

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ...

130 rodeos a year to about 40 while working at the Polo Ranch in Cheyenne, Wyo.

“It was hard to leave the arena and go into civilian life,” Nafzger said. “When you get injured, you start looking for a transition into a life you want to be in, and horses and animals was part of what I liked.”

In 1970, Nafzger and his wife, Wanda, along with his brothers, made a trip to the horse racing track Keeneland in Lexington, Ky., where they pooled their resources. With \$8,000 they bought two yearling fillies. Nafzger’s racehorse-training career had officially begun.

Surprisingly, he found that training race horses was like bull riding.

“They’re a lot alike, actually – you’re your own boss and do your own work,” Nafzger said. “When you get in the chute, there’s you, God and the bull, and that’s it. But in the racehorse world, it’s what you can get done with a horse. But you have to understand you can’t make a bull buck or make a horse run. ... My motto when training horses was I never trained a racehorse, every racehorse trained me. I never rode bulls a certain way, I knew what they would do and I knew how I had to adjust to that bull. When I got into horses it was the same thing, you had to adjust to the animal.”

The efforts paid off as Nafzger saw his first horse win a race in Lubbock, Texas, in 1970.

Nafzger continued to compete in bull riding before officially retiring in 1972.

Meanwhile, he was on onto something with his bull riding approach for training racehorses.

Among those he trained were a pair of Kentucky Derby champions – Unbridled in 1990 (who also won that year’s Breeders’ Cup Classic) and Street Sense in 2007. He also trained Banshee Breeze, winner of five Grade 1 races and voted the 3-year-old filly champion in 1998.

His career as a horse trainer landed him in the National Museum of Racing’s Hall of Fame in 2008. His purses have totaled more than \$52 million.

Like the bulls he once rode, each horse he trained had its own style.

“We called him (Unbridled) the Gentle Giant,” Nafzger said. “He was about 17 hands tall and he loved kids, he had more kids on his back than he knew what to do with. But he was a different horse – if you had to stop him, it would take him a while to get on again.”

Street Sense was the complete opposite.

“He was like push-button – he would give it to you and he was the perfect horse,” Nafzger said. “They all had their different personalities and you had to learn how they liked to do it. Every horse is trying to tell you what he likes and doesn’t like, and the good thing about a horse is he will tell you what he doesn’t like.”

Leffew credited Nafzger’s people skills for his success, since training someone’s racehorse meant convincing owners their horses would be a better fit for a different racing class.

“His enthusiasm in bull riding and his fun approach to life carried over to that racehorse industry,” Leffew said. “... I have an uncle I asked what the secret to success is. He said it’s to make sure people like you, and then you’ll be a success. That’s a big part of Carl’s success and we thought the world of him.”

SHARING HIS KNOWLEDGE

Nafzger worked with a ghost writer to publish two books. His first book, *Traits of a Winner: The Formula for Developing Thoroughbred Racehorses*, was published in 1994.

“Everyone thinks trainers know something they don’t, and I want people to know the truth – a horse makes you, don’t ever think you make the horse,” Nafzger said. “I wanted to take the black magic out of horse racing.”

More than 20 years later, Nafzger wrote his second book, a more

reflective theme to understanding the meaning of success and how to achieve it. *Why – Discovering Your Essence is Important for a Life of Meaning* was released in 2016.

“I wanted people to find out that life is really about PMA – having a positive mental attitude,” Nafzger said.

Nafzger and Leffew read “Psycho-Cybernetics” by Maxwell Maltz – a self-help book that emphasizes positive thinking – at about the same time that Nafzger’s rodeo career was winding down.

“He certainly took it to another level because around the time he read it, he was at the end of his career and wanting to get more into horse training,” Leffew said. “Where I went on with it, he took it to a different sport.”

The trick is to learn from adversity, rather than dwell on it, Nafzger said.

“If they want to be a success, it’s up to you,” he said. “I don’t mean money or wealth, I don’t know what your success is. But if you want to be a successful person, I think the world needs to realize when you screw up, then go look at your life. Don’t worry about this and that, just ride your bull and you’ll be OK.”

Nafzger’s experiences weren’t always an easy ride.

“I turned my back on Christ,” Nafzger said. “I’d party and had a great time, but then I realized I was in Hell and had nowhere to go.

“I love rodeoing and all the great things from it, and I still love rodeoing. ... I thought I would win the world, but I let partying take me away from it and then I realized I wanted to be independent and successful and be me, Carl Nafzger, so I went back to Christ.

“That’s the biggest accomplishment of my life, getting my life together,” Nafzger said. “I wanted to help people and have them see there’s no black magic to it. They can take it or leave it – that’s cowboying there. I’m not a preacher.” 🐾



Carl Nafzger rode his first bull when he was 16 years old, and it wasn't long before he was competing at the pro level.

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