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# Beauty and the Beasts

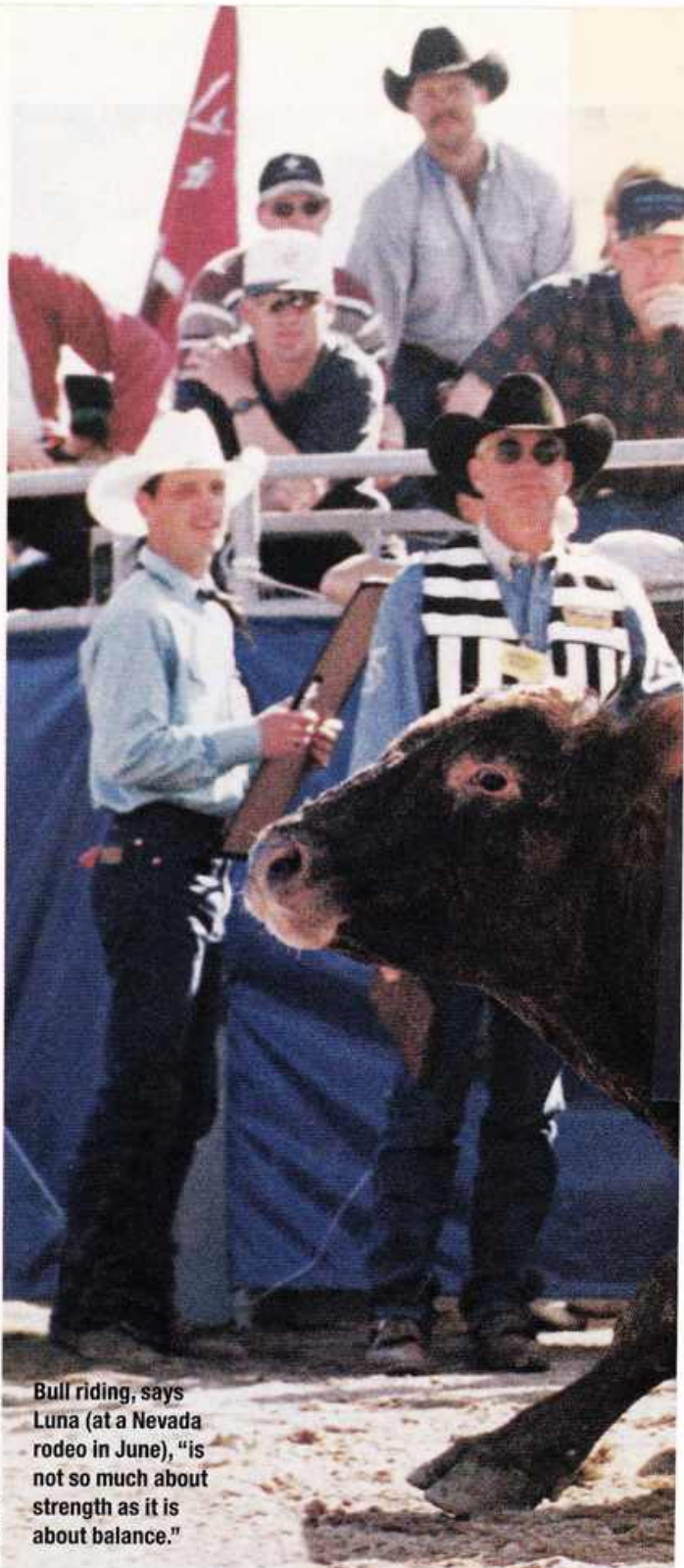
Texas model Denise Luna risks life and face for the joy of riding raging rodeo bulls



DAN STRONAU

DAN HUBBELL

**"She's talented and pretty, yet tough," says her agent Ray Salinas.**



**Bull riding, says Luna (at a Nevada rodeo in June), "is not so much about strength as it is about balance."**

**D**enise Luna lay in the dirt gasping for air, her ribs burning with pain. With the huge bull still bucking beside her, the slender 26-year-old tried to roll out of harm's way, but her muscles refused. "I couldn't even crawl," says Luna, thrown while competing in July's Mesquite Championship Rodeo near Dallas. "The bull had kicked a nerve in my legs, and they were totally numb. And he'd slammed me to the ground so hard that a rib I'd cracked the week before had broken, along with two more. My belt buckle



was caved in from where he'd stepped on my gut."

Just a week later, Luna, looking a bit wan, unwrapped the tape binding her ribs just long enough to slip into a silver blue swimsuit for a four-hour beer-ad photo shoot. "Hey, are you gonna be okay?" asked photographer Dan Strout. "Yeah, sure," she said. "It hurts a little, but I'm healing fast. Let's go!"

Luna's life may be the ultimate mix of glamor and grit. Ranked the world's fourth best female bull rider by the Professional Women's Rodeo Association, the 5'6",

120-lb. Bedford, Texas, resident is also pulling in \$25,000 a year digging her heels into a budding modeling career for Wrangler jeans, Bud Light and other clients. "Denise has more heart and more try than some male cowboys I know," says bull rider Ralph Mosqueda. "I tell her to keep reaching for the stars, 'cause she's gonna be one someday."

That's if her other career—the one involving 2,000-pound beasts with a yearning to tap-dance on her head—doesn't do permanent damage. "If I had my way,



At Cowboys, Luna works the beer tub and deflects pickup lines. "When they ask me out," she says, "I say, 'Oh, you're so funny!'"



"We're all like sisters," says Luna (far right) with fellow rodeo bull riders (from left) Lisa Stipp, Joy Gordon and Tina Wilkerson.

she'd wear a protective helmet and a mask," says photographer Strout. "One hoofprint could ruin her face for life." Luna, fully aware of the danger (one of her idols, Lane Frost, whose life was chronicled in the 1994 film *8 Seconds*, died in a bull-riding accident in 1989), does use the protective vest worn by most bull riders, but declines the lacrosse-style mask. "I've heard that the bull's horn can get hooked on the mask and snap your neck," she explains.

The rewards, compared with the risks, are paltry. Luna's ranking is based on her earnings, which this year total less than \$1,500. By con-

trast, the top male bull riders can earn about \$100,000 annually. But that inequity has forged a bond among the 16 women who compete on the PWRA circuit. "We're all really close," says Tammy Kelly, 36, of Queen Creek, Ariz., the current top-ranked rider. "We've gotta be, 'cause there's only a few of us." They share long drives and hotel rooms during the 40-event season, believing that the more attention they attract, the more money—and acceptance—will follow. "We get a lot of the 'You should be barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen' comments," Luna says.

"I answer, 'When I find a man who gives me as big a rush as I get from a bull, that's when I'll quit riding.' That usually shuts 'em up."

Luna got her start in rodeo three years ago, when she tagged along with a male friend on his way to bull-riding practice and talked the other cowboys into letting her ride a bucking steer. To their surprise, Luna "covered" the steer, riding the eight seconds required in men's competition. (For women it's six.) "The only problem was I didn't know how to get off," she recalls with a laugh. After practicing for a year, Luna got her PWRA permit and hit the circuit.

Always adventurous, Luna grew up surfing in San Diego. The daughter of teenage parents, she never knew her father and was first raised by her grandmother Delfina Benitez,

who died in 1976, then by her mother, Carmen, 44, a hotel housekeeper. "Like most California girls my age, my dream was to become some kind of star when I grew up," says Luna. But as a tomboyish, headstrong teen she clashed with her mother—though the relationship is amicable now—and struck out on her own, moving into an apartment with a friend at 16.

After graduating from high school in 1990, Luna spent a semester at community college before joining a friend in Arlington, Texas, in 1992. There, she met and married a Navy man, though the marriage lasted only a year. Luna continued working as a bartender at Cowboys, a honky-tonk where she still moonlights, passing out long-neck bottles of beer and riding the mechanical bull during breaks. A secretarial job led to her first modeling session, for a local apparel company.

Currently single and living in a one-bedroom apartment with her three cats, Luna daydreams about owning "a beautiful strawberry roan, with land to keep it on, and maybe some bulls—not for bucking purposes, but as pets." For now, Luna draws inspiration from the photos on her walls of such past female rodeo legends as Kitty Canutt and Prairie Rose Henderson and hopes she can hold on for the rest of the ride. "When I drive away from a rodeo, even if I didn't cover or didn't win, I'm satisfied simply knowing that I got on, that I didn't chicken out," she says, adding significantly, "and that I'm still in one piece."

- Sophronia Scott Gregory
- Anne Lang in Bedford



"Fear is okay if you can control it," says Luna (at home).

WATT/MSB/ANDERSON (3)

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# La bella y las bestias

La modelo tejana Denise Luna se arriesga a quedar desfigurada o morir con tal de coger al toro por los cuernos

DAN STRIHOUD



"Es talentosa y bella, pero recia", dice su representante, Ray Salinas.

**D**enise Luna yacía casi sin aliento con un ardiente dolor en las costillas. La esbelta mujer de 26 años trató de darse vuelta para alejarse del enorme toro que seguía pateando a su lado, pero sus músculos no le respondían. "No podía ni siquiera gatear", dice Luna, que en esa ocasión fue derribada por el toro mientras competía en el Campeonato de Rodeo de Mesquite, cerca de Dallas, Texas, en julio. "El toro me pateó un nervio en las piernas y las tenía completamente adormecidas. Me tiró al suelo con tanta fuerza que me rompió una costilla que tenía agrietada desde la



DAN HUBBELL

"Cabalgar toros es cuestión de balance antes que de fuerza", dice Luna (durante un rodeo en Nevada en junio).

semana anterior, además de quebrarme otras dos. Cuando se me paró encima me enterró la hebilla de mi correa”.

Sólo una semana después, todavía algo demacrada, Luna se quitó la banda que mantenía unidas sus costillas, se puso un traje de baño azul plateado y posó durante cuatro horas para las fotografías de un anuncio de cervezas. “Oye, ¿seguro que vas a estar bien?”, le preguntó el fotógrafo Dan Stroud. “Sí, claro”, respondió ella. “Me duele un poco, pero me estoy recuperando rápido. ¡Vamos!”

La vida de Luna bien podría ser la mejor mezcla posible

de encanto y coraje. Esta residente de Bedford, Texas — que mide 5' 6" y pesa 120 libras— ostenta el cuarto lugar mundial en cabalgadura de toros de la Asociación Profesional de Rodeo Femenino (PWRA, por sus siglas en inglés). Pero además tiene una prometedora carrera como modelo de los *jeans* Wrangler, la cerveza Bud Light y otras compañías, que le permite ganar \$25,000 anuales. “Tiene mejor disposición que muchos vaqueros que conozco”, dice el jinete de toros Ralph Mosqueda.

Su carrera de modelo dependerá de si su otro oficio —





En Cowboys, Luna ignora los piropos. "Cuando me invitan a salir, les digo: 'Ay, tú eres tan chistoso'".



"Somos como hermanas", dice Luna (derecha) con sus compañeras (desde la izquierda) Lisa Stipp, Joy Gordon y Tina Wilkerson.

enfrentar bestias de 2,000 libras de seosas de bailarle un jarabe tapatío en la cabeza— no le produce daños permanentes. "Si por mí fuera la haría usar un casco protector y una careta", dice el fotógrafo Stroud. "La marca de una pezuña podría arruinar su cara para siempre". Al igual que la mayoría de los jinetes de toros, Luna lleva un chaleco protector, pero rehúsa ponerse una careta. "He oído que los cuernos del toro pueden engancharse en la

careta y quebrarte el cuello", explica.

Las recompensas, comparadas con los riesgos, son mezquinas. El rango que ocupa Luna se basa en sus ingresos, los cuales este año han sumado menos de \$1,500. Por el contrario, el jinete de toros mejor cotizado puede ganar cerca de \$100,000 anualmente. Esa injusticia ha forjado un vínculo entre las 16 mujeres que compiten en el circuito de la PWRA, durante la temporada de 40 eventos. "Escuchamos muchos comentarios por el estilo de 'Tú deberías estar en la cocina, descalza y embarazada'", dice Luna. "Yo les contesto: 'Cuando encuentre un hombre con una embestida tan grande como la de un toro, entonces dejaré de cabalgar'. Casi siempre eso les tapa la boca".

Luna debutó como jinete hace tres años. Había acompañado a un amigo a una práctica de rodeo; y una vez allí éste convenció a otros vaqueros para que la dejaran montar en un novillo. Para sorpresa de todos, Luna "dominó" a la bestia durante los ocho segundos requeridos en las competencias masculinas. (Para las mujeres son seis.) "El único problema fue que después no sabía bajarme del animal", recuerda. Luego de practicar por un año, Luna obtuvo su licencia de la PWRA.

Siempre audaz, Luna, hija de adolescentes, nunca conoció a su padre y fue criada por su abuela materna, Delfina

Benítez, quien murió en 1976. Luego vivió con su madre, Carmen, de 44 años, empleada doméstica en un hotel. "Como la mayoría de las chicas californianas de mi edad, mi sueño era convertirme en artista cuando fuera mayor", dice Luna. La testaruda jovencita tuvo encontronazos con su madre—hoy la relación es amigable— y a los 16 años se mudó a un apartamento con una amiga.

Al graduarse de secundaria en 1990, Luna pasó un semestre en un colegio universitario. Durante un año estuvo casada con un miembro de la Armada. En 1992, tras mudarse a Arlington, Texas, comenzó a trabajar como cantinera en Cowboys, una taberna barata y de poco fuste, donde todavía labora al margen de sus otros empleos. Una posición de secretaria la llevó a su primera sesión de modelaje para una firma local de ropa.

Luna permanece soltera y vive en un apartamento de un dormitorio con sus tres gatos, aunque no deja de soñar despierta con ser dueña de "un campo y un hermoso caballo que pondría a pastar junto a algunos toros, a los cuales no cabalgaría, sino que los tendría como mascotas". Por ahora, se inspira en las fotos de leyendas del rodeo femenino y mantiene la esperanza de poderles hacer frente a los futuros retos. "Cuando vengo de regreso de un rodeo, aunque no haya dominado al animal o no haya ganado, me siento satisfecha con saber simplemente que cabalgué y no me acobardé". A eso añade enfáticamente: "Y que no me hicieron pedazos".

■ SOPHFRONIA SCOTT GREGORY

■ ANNE LANG en Bedford, Texas



"El miedo está bien, siempre que lo puedas controlar", dice Luna (en su casa).

WYATT MC SARDEN (3)

# Reality Check

An Inside Look at TV's Hottest Trend

## BREAKING NEWS!

**Hitting a Sour Note** Jaered Andrews, 24, expelled from *American Idol* in January, is scheduled to make a court appearance March 14 in Hermitage, Pa. Freed on \$5,000 bail since his Feb. 28 arrest, he faces an assault charge related to the Nov. 16 death of Thomas Blakely, 39, who police say fatally struck his head during a brawl with Andrews and a pal outside a bar in Farrell, Pa. (across the Ohio border from Youngstown, where the singer lives). Andrews, ironically, was celebrating his having made the cut for the show's new season. Producers have declined to explain his expulsion or comment on his legal troubles.



JAERED ANDREWS IN CUSTODY FEB. 28 AND ON *IDOL* IN JANUARY



**DIVORCED BY AMERICA** On the March 10 *Married by America* voters rejected *Playboy* model Denise Luna, 31, as fiancée for restaurateur Stephen Savona, 35. Just as well: Luna, it turns out, never told FOX she's already married to (but separated from) handyman Alan Hari, 31. Luna shrugs off the match. "I don't think I was in love with him. We married in '93 and it was over as soon as I said, 'I do.'" Oh yeah? Hari says they spent six months together, then Luna dumped him while he was in Somalia with the Navy. So why endure a decade of nonmarriage? "Out of sight, out of mind, probably," he says. Now she says she'll file papers. And he won't contest.



## SCANDAL OF THE WEEK

### BEHIND THE SCENES I'M A CELEBRITY—GET ME OUT OF HERE!



**JUNGLE FEVER** At the March 5 conclusion of the ABC series, Alana Stewart and Robin Leach (above) hugged after a contentious week together with eight other celebrities in the Australian rain forest. But the most casual U.N. inspection would have revealed that neither had buried the hatchet. "I don't care to speak to him," says Stewart, 57, ex-model and ex-wife (Rod Stewart, George Hamilton). She says the former *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* host, 61, behaved as if their Outback survival challenge was one long caviar dream: "All he did was lie on his cot all day, ordering everyone else around. He was tedious and pompous." Good with poison

darts, though. In an e-mail sent out to friends after the show, Leach called Stewart a "whining hypochondriac who never lifted a finger to help with anything." Leach tells PEOPLE: "Don't for one minute think it was just me that had issues with Alana."

At least the winner, anointed by phone-in voters, isn't whining. Choreographer Cris Judd (below) did dish a little in the finale, talking about the first time he kissed ex-wife Jennifer Lopez. (Awww!) "I'm thrilled to win," says Judd, 33, who donated his \$200,000 prize to the Make-A-Wish Foundation. "But I've had my fill of reality shows." So has Stewart: "Critters are easy. People are more difficult."



PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL VANISHYUK; CRAIG SLOON/ABC; ADAM NERSEN/PHOTO/INC; CRAIG SLOON/ABC; COURT TV'S THE SMOKING GUN