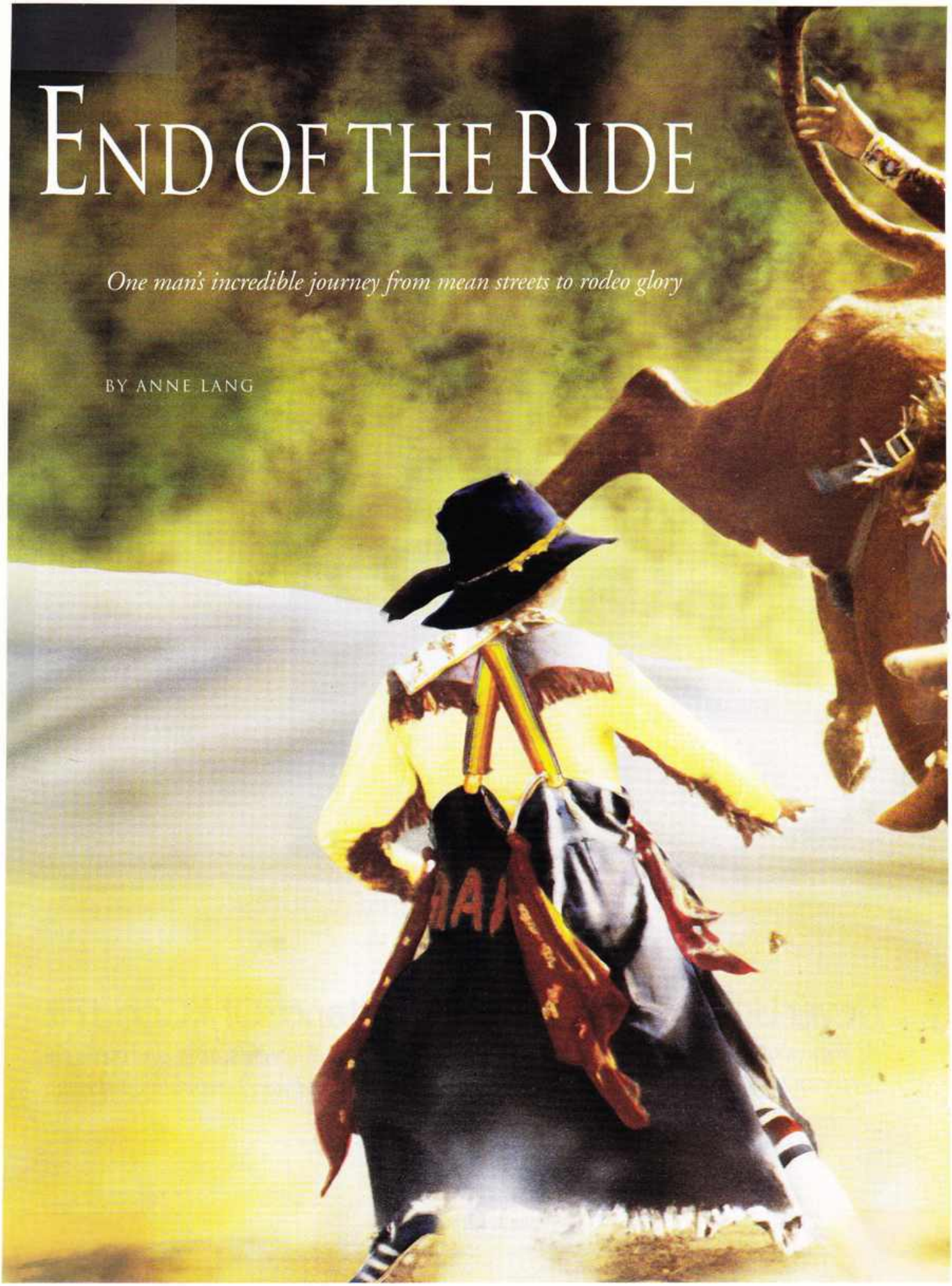
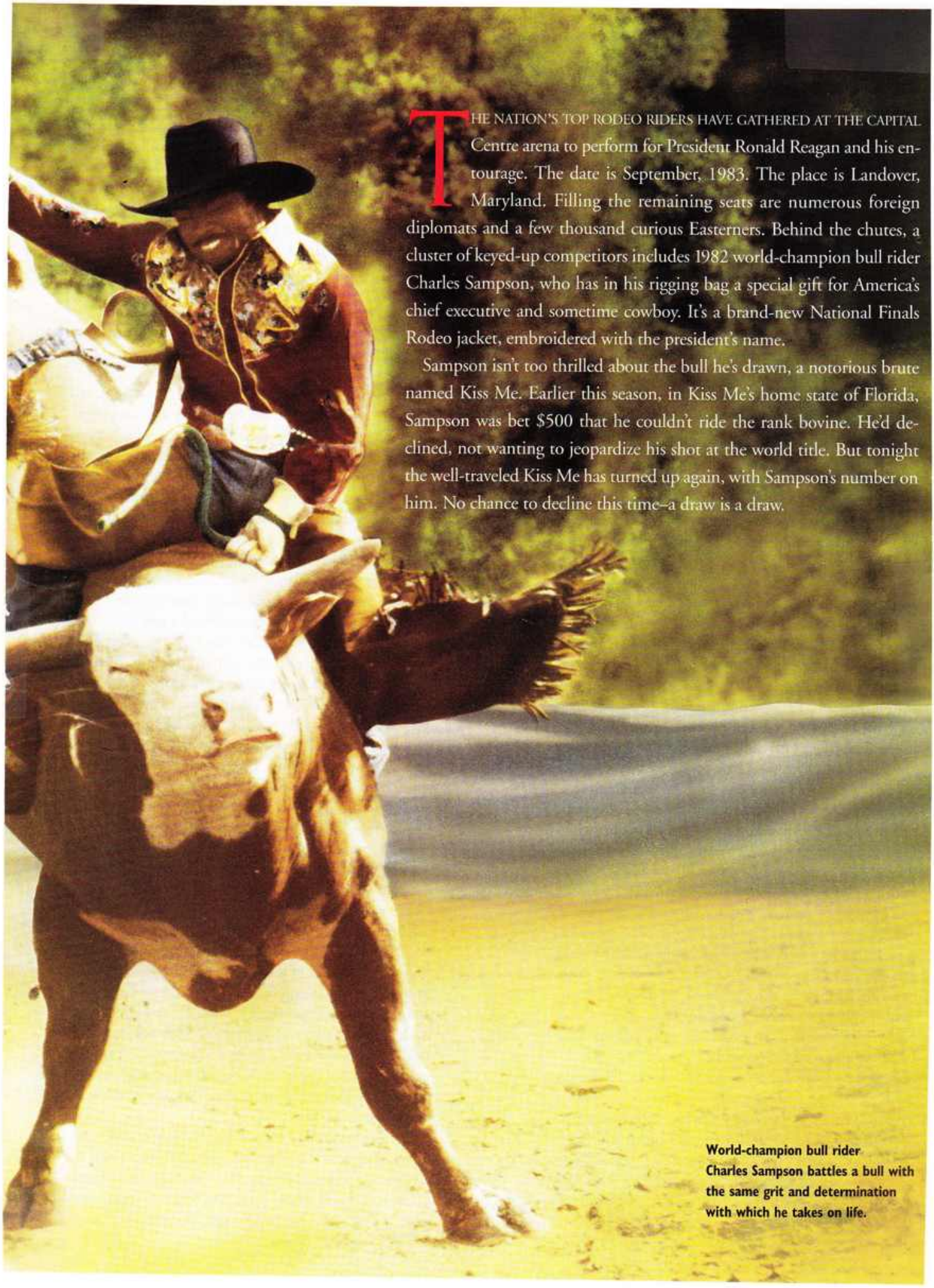


END OF THE RIDE

One man's incredible journey from mean streets to rodeo glory

BY ANNE LANG



THE NATION'S TOP RODEO RIDERS HAVE GATHERED AT THE CAPITAL Centre arena to perform for President Ronald Reagan and his entourage. The date is September, 1983. The place is Landover, Maryland. Filling the remaining seats are numerous foreign diplomats and a few thousand curious Easterners. Behind the chutes, a cluster of keyed-up competitors includes 1982 world-champion bull rider Charles Sampson, who has in his rigging bag a special gift for America's chief executive and sometime cowboy. It's a brand-new National Finals Rodeo jacket, embroidered with the president's name.

Sampson isn't too thrilled about the bull he's drawn, a notorious brute named Kiss Me. Earlier this season, in Kiss Me's home state of Florida, Sampson was bet $500 that he couldn't ride the rank bovine. He'd declined, not wanting to jeopardize his shot at the world title. But tonight the well-traveled Kiss Me has turned up again, with Sampson's number on him. No chance to decline this time–a draw is a draw.

World-champion bull rider Charles Sampson battles a bull with the same grit and determination with which he takes on life.

Lowering himself onto the bull's broad back, Sampson has a fleeting insight: This chute is too cramped for such a big monster. The gate swings open, and Kiss Me bursts out, jerking powerfully to the left with a simultaneous hard buck and belly roll. Sampson tries to gather up and grab hold, but the centrifugal force snaps his head downward, smashing his face into Kiss Me's unyielding skull.

"It was like a slingshot," Sampson later recalls. "The way that he bucked and that particular jump out of the chute just stretched me out."

The impact shatters every bone in Sampson's face except, incredibly, his nose and teeth. He and Kiss Me part ways on the first violent jolt, but Sampson, in shock and with blood streaming down his shirt, staggers in an erratic circle before the medics reach him and lower him onto a stretcher. Among the first to administer aid is President Reagan's personal physician, who along with two agonized bullfighters accompanies Sampson in the ambulance.

Much later, Sampson's rigging bag catches up with him at the hospital. Amid the jumbled contents, still folded neatly and wrapped in tissue, is the NFR jacket intended for the president. The bag is tossed under a remote table in Sampson's room, where it goes unnoticed for days.

IT'S SOMEHOW FITTING THAT A MAN WHO HAS SPENT a sizable chunk of his adult lifetime in airplanes would reach his life's most critical decision while cruising at an altitude of 35,000 feet.

That's what happened to Charles Sampson last February when, flying from a respite in Seattle to a rodeo in Fort Worth, it suddenly occurred to him that it was time to quit his bull riding career.

"I had a talk with God, and we decided it was time for me to get off the bulls and raise my family," Sampson explains later that month, perched on a stack of hay bales at his Arizona ranch. "Always before, when God asked me if I was ready to quit, I always said, 'Nope! Not now!' And God would say, 'Okay. Check with you later.'"

The idea of retiring had actually been nagging at Sampson for a week or so, in the form of a minor injury. In January, he'd ridden three bulls in Denver and felt completely in shape. But later that month, after covering his bull in the preliminaries at Fort Worth, Sampson hurt his knee. "I couldn't have come off any better," he recalls. "I landed on my feet. But my knee buckled, and it's been painful ever since."

Aches and pains are an accepted burden in any roughstock rider's life, and Sampson–who has broken more than 100 bones in his body–has never been the type to "doctor out" of an event because of a little ol' sore knee. But this particular injury Sampson began to view as an omen. He visited friends in Seattle, and the knee still hurt. The Fort Worth finals loomed, and the knee still hurt. On the plane to Texas, he finally put it all together.

"I was thinking about the bull I had drawn," Sampson says. "I knew I could ride him: he's a leaping Brahma, bucks really high and good. But I just kept visualizing that when I hit the ground, my knee was gonna buckle. That was a bad vision, because if it didn't happen on that bull, it might happen on the next one. Or the next one. I had mixed emotions, about my body more than anything, and I hadn't had mixed emotions before. That's when I said, 'I ain't ridin' no more.'" He doctored out of the Fort Worth, Scottsdale, and El Paso rodeos, and went home to his ranch.

On the day of his decision to retire, Sampson was precisely five months shy of his 37th birthday. But his bull riding days weren't really over yet. And neither were his ties to the rodeo world.

IT BEGAN AS A LOVE AFFAIR WITH HORSES. IN 1967, when fifth-grader Charles Sampson went on a Cub Scout field trip to a riding stable in his hometown of Los Angeles, he discovered the heady feeling of controlling a four-footed beast. From the back of a stubborn little school pony, young Sampson made up his mind to become a cowboy. No matter that he, his parents, and his 12 siblings lived in the city's turbulent Watts section, an area not exactly known for launching rodeo careers. Never mind that African-American role-model cowboys were practically nonexistent. The plucky Sampson would somehow find a way.

He returned to the stable the very next day and worked out a deal with the owner: free rides for free work. Sampson eagerly took on a variety of after-school barn chores. In exchange, he was given the chance not only to ride but also to be taught every possible aspect of horsemanship by a host of resident cowboys who were instantly taken with the charismatic youngster. Small in stature back then, and destined to reach an adult height of only 5 feet 4inches, Sampson acquired the stable nickname of Peewee.

By the time he was 13, Sampson and stable owner Tommy Cloud were good buddies. Every Friday night, the two would attend local horse auctions, where Cloud would buy and sell stock. Sampson's job was to ride the consignment ponies in the auction ring, which proved to be an invaluable introduction to roughstock. "A lot of those ponies hadn't been ridden in months, and some of them hadn't ever been ridden," Sampson remembers. "There we were in this 6-by-20-foot auction ring, and they'd start bucking. No saddles, no bridles, just those flimsy grass halters on 'em. It was a heck of a little ride, I'll tell you! Whatever came through there, I just grabbed mane and dared it not to buck me off."

Sampson's cowboy friends taught him to rope, and he traveled with the older men to watch them ride in weekly ropings in the area. After one particular competition, a roper who'd brought the stock that night was letting some teenagers ride the steers. Cloud

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clapped a hand on Peewee's shoulder and told him he was up next.

"I said, 'Hey, I ain't ridin' no steer!'" Sampson remembers. "But Tommy said I had to ride the steer or I'd have to walk home. So I rode the steer, 'cause I wasn't sure how far away home was."

Sampson pauses, grinning as he thinks back to that long-ago night. He picks up a rope off a nearby hay bale and throws a lazy loop over a fence post before continuing.

"Well, that steer made a U-turn and bucked me off. I landed on my stomach, then I got up crying and swearing and askin' Tommy how come I'd had to ride the steer! But I knew that every time I went back, I'd have to do it again. So I practiced all the time: on a bucking barrel, on a hay bale, on a horse. That's how I pursued it. And after awhile, I started to like it."

Once he'd mastered steers, Sampson figured he was ready for tougher stuff. While still in junior high, he spent a lot of time with Southern California roughstock riders who participated in International Rodeo Association events, and a cowboy named Gene Smith took Sampson under his wing.

"I'd go to all the IRA rodeos with him," Sampson says. "I more or less just hung out at first. Then one thing led to another. I was hanging around so much that I became cocky enough to want to ride a bull." The opportunity finally came at Tishomingo, Oklahoma, when he was 14. Like that first steer ride, it was a humbling experience.

"That bull took two jumps, and I bailed outta there. I was petrified," Sampson admits. "I was stung, more than anything, because I didn't know what had happened. All I know is that bull had a good set of horns on him, and I was scared. But when we got back to California, the guys took me to a little buckout place in North Hollywood, and that's where I really started riding bulls."

Living in Los Angeles, Sampson had no access to information about the national high school rodeo system. Consequently, he rode with older contestants on the amateur circuit, at rodeos held mostly no more than a hundred miles from his home. But in 1974, the 17-year-old got a chance to travel to New York's Madison Square Garden to rodeo with some cowboy friends.

"I'd competed on bulls all that year, and I was lucky enough to be riding pretty good," Sampson says. "And the bull I rode, well, he bucked me off, I hung up to him, and he dragged me around the arena forever. Later, as I was crossing the street in front of the Garden on my way back to the hotel, a kid asked me if I was the cowboy who was hangin' on that bull. I said yes, and he asked me if I was gonna do that again tomorrow. 'Cause if I was, he was coming back."

Sampson and his buddies stayed up all night, getting kicked out of every tavern in the Big Apple due to Sampson's being underage. Just before dawn, they caught the first ferry to the Statue of Liberty. "That was the most amazing feeling, approaching the statue in that boat," Sampson says, his expression dreamy with the memory. "From that moment on, I knew this was what I wanted to do: to rodeo and see the world."

The world he saw back then, whenever he scraped together enough money for weekend trips to IRA rodeos, was limited mostly to small towns no farther away than Montana, Arizona, and Utah. In 1976, just two weeks before his high school graduation, Sampson was riding in Perris, California, when a bull stepped on his thigh, breaking his femur. His mother was summoned to the hospital emergency room.

"She didn't know what in the world was going on," Sampson confesses. "She thought a horse had hurt me, not a bull." The following exchange occurred at his bedside:

"Charlie, what were you doin' on a bull?"

"Mom, I've been riding bulls for two years."

"What! I thought you were at the stable riding horses!"

Fortunately, Sampson's mother forgave him in time to attend his graduation, smiling and shaking her head as her 11th child hobbled across the stage on crutches to receive his diploma.

THE NEXT TWO YEARS WERE DEVOTED ALMOST solely to rodeo. During that time, Sampson attended Central Arizona College on a rodeo scholarship, and his competitive experience expanded to include steer wrestling, bareback bronc riding, calf roping, and team roping. But bull riding remained his primary event. "Bareback horses scare me to death," he says, echoing an intriguing sentiment common among bull riders. "I got hung up on a bronc and broke my hand, so that ended my bareback career.

"I do love horses," he continues, his gaze sweeping the large ranch pasture where half a dozen graze. "Although bull riding is my specialty, team roping is what I love more than anything. People wanna go golf, I wanna go rope. People wanna go play tennis, I wanna go rope. I wish I was as good a roper as I think I am." He laughs, with no trace of bitterness. "But from the beginning, I knew that bull riding would be my forte. It's a living, you know? When I was a kid, you'd pay $3 to ride a steer, and you'd win $50. Then I started riding bulls, and I not only enjoyed the traveling, but I was able to win four, five, six hundred dollars. I really thought I was rich. And the people involved with bull riding just opened their arms to me, so it was easy to decide to become a bull rider."

But it didn't always seem like such a wise decision. During more than two decades of bull riding, Sampson has broken his right leg four times. His left leg was only broken once, but it contains 17 pins and two metal plates. ("Can you believe it? I don't even set

off the airport security alarms!" he says proudly.) Once, in Iowa, a bull stomped his chest, puncturing his lung and breaking his sternum. "That was a bad one, because I could feel it crushing me. I couldn't breathe, I was in tremendous pain, and I thought I was going to die."

Then there was the incident in 1978, at a rodeo in Reno, Nevada. Sampson had just covered a bull and was thrown to the arena floor. He was unhurt, but before he could get up, the bull stepped on his hat and clipped off Sampson's left ear. Just like that.

"I didn't even know it had happened. I thought I'd just got nicked," Sampson says. "A Justin heeler came running up and pressed a big wad of gauze against my head. I said: 'What's wrong?' He said: 'You lost your ear.' I said: 'What?!'" A local surgeon's immediate attempt to reattach the ear was unsuccessful, and Sampson now wears an impressive plastic replica. "I was pretty devastated after that," he relates. "I considered quitting then. I was mad. But my desire to keep going overtook my anger."

In 1979, desire manifested itself in another form, named Marilyn. Sampson fell in love with the pretty young woman while on the rodeo trail in Texas. They married, and now have two sons: Laurence Charles (L.C.), 9, and Daniel, 5. In 1984, Sampson bought the 20-acre horse ranch he still owns. Located in tiny Casa Grande, the property is just off I-10, about midway between Tucson and Phoenix. There's a small house on the premises, but where Marilyn and the boys reside while Sampson is on the road remains a secret fiercely guarded by the otherwise open cowboy. He won't even reveal what state they live in.

"I just prefer to keep that part of my life private," is all Sampson will say. He does add that Marilyn lived on the ranch for several years, but she prefers to be near a larger town–so he bought her a second home. Somewhere. He maintains that their family bond is a strong one, despite his having been on the road so much–and despite a tragedy that occurred seven years ago.

It was a typical day at the ranch. Sampson was between rodeos, trying to catch up on maintenance work at home. He was driving a pickup truck full of sand, filling in numerous large mud puddles caused by torrential rainstorms. Two-year-old L.C. was playing up by the house, or so Sampson thought. He didn't realize that the youngster had climbed into a barrel that was blocking one of the targeted water holes. Sampson threw the truck into reverse, not seeing the barrel–or L.C., who was just starting to crawl out when the rear tires ran over him. In one split second, every parent's worst nightmare became hideous reality.

Sampson recounts the heartbreaking story with the resigned composure of one who's had a long time to come to grips with the consequences. The days and nights of screaming "Why?" at the heavens, the countless hours spent in children's hospital wards and rehabilitation centers, the long and painful struggles toward emotional healing are mostly behind Sampson and Marilyn now. L.C., who was rendered developmentally delayed and partially handicapped as a result of the accident, makes progress every day. He's in school, he's learning to walk, and he's grown into a sweet, lively, mischievous boy who teases his younger brother mercilessly.

"We've finally learned that the best, most healthy way to cope with all of this is to focus on the positive," Sampson says, staring at the motionless rope in his hands. "L.C. is doing better all the time. We have all kinds of love for him, and for each other. God has his reasons for everything he does, and we can't question those reasons." He smiles. "Our family is blessed, really, in so many ways."

That kind of quiet strength and determination kept Sampson going in bull riding as well. Prior to meeting Marilyn, and for a time afterward, his most consistent companion was fellow bull rider Ted Nuce–the only traveling partner he ever had. The two met in 1980 and decided to travel together the following year, when they both were gunning for the NFR. Their agenda was hectic, to say the least, with an average of two to three rodeos a day. During one 48-hour period, Sampson and Nuce got bucked off bulls in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and Oregon. In the summer months, they kept a private plane on call.

"Ted used to like to tease Marilyn that in 1982 I slept more with him than I slept with her," Sampson jokes. That year, he and Nuce rode in 148 rodeos. Sampson earned $91,000 and the championship–the pinnacle of his career. But there have been other highlights along the way. He twice won the Turquoise Circuit, the Pendleton Round-Up, the Grand National Rodeo, and the California Rodeo. He was bull riding champ of the Sierra Circuit in 1984; he won the Calgary Stampede $50,000 champion bonus round; and in 1992, he was the Copenhagen/Skoal bull riding champion. In 16 years of competing in Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association events, Sampson collected $739,246 in prize money and qualified 10 times for the NFR, where only the world's top 15 riders in each event are allowed to compete.

Not bad for a guy from the L.A. projects, as many sportswriters liked to point out when Sampson was riding the crest of his success. Sampson is the first to admit he's proud to have beaten the odds–not only to make it to mainstream rodeo, but to achieve bull riding's highest honor and remain among the world's best for a decade afterward. Yet, it saddens and frustrates him that even in these modern times of stepped-up integration, he's still one of the only African American principals in PRCA competition.

"The attitudes may have progressed, but the numbers haven't grown," he says with a slight edge in his voice. "In all my 20 years of rodeoing, I think it's ironic that there aren't more black cowboys. They're out there, but

I honestly don't know why more of them haven't pursued rodeo further, like I did. It's an expensive sport, so that's probably one reason. I don't hear the other blacks in rodeo talk about being cheated, but at the same time, it's just mind-boggling that I've never been judged by a black cowboy, the PRCA isn't run by any blacks, and there are no black stock contractors in the pros."

It can also be hard for an African American to find a foothold in lucrative commercial endorsements, according to Sampson. He's landed some sponsors through the years, among them Wrangler jeans and Bailey hats. In 1992, he was featured in a print ad for Timex watches. The slogan "It takes a licking and keeps on ticking," of course, applied both to the watch and to Sampson himself. However, he says, "just because you're world champion doesn't guarantee that sponsors will come knocking at your door. Rodeo is a white sport, so there's not a lot of advertising for a black man in Western apparel. Change is slow, real slow."

Still, he doesn't feel he can really complain. "I've been treated equally in rodeo," he says. "Sometimes, I was probably misused for being black, but other times I was probably treated better for the same reason. So my eyes are balanced, and as a person that's how I try to keep it. I just try to get along and be as happy as I can."

Wouldn't he like to help improve rodeo opportunities for African Americans, now that he's out of mainstream competition himself? Sampson throws his hands up in exasperation. "If I haven't helped change things just by being out there all these years, then how am I going to change it any other way? I can't go and make black kids ride bulls. I can't go and make black parents make their kids be like me. My participation should be the thing that motivates other blacks to get involved. That's how I got involved myself."

When Sampson was a teenager, his role model was the accomplished African American cowboy Myrtis Dightman, who was even more of an anomaly then than Sampson is today. "I admired Myrtis more than anybody because when I was a kid, he would come to the stables and ride, then go and ride bulls. I'd show him my steer riding pictures." The encouragement from Dightman, coupled with that of a leading white cowboy, eight-time world-champion bull rider Don Gay, was a strong influence. "When I was just beginning to ride bulls, Donnie was riding everything–and I felt I wanted to do that, too. They called him cocky, but I called him positive. I got my incentive from that positive attitude. I knew that if I was going to be the best, I needed to be confident." Sampson has never forgotten the kindness and attention bestowed on him–a starry-eyed, urban cowboy wannabe–by rodeo greats like Dightman, Gay, and others. That's why, whenever possible, he takes time to talk with kids while on the road, and also in his own community.

"I tell them about rodeo and what it takes to be a rodeo cowboy," he says. "I mainly just encourage them to be the best they can be, because it doesn't matter if you come from a rodeo background or not. If you take an interest in something and pursue it, that's all you need to be concerned with. I tell 'em, hey, if you want something bad enough, go clean some stalls. Mow some lawns. Hustle some bottles. There are so many things you can do to provide for yourself."

On this particular afternoon, three local boys are hanging around Sampson's place, helping ranch manager Bob Wilson with various chores, earning the privilege to ride the horses later on. Wilson keeps the teenagers plenty busy, but the furtive glances they send frequently in Sampson's direction and the respectful tones with which they address him indicate their admiration. Sampson is clearly their hero–a responsibility he doesn't take lightly.

"One of those boys was having some trouble at school last year," Sampson quietly reveals as he watches the trio load hay into feed racks. "I flat-out told him that until he got his grades up and stopped messing around, he couldn't come around here no more." The ultimatum had the desired effect, and the boy was allowed to return.

Sampson serves as an example not only to youths, but also to budding bull riders who are smaller than average. Years ago, Sampson felt that taller riders had an advantage; but he eventually came to accept his small frame, and even discovered that it often minimizes the amount of whip caused by a bucking bull. But in the end, he philosophizes, "it doesn't matter what size you are, if you're five-foot-four or six-foot-two. If you've got the desire, you'll find a way to get along."

DESIRE, RAW AND PERSISTENT, DROVE SAMPSON'S return to competition following the 1983 Landover incident. The worst wreck of his bull riding career resulted in 30 hours of surgery, during which doctors totally reconstructed his face, grafting skin from his buttocks–the only place they could find any trace of fat–to repair his forehead. Throughout the three-week hospital ordeal, however, the only time Sampson entertained the idea of switching careers was when he saw his reflection.

"When I looked in the mirror, I sometimes thought, well, maybe there's another job for me," he laughs, though his handsome face today bears almost no trace of the expert surgery. "And I knew that job wasn't modeling! I looked even worse than the Phantom of the Opera."

The Phantom's trademark facial shield was less elaborate, too. Wearing a lacrosse mask for protection, Sampson, against his doctors' judgment, was back in the chutes in less than three months, in time to finish up the year in sixth place overall.

"I couldn't see any reason not to ride," Sampson shrugs. "I still had the desire, and I felt like if my arms and legs were good, why not keep going?"

The extent of Sampson's injuries called for several return visits to the Washington, D.C., hospital where he was first treated. On one of those occasions, he was invited to come to the White House. President Reagan wanted to meet him.

During the first three-week hospital stint, Sampson had received a letter and several phone calls from the concerned president. During the brief conversations, Sampson had been too shy to mention that he had a special gift for Reagan. But he made sure to take the NFR jacket with him on the day of the big visit.

"That was a thrilling experience for me," Sampson recalls. "I was with a local sportscaster, and we walked past security, down the driveway and into the White House like we owned the joint. When I finally met the president, I was trembling in my boots. But he was a nice guy, asking me a lot of questions about the wreck, and was I okay now, that sort of thing. I gave him the jacket, and he seemed pleased."

For the next decade, Sampson's rodeo career zipped along, often at a clip of 300 days a year on the road–with thousands of rides resulting in thousands of dollars and hundreds of injuries. Marilyn remained ever-patient. When Sampson finally made the monumental decision to quit, Marilyn was one of the few who knew for certain that this wasn't a bluff.

"I'm glad Charles made his mind up for himself," she says by telephone, after Sampson dials the number while coyly making sure the area code is hidden from view. "No one could force him to retire. And it makes all the difference in the world that he made this decision while he was standing up. I can't tell you how many times I heard him say the same thing from a hospital bed."

When Sampson makes his official announcement of retirement, the PRCA sends out press releases, and the news appears in print and broadcast markets coast to coast. He's feted at the Tucson and Phoenix rodeos, and in March, he chooses the Dodge National Circuit Finals in Pocatello, Idaho, as the first rodeo in his new life as a mostly retired bull rider.

"I used to think that if I wasn't riding bulls for the championship, then I didn't want to ride bulls at all," Sampson explains. "But bull riding is still a part of me, something I still love." It didn't faze him that Pocatello wasn't one of his better rides. "The first bull one-jumped me. I knew my chance of winning the Dodge at that point was kinda slim to none!"

Sampson won't lack for work or income. He'll continue to conduct bull riding schools in the United States and abroad. But he'll concentrate most of his energies on a national tour called Bull Riders Only, for which he's been the public relations man–never a competitor–during the past several years. The tour will take him to many of his old favorite stomping grounds. And between tour events, and the more frequent visits home, Sampson will no doubt delight his longtime fans and friends by once again settling onto a bull's back and tying on.

"I'd love to go to all my favorite rodeos and retire, maybe with one last ride at each," he says. "But I'll never accept that any bull I get on is going to be my last ride. At Pocatello, it was more like: 'I wanna ride this sucker! Bear down now, Charles, and don't let this sombitch buck you off.'

"Those feelings are instilled in me, and I hope they always will be," Sampson declares. "Especially the feeling that I could get on a bull at any minute."

THE AFTERNOON HAS DWINDLED away, and the Arizona sun rapidly sinks toward the horizon. Sampson suddenly jumps off the stacked bales and strides toward the corral fence, where an insightful ranch manager has tied an already-saddled Paint. The agile little cowboy swings aboard in one graceful motion, coiling his rope as he whistles over his shoulder for the dogs.

Following him as he jogs through the front gate is a ragtag parade of riderless ranch horses, including a yearling, a mare, and her weanling. Sampson heads for the nearby desert at a lope, swinging the lariat, his scarlet shirt a brilliant smear against the darkening azure sky and mauve-shadowed mountains. Barely heard above the thrumming of numerous hooves is the sound of jubilant laughter.