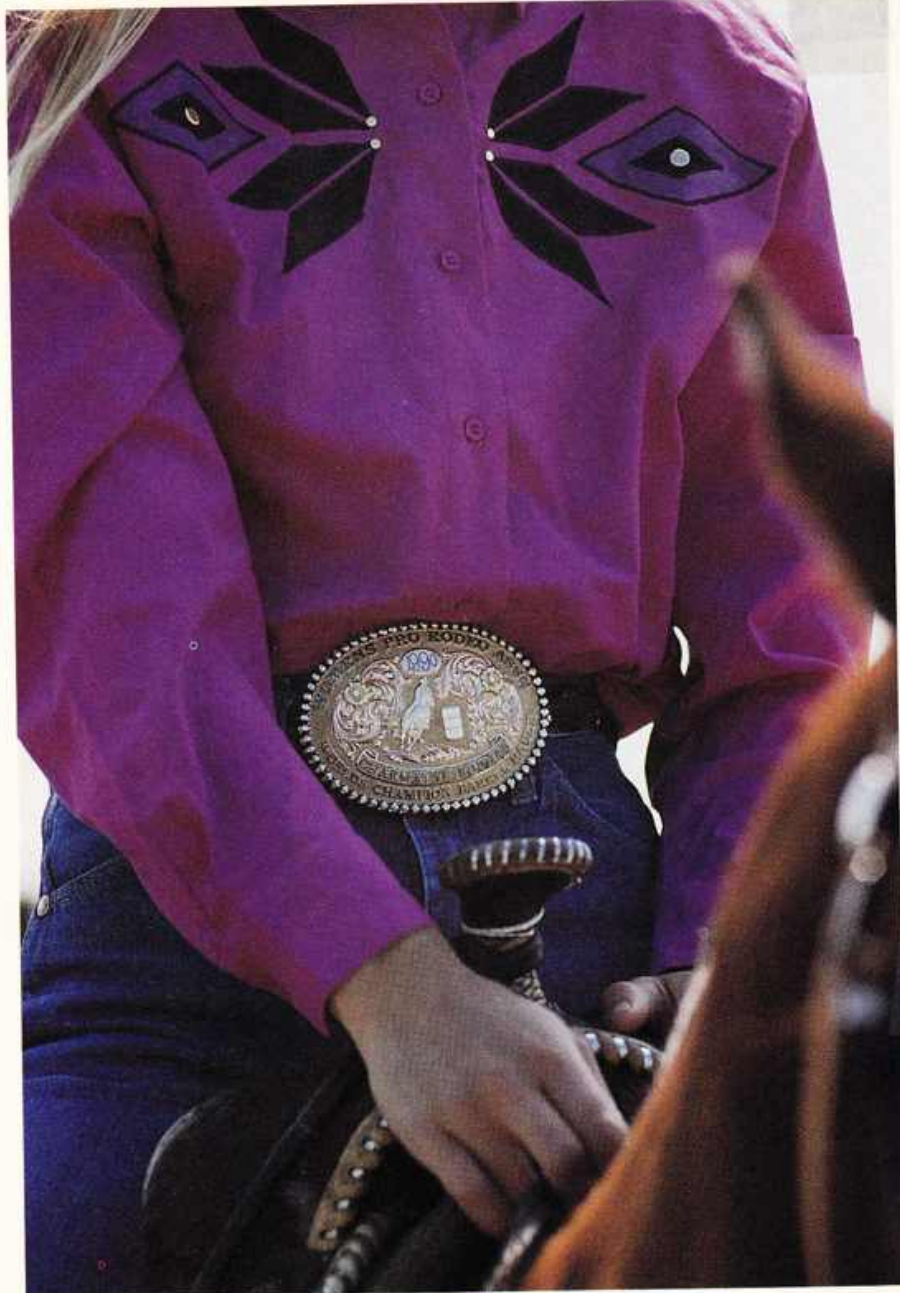
A thin coating of sweat has darkened the horse's shiny bay coat, and on his back is the worn but sturdy NFR championship saddle from 1984—not for sentimental reasons, but because it's the most comfortable for both horse and rider. Scamper suddenly dances sideways in a little jig, as if to say, "C'mon, let's get going!"

It's almost time. Charmayne and Scamper sidle up to Walt, who's aboard his roping horse near the gate. Scamper's ears flicker, and his bright eyes are on the action in the arena, where Charlotte Schmidt's horse has just blazed through the electronic-timer beam in 18.16 seconds. That's the new time to beat, and Scamper is next—and last—to go.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, let's give a rousing welcome to 10-time world champion SCAAAAAMMMMMPER!!!!" thunders the announcer. Then, Scamper blasts into the arena to the appreciative hoots and hollers of 58,000 rodeo-maniac Texans. He completes the cloverleaf pattern in his usual freight-train fashion, tripping the clock at 18.10—winning the

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For Charmayne, home is wherever Scamper is. Sometimes that's a white-fenced ranch near Galt, California, but often her home is simply atop his back, or at the end of his lead rope.



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go-round and the overall average, and capturing the whole prestigious Houston event for the 10th time. Waiting in the wings is yet another championship saddle, as well as a check for \$13,179 and change. Not bad for two weeks' work.

Back behind the chutes, Charmayne graciously accepts a stream of congratulatory hugs and handshakes, as she deftly removes Scamper's tack and wraps. She gives him affectionate pats as each item comes off. Amazingly, Scamper already has caught his breath, and is standing in a relaxed pose, his eyes fixed on his blonde mistress as she darts around him.

Charmayne is approached by a rodeo worker, who leads her away to the waiting press. Left behind with Walt, Scamper watches his best buddy depart. Then—ignoring all the frenzied activity, and the video replay of his winning run on the Astrodome's enormous screen—he expels a mighty yawn.

THE PLACE THEY CALL HOME

One month later, Scamper is back at the Rodman ranch in the California town of

Galt, just south of Sacramento. After getting off to a roaring start for the year, he's on R&R—a circumstance that won't sit well with him for long.

"Scamper was never a horse who did good with long layoffs," Charmayne explains. "But if you can just run him at the good rodeos, keep him fresh, and not haul him up and down the road at 100 miles an hour, you can keep him going right along." No doubt dozens of pro barrel racers wish the formula for consistent winning were that simple. But that's pretty much all there is to Scamper's time-tested routine. He doesn't even run practice barrels between rodeos; in fact, at the 20-acre Rodman ranch, there isn't a single barrel in sight.

For the Rodmans, home is a rarely visited place. A caretaker looks after the horses and the house, where an entire room is filled with 30-some trophy saddles. But to Scamper's owner, the awards presented to Scamper alone are far more important than the saddles, the grand-prize trailers, the appearances on *Good Morning America*, *CBS This Morning*, and *A Current Affair*, or the profiles in *Sports Illustrated*, *People*, and *US* magazines. Five times each, he's been named NFR

Horse With The Most Heart, and AQHA Barrel Racing Horse of the Year. In 1992, he received the AQHA Silver Spur Award, granted to a horse who brings outstanding renown to the breed.

"The Silver Spur was especially neat, because amidst all the great cutting horses, reining horses, show horses, and racehorses everywhere, they gave the award to Scamper," says Charmayne with obvious delight.

On this cool, sunny morning, Scamper is full of pent-up energy as Charmayne leads him out of his stall for grooming. "He's pretty fresh right now," she observes, laughing as Scamper playfully butts her in the chest with his head. "I try to exercise him every day when we're not on the road, but he never seems to run out of steam." That point is later proven when Charmayne climbs aboard, and Scamper immediately breaks into an excited jog, ears pricked, tail plumed, and head tossing impatiently. He's a frisky colt trapped in an older horse's body.

Indeed, Scamper's body is fascinating to behold; the nimble way he uses it is belied by its battered underpinnings. Just take a good look at the legs, and every one of his actual horse years is clearly

visible, like trunk rings on an aging tree.

The permanently enlarged right hock is the result of two injuries, 10 years apart. The ballooned right knee, also permanent, developed from long-standing, degenerative bone disease, which in 1992 led to a bone spur and a subsequent slab fracture. Surgery was performed by eminent Texas veterinarian Robert Lewis, and Scamper was successfully running barrels again just 90 days later. (To quote Dr. Lewis: "That horse has a motor in him that just won't quit.")

"That knee is...probably the worst knee anybody's ever seen," Charmayne admits. "But I watch it closely, and I do physical therapy on it. Other than that, Scamper...is basically sound."

YOU FIRST, MY FRIEND

In an effort to keep him that way, Charmayne has been gradually tapering Scamper off from competition, saving him for the venues offering the largest purses. Of the 80 rodeos targeted for 1994, she planned to ride Scamper in only 10 or so. At the rest, she'd compete on her younger barrel horse, the Paint she calls Magic, that she's been bringing along for several years. Although Magic

earned about 10 percent of the \$103,609 in prize money that Charmayne won in 1993, she's quick to point out that every single one of her world championships is ultimately attributable to Scamper.

Her \$1,100 horse is now virtually priceless, and in caring for him, Charmayne automatically puts his welfare before her own. When there's a gap between rodeos, she won't even consider leaving Scamper with friends, and flying home without him. "If he needs to come home, I'll haul him home," she states. "I don't care how far I have to drive to do it."

His exercise session now complete, Scamper's back in the pasture with Magic, and the two finally have settled down to grazing. Scamper steadily works his way over to the fence where Charmayne is still standing, keeping his attention fixed on her as he nibbles. She watches him, too, with a pensive expression.

After all these years of close companionship, is there a certain telepathy between horse and rider?

"Yeah, I think so," Charmayne quietly replies. "You know, I've hardly ever been separated from Scamper. When he had that knee surgery 2 years ago, I was away from him for a whole week." Her

voice catches. "That was the longest time. Ever."

If it's possible to believe in equine-human telepathy, then it's also possible to imagine that a lucky twist of fate brought the two together. "I definitely think it was all part of a plan, the way everything happened just right," Charmayne declares. "I was at the right age, at the right place, and Scamper needed a friend right then."

Her eyes suddenly mist over. "As far as I'm concerned, Scamper's the greatest horse that ever lived. You can't much fault what he's done." □

Tracking down this elusive pair to schedule a day's visit, was a months-long challenge for Austin, Texas-based freelancer, Anne Lang. "When the appointed day finally arrived," says Anne, "I went to Galt, California, as a coolly detached journalist. But I left there a solid fan. Scamper is living proof that miracles do happen." California photographer Katey Barrett, unfamiliar with the rodeo world, went to capture the "essence" of some kind of wonder horse. "What I saw was a plain, little brown horse," recalls Katey, "and I thought to myself, 'This is *the* Scamper?' Then I saw his eyes. They're indescribable—there's such depth and intelligence in them."