

# A COWBOY'S COWBOY

## BRIAN FULTON

### 1962-2015

**B**RIAN FULTON was as nice and unassuming as he was talented and funny. He was a husband to the love of his life, Lisa, dad to their three sons, Jake, Jared and John Lloyd, a son, a brother and a true and trusted friend to many. But if forced to use just one word to describe Brian Fulton, it'd have to be **COWBOY**.

When I say all-around cowboy, I'm not just referring to Brian's 19 Badlands Circuit year-end championships, national circuit all-around and tie-down roping titles or the fact that he qualified for the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo as both a tie-down roper and a bulldogger. Brian was the man if there was ranch work to be done. And Brian didn't just have an eye for good horses—he raised and trained them himself. With a crew that consists of family and close friends, Brian and Lisa built the annual Fulton Performance Horse & Production Sale in their hometown of Valentine, Neb., into a renowned and respected event that's a gold standard in the Western industry nationwide.

Brian battled brain cancer the last nine years without complaint. He fought it—and won—so many times. At 52, Brian headed to Heaven on Aug. 28, one week to the day after their 2015 sale at the Cherry County Fairgrounds in Valentine. Rodeo and ranch people from coast to coast journeyed to the same site on Sept. 1 to remember a cowboy none of us will ever forget. The

stories flowed, as did the laughter and the tears.

Brian had several brothers in addition to the four he was born with. Troy Pruitt was one of them. Like Brian, Troy is a South Dakota native. In the end, they could not have been closer. But it didn't start out that way.

"Brian and I high school rodeoed together," said Pruitt, the 1990 World Champion Tie-Down Roper, who's a native of Lennox, S.D. "And at that time, we hated each other with a passion. It was a mutual dislike. Brian was a cowboy from the country, and I was from the Sioux Falls area, had long hair, wore bell bottoms and roped in tennis shoes.

"We college rodeoed together, too, and we still couldn't stand each other. Brian was buddies with my brother Todd. Todd entered the three of us, then Todd didn't go, so Brian and I got stuck together. We didn't even like each other a



*Fly Thomas Photo*

**PARTNERS:** With friend and hazer Todd Suhn on one side and his trusty four-footed friend Cactus on the other, Brian Fulton makes another winning run.

little bit, but by the time we rodeoed together a month or so that year (1984) we became inseparable.”

Brian and Troy were the very best of friends the last 30 years. “We’ve got so many stories between us,” Troy said. “Probably 80 percent of them can’t be repeated, but that’s probably the case with most best friends. Brian’s family to me. I can’t hardly imagine he’s not here. You have a list of your closest friends you call when you’re frustrated or at your wit’s end, and Brian was one of those guys for me. If Brian was your friend you didn’t need another one.”

The visual that comes to most minds when we all think of watching Brian work in the arena is of him roping calves, bulldogging and hazing on Cactus, a gritty bay horse Brian bought as a yearling and drove on foot with the long lines before he ever saddled him the first time. To tell you something about Cactus’s bloodlines and the undertaking it was for Brian to make him a world-class timed-event horse in multiple events, Cactus’s full brother found his calling in a bucking string.

“That horse was amazing at everything he did,” Troy said. “That’s because Brian made him. That was the most versatile horse I’ve ever seen in my life. He wasn’t just good at multiple events. He was outstanding.”

Brian lived so much of his life in the saddle, and with legendary toughness. But the same huge heart that fueled the fierce competitor in him made for a soft center that was borderline sweet.

“I don’t think a lot of people knew how soft-hearted Brian was, because a lot of people didn’t see that side of him,” Troy said. “He was the toughest son of a gun ever, and he could do it all. If it needed to be done on a horse, Brian could do it. He could make an average horse great. He was also pretty tender-hearted.”

Brian never whined about the heart-breaking hand he was dealt—a diagnosis that came when John Lloyd was just a few months old. “He was always worried about how other people were getting along,” Troy said. “I had shoulder surgery earlier this year, and when I was picking him up out of the bed to put him in the wheelchair this summer his only concern was that I didn’t hurt my shoulder. It was the furthest thing from my mind, but that was Brian.”

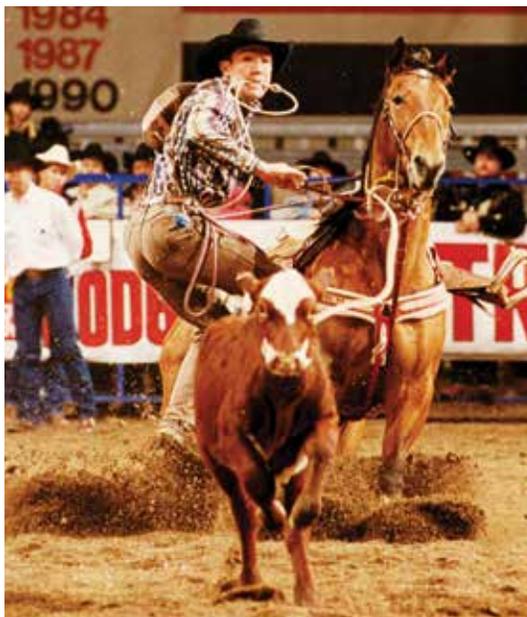
Todd Suhn grew up in Ree Heights, S.D., about 12 miles from where Brian did in Miller, S.D. The Fulton family had an indoor barn, where they were having a roping school. The Suhn boys—Justin, AKA “Buck,” Todd and Randy—were 9, 7 and 5 at the time, and weren’t yet roping horseback much. But they wanted to get in on the groundwork part of the school, so their dad, Jerry, traded Brian’s dad, Tex, some roping dummies he made in exchange for tuition.

“I admired Brian and his brothers when I was a little kid,” said Todd, a 16-time Wrangler National Finals Rodeo steer wrestler. “In ’95, I went and lived with Brian and Lisa right there north of Valentine, and we hit the Badlands rodeos and a few of the bigger ones, like Cheyenne. We had a good time all the time.”

Brian blew the Badlands Circuit bulldoggers’ doors off in 1995, riding Todd’s superhorse Super. “That set up the year in 1996, when we traveled together and went to a bunch of rodeos,” Todd said. “Jake was a brand new baby. We both placed at Denver, and we both bulldogged at the Finals that year. We both rode Cactus some that fall up in the Northwest. It was my first Finals. Brian was the reserve world champ. (They bulldogged on Super and hazed on Cactus—that same bay horse Brian roped calves on at the NFR in 1991—in Vegas that year.)

“Brian never really went hard after that. He’d have won countless more dollars if he’d chosen to go hard. Brian was a winner. But he did it closer to home most of his career, because he had so many other irons in the fire. He didn’t have the rodeo mentality of laying around until the next one.”

Brian was a cowboy’s cowboy in the arena and on the ranch. “He lived it and breathed it,” Todd said. “He took care of business and didn’t complain about a bad shake. He was always ready to conquer



**CIRCUIT KING:** Brian won 19 Badlands Circuit titles in his career, many of them aboard Cactus, a gritty bay horse he made himself from the ground up. In 1995, Brian won the RAM (formerly Dodge) National Circuit Finals Rodeo tie-down roping title riding Cactus, and in 1996, again thanks in large part to Cactus, Brian was crowned the DNCFR all-around champ by Dodge Truck’s Jack Lowry.

*Dan Hubbell Photos*



any hardship. He was a good, fun guy to be around. I respected Brian a lot. He was a good friend, and he taught me so much. I really valued his opinions and his friendship, and I know I'm not the only one."

He's right about that. Jason Miller, the 2007 world champion steer wrestler, got to know Brian during that magical 1996 season when he was Todd's college roommate at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. Jason bought Brian's bulldogging horse Porky in 2009, and rode him in 2012-13. Brian and Lisa's oldest son, Jake, just rode Porky at the College National Finals Rodeo in June.

"Cowboy is the first word that comes to mind when I think of Brian," Jason said. "I've seen Brian start a colt, and in three days it looked like he'd been riding him 45 days. I would literally stand around in awe. Brian was such a hand. We had some great practice sessions, just the two of us and a remote-controlled chute. We'd run one then talk about the run. There are very few guys you can practice with who can watch you run one steer and tell you what you're doing right and wrong.

"I spent my fair share of time down there with Brian trying to learn from him. You learned a little bit of everything when you were with Brian—horsemanship, bulldogging, hazing. Not very many bulldoggers are known for being good horsemen. Brian was a great horseman. He was always positive. He didn't tell you good job if you didn't do good, but the criticism was always constructive. Every time you walked out of the practice pen with Brian you felt like you learned something."

Brian was born Oct. 14, 1962—two weeks to the day after ProRodeo Hall of Fame steer wrestler Ote Berry, a fellow South Dakota native. Brian's 19 Badlands Circuit titles—a record 12 circuit all-around championships, six bulldogging crowns and a tie-down roping title—made him the circuit king.

"The first time I met Brian was at the 1980 National High School Finals Rodeo in Yakima, Wash.," said four-time Champ of the World Ote. "Brian was the calf roping champ and I won the bulldogging. Being from South Dakota—Brian was born and raised in Miller, and I grew up in Scenic—my dad (Buster) and Brian's dad (Tex) knew each other. Brian and I became good friends over the years because of rodeo, and Lisa's family (based in Interior, S.D., which neighbors Scenic) and my family have been lifelong family friends.

"When I think of Brian I think of toughness and what a competitor he was. Brian had such a work ethic, and when you grabbed Brian it was like taking ahold of a steel post. Brian never drew attention to himself, and he was kind of an old-school kind of guy. He quietly went about his business, and he could beat you anytime, anywhere, in any event. I went to Lisa and Brian's horse sale the other day, and heard a guy say Brian was the best timed-event cowboy to ever come out of South Dakota. If it wasn't Brian, I don't know who it would be."

Brian's been beloved by cowboy people coast to coast for decades, and made a strong California connection through close friends like bulldoggers Thomas Switzer and John W. Jones Jr.

"I got to know Brian because he was a rookie the same time I was and he was traveling with Paul Tierney," said NFR steer wrestler Switzer, the 1984 Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association Resistol Rookie of the Year. "I was traveling with Lance Robinson and Johnny (Jones), and they knew Paul really well. That was my first introduction to Brian, and we hit it off right from the



Dan Hubbell Photo

**SUPER:** With Todd Suhn hazing on Brian's Cactus and Brian bulldogging on Suhn's great horse Super, Brian was the 1996 reserve world steer wrestling champ.

get-go.

"If Webster's has a definition of a true friend, to me it's Brian Fulton. If you were his friend, the guy would fight for you. He was the real deal all the way to the core. He was as hard a working, straight up a guy as you could ever meet. There was no BS to Brian."

None to ProRodeo Hall of Famer Jones, either. Brian and Lisa made multiple family trips to the Jones Ranch in Morro Bay, Calif., and a big time was had by all of us, including Johnny's late and dear dad, also a Hall of Famer, John W. Jones Sr.

"I got to know Brian when we were both rodeoing," Johnny said. "I just saw him around, and we became friends. I noticed a fine horseman right off the bat. Brian rode great horses, and was so correct about everything he did. That's what I admired about him from the very start.

"I always loved Brian's dry sense of humor and how he always called a spade a spade. He called BS if you tried to lay one on him. He was fun, he had an eye for a horse and he always rode a good one. And the horse was good because Brian made him."

Johnny's always been known for being strong and scrappy beyond his size. And he was a high school wrestler. "We were up in Edmonton one winter, and a few of us got a room and got to roughhousing," he said. "Brian flipped me around and slammed me on the ground in about 10 seconds. I tapped out. Brian was a big-time wrestler in high school, and it didn't take him very long to go through me. Brian's the toughest son of a gun I know. He was a tough man. And a great guy."

Johnny took a pass on the spotlight in his prime, to stay home when his first daughter, Katie, started kindergarten. Brian always shared that family-first way of thinking.

"Brian would go in the winter and do really good," Johnny said. "He'd go a little bit in the spring, then he'd be gone. I'd ask where he was going. He'd say he had to go home and help his dad on the ranch. If he'd gone more there's no telling how much Brian would have won. He had all the talent in the world. But Brian always put his family ahead of rodeo."

We'll all miss Brian as long as we live, but we'll remember all the good times with a great, big smile because Brian made us laugh.

"Brian was a great cowboy," Troy said. "And Brian was a hell of a good guy, too." 🐾