

Disabled rodeo-riding pastor overcomes obstacles

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Twenty years ago, doctors told Randy Bird he never would ride, rope or walk again. He not only rides and ropes; Bird also is pastor of Higher Trails Cowboy Church in Merit, northwest of Greenville. (Photos courtesy of Randy Bird)

Disabled rodeo-riding pastor

overcomes obstacles

By Toby Druin

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MERIT—Twenty years ago, in the midst of an almost yearlong stay in a Dallas hospital where medical specialists were putting him back together, doctors told Randy Bird he never would ride, rope or walk again.

They underestimated him. He not only rides and ropes; Bird also is pastor of Higher Trails Cowboy Church in Merit, northwest of Greenville. He hasn't given up on walking again, either, and people who know him and his determination aren't betting against him.



Randy Bird developed a therapy saddle that enabled him to ride and rope, even after a wreck 20 years ago left him unable to walk.

Bird grew up in Tomball and was a gifted athlete. He ran the 100-yard dash in 9.9 seconds, the half mile in 1:58.6 and once ran a punt back 104 yards in a high school football game. And from the time he was 10 or 12, he participated in rodeo events, usually at Cypress-Fairbanks High School.

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When his grandfather moved to the Dallas area in 1976, Bird wasn't far behind, joining him in 1978. He brought along his wife and their young son and some bad habits he had picked up. He had become a drug addict and an alcoholic and was about as far from God as he could get, he said.

On Feb. 24, 1986, all that changed. About 4 a.m., on his way home after a night of drinking, Bird noticed his dog, Rooster, was about to fall off his

favorite perch on the toolbox behind his pickup truck's cab.

"I had a new Ford pickup, and I hadn't had time to put some carpet down on the toolbox so Rooster could maintain his footing," he recalled.

When he saw Rooster about to fall off the side of the pickup, Bird said, he jerked it to the side to try to keep the dog on the toolbox and then back again to try to stay on the highway.

The pickup rolled, and it continued rolling even after Bird was ejected through the passenger-side window.

When it finally stopped rolling and was lying upside down on its crushed cab, Bird remained on the highway with multiple broken ribs, a crushed chin, a jaw broken in three places, and—worst of all—a broken neck and back.

"I couldn't move," he said. "But lying there, I told God I had wrecked my truck, had broken my back and had killed my dog. And God said, 'Randy, if you're going to live through this and make it, you're going to have to keep your eyes on me.'"



Randy Bird's therapy saddle.

As he lay on the road, Bird noticed an elderly man standing about 60 feet away. He still has a vivid recollection of the man, including his white beard and every item of clothing he was wearing.

"I said to him, 'Mister, I need some help,'" Bird recalled.

"I've already sent for help," the old man replied.

A few minutes later a neighbor took Bird's hand and said, "You need help," and said he had called for an ambulance.

When Bird asked the neighbor where the old man was, the neighbor said he hadn't seen any old man. Bird remains convinced the old man was an angel who saw him through the wreck.

When the ambulance arrived and the emergency medical technicians were trying to get Bird in the ambulance, Rooster showed up, too, biting and nipping at them, trying to protect Bird from further injury. The wreck hadn't killed him, after all. In fact, the blue healer/Australian shepherd mix, 10 at the time of the wreck, lived another six years.

Bird first was taken to a hospital in Greenville and then by CareFlight to Methodist Hospital in Dallas and put on the road to recovery.

He recovered from his other problems in the fury of the accident.

"I was a drug addict and an alcoholic for 15 years," Bird said. "But God changed my life on the side of that road."

It helped that both his mother and grandmother had been praying for him during those 15 years. "Prayer works," he said.

Hoping to be healed, he promised anything and everything to God during his recovery, Bird said, but he became aware that all God wanted was his obedience.

And while he has remained paralyzed from his mid-chest down, Bird hardly is confined. He gets around in a wheelchair as well as many people do on foot, and he tours his ranch and the church grounds on a golf cart, working the brake and accelerator with a pick handle. He and his wife, Linda, know every bump on their ranch and the 10-acre church site.

After his accident, he invented the Randy Bird Therapy Saddle, which got him back on the back of a horse.

In 1990, Randy and Jimmy Ray Bird competed in a PRCA roping event in Huntsville and won one go-round before placing seventh in average.

“I still miss rodeoing,” Bird said. “But I have a far greater thing to do. God called me to preach when I was 16, but I ran from him until that night on the highway.”

After getting out of the hospital, he spent the next several years leading evangelistic services, preaching wherever he got the chance, he said. In late 1994 or early 1995, he was invited to speak at a meeting of the Texas Rehabilitation Centers in Amarillo. After he spoke to the group, the wife of the man who had invited him to speak and who attended church in Hereford asked him to speak at a sunrise service in a feedyard.

Randy and Linda Bird wound up buying a ranch in Dawn and staying there seven years, starting the Barn Church. Attendance was topping 400 when they left West Texas to move to Merit.

Higher Trails Cowboy Church in Merit, which Bird started in a feed store, is attracting more and more people. On any given Sunday, about 230 to 250 people gather for worship in the church’s unfinished building. The

congregation moved into its facility about three months ago once the building was in-the-dry, and Bird expects the interior work to be completed by mid-year.

The church building, which will accommodate 600 worshippers, and the 10-acre site on which it is located, are a miracle, Bird noted.

When Kirk Hammack of Greenville bought 93 acres at the intersection, Bird asked if the church could buy the 10 acres on the corner for \$5,000 per acre. Hammack agreed.

"Our people did all kinds of fund raisers—horse auctions, yard sales" and so forth, Bird said. "When we had raised \$37,000, a lady who was not even a member of the church wrote us a check for \$13,000."

When Bird telephoned Hammack to arrange a meeting so he could give him the \$50,000, Hammack told him he was giving the property to the church.

"So, with that \$50,000 and \$100,000 from a loan from the Baptist Church Loan Corporation, we have \$150,000," Bird said. "All we owe is \$96,000, and our dream and real desire is to be debt-free."

Bird never has let any obstacle—including his injury—stand in the way of ministry.

"God uses it for my good and his glory," he said. "Any time I meet someone and start talking to them, they go down on their knees to look me in the eye. There's something about someone being on their knees that God can take and use."

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