

LAST DANCE

Bull rider

Brent Thurman

lived—

and died—

for rodeo

BY ANNE LANG

THE ATMOSPHERE AT THE 1994 PRCA NATIONAL FINALS Rodeo in Las Vegas crackled with anticipation as 25-year-old Brent Thurman settled onto the back of an ugly, speckled bull named Red Wolf. Three straight no-scores had set a disappointing tone for the final round of a 10-day competition that annually pits the world's toughest cowboys against the country's rankest roughstock. The crowd wanted a reason to whistle and cheer.

Thurman, an affable Texan competing in his second consecutive NFR, wanted to *be* that reason. Deftly tying onto the bull with steady gloved hands that betrayed no hint of nerves, he flipped his rope tail across Red Wolf's hump. As he briefly locked his gaze on a spot between the menacing horns, his expression showed measured confidence—maybe even serenity.

The gate snapped open. Red Wolf exploded from the chute, all four hooves in the air, and promptly twisted into a tight spin. The vicious bucking intensified, and Thurman was done in by the fourth jump. Hung up in the rigging, his legs were whipped out from under him, flinging him backward over the bull's haunches. He fleetingly stretched out his free arm as if trying to catapult himself clear. But the rope jerked him head-first under Red Wolf's belly. As Thurman hit the dirt, his hand at last broke free.

Stunned, he was trapped face-down beneath the thrashing legs for one instant too long. Red Wolf, still spinning, clumsily butted Thurman's shoulder on the first circle. On

the next, his flying rear hooves delivered a crushing blow to the cowboy's head and neck. Bullfighters leapt in from both sides, madly fanning their hats, but couldn't help.

For three agonizing heartbeats, Thurman held his head rigid above the arena floor, his bloodied face staring toward the chutes as chaos ensued all around. Then, ever so slowly, like a small child succumbing to slumber, he lowered his head to the ground.

As medics rushed in with a stretcher, the sole sign of life in Thurman's body was his heaving back, still pinned with its tattered #53. His crumpled legs were clad in chaps fringed in the purple he so loved. Meanwhile, the jubilant Red Wolf still dashed about the arena, dodging the wranglers trying to rope him while the bullfighters straddled Thurman, their painted faces grim. A shocked pall had fallen over the audience, their roar reduced to a muted hum.

Red Wolf was captured and hustled out. Thurman was carefully lifted and rushed through another exit. Unsure of what to do, the crowd broke into somber applause. Suddenly, the next rider, Brian Herman, appeared in the chute, pulling his rope in a glassy-eyed daze. Seeming almost willfully to bail out on the bull's second jump, Herman ran from the arena and sank to the ground against an outside wall, where the television cameras caught him, his head buried in his arms, sobbing.

Texan Adriano Moraes (known as "The Brazilian") eventually came out and scored a 78, becoming only the third



contestant in NFR history to successfully ride all 10 of his bulls. He immediately dedicated the achievement to Thurman, who by then was at University Medical Center, lying in a deep coma from which he never awoke.

A worldwide vigil and media coverage accompanied his week in intensive care. Supporters, letters, flowers, phone calls, and donations toward medical expenses poured into the hospital. No amount of wishing or prayer, however, could bring him back. On December 17, Will and Kay Thurman finally allowed the removal of life support, bowing to their son's previously expressed wishes.

A devastated Kay, who was her son's admitted best friend, took some comfort in recalling a conversation she'd had with him following the 1989 death of former world-champion bull rider Lane Frost. "He grinned his goofy little grin and said, 'Mom, where's your faith?'" Kay told an Austin newspaper on the eve of the funeral. "God is with me on every bull I get on. I want you to understand that if God should ever take me, it doesn't matter if I'm lying on my bed, sitting on a chair, or on a bull. That's when I'll go home."

In life, home to Thurman was wherever the bad bulls beckoned. He'd passionately pursued bull riding since childhood in his native Austin. Bewildered by their son's commitment, his non-rodeo parents slowly came to accept and support it. As an adult, Thurman parlayed that passion into a job raising bucking bulls while rising up through the

competitive ranks. He'd arrived at the 1994 NFR 12th place in the world, having bankrolled more than \$200,000.

"He was just starting to hit his stride as a bull rider," says Ty Murray, fellow Texan and six-time all-around world champion cowboy. "And you know, when somebody dies, everybody wants to say only good things about him. But with Brent, people said it the whole time he was here. He was just a great guy, one of the funniest people I've known. Every time I saw him, he'd make me laugh."

At a memorial service held in an Austin rodeo arena, Thurman's casket was silently wheeled in on a horse-drawn wagon. A massive horned bull followed, and six bull rider pallbearers brought up the rear. Some 1,500 mourners packed the stands, and more than a few tears rolled unchecked down the weathered faces of America's toughest cowboys.

Eulogizing their friend, many struggled to explain the fervor that drove Thurman to do what he did—what they do. To keep going in a sport where death whispers in your ear between every tick of the timer's clock—and leers in your face each time you hit the ground.

Rodeo announcer Mike Mathis put it all in succinct perspective. "Four years ago," he recalled, "Brent told me, 'Old man, I'm gonna be at the big show. I'm going to the National Finals.' Brent lived and died for the scoreboard, and that was pretty simple."

Simple, yes. But for Brent Thurman, it was enough. 🐮

ROUNDUP

Western Styles - June '95

MAILBAG

LAST DANCE

I JUST GOT THROUGH READING "LAST Dance" by Anne Lang (*Western Styles*, April 1995). Of all the articles I have read these past couple months concerning the death of Brent Thurman, that was one of the most moving and touching. My husband and I, along with a friend (who was a boyhood friend of Brent's), were at the final round of the NFR. We were sitting almost directly behind the chute where the accident happened. Anne Lang described that accident exactly how it took place. I had chills (and tears) reading it. I could picture every movement she described as if I was sitting there watching it again.

We feel like we know Brent after all the stories we have heard from his friend. Our prayers and thoughts go out to Brent's family and all his friends in the NFR. I know he will truly be missed by all the rodeo fans! Good luck Brent in your rodeo in the sky!

*Sylvia L. Crowton
Phoenix, Arizona*

A QUESTION OF PROTECTION



The debate on just how much protective gear—if any—should be worn by roughstock riders was fueled by the death of bull rider Brent Thurman from injuries sustained at the PRCA National Finals Rodeo last December (see "Last Dance," page 40). Thurman suffered head and neck injuries after being trampled by a bull; he was wearing a protective vest but no protective headgear.

Prior to Thurman, rodeo's most publicized death was that of world-champion bull rider Lane Frost in 1989. Frost, who was battered in the ribs by a bull, wasn't wearing a protective vest. Since his death, such vests have become so popular that 12 of the 15 bull-riding contestants at the 1994 NFR wore them.

Insiders claim the vests have won acceptance because they don't restrict movement or vision, or clash with the "cowboy look." Helmets present these problems and more, according to Don Andrews, director of the Justin Sports Medicine Program. "If you put on a helmet, you're protecting the head, but you're transferring the load of impact to the neck," he explains, adding, "How much protection is any type of helmet going to provide when you get stepped on by an 1,800-pound bull?"

Six-time all-around world champion Ty Murray wears the protective vest, but remains skeptical about helmets. "You've got a better chance of getting hurt [wearing one]," he explains. "Your vision's screwed up, you've got weight on your head, and your center of gravity's thrown off. If a guy's that concerned about getting hurt, then maybe he shouldn't be riding bulls."

But Shaw Sullivan, chief executive officer of Wrangler Bull Riders Only and a rider himself, says that a helmet prototype should be created—and required. "We're all concerned with protecting rodeo contestants' health. You don't have much of a sport if you don't keep the participants healthy long enough to build legends."

-Anne Lang