



WE DARE YOU TO TRY THIS

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Men'sHealth ADVENTURE™

BY TREVOR THIEME

Buck U.

Think you threw a lot of bull in college?
Let the bull have a turn

TWO SECONDS IN, I KNOW I'M IN TROUBLE.

Each buck from the 2,000-pound bull beneath me sends my feet sailing higher into the air and thrusts my face closer to his dirt-tipped horns. What had been, albeit briefly, a coordinated dance between man and beast now seems more like a suicide mission. Bracing myself with my right hand, I try to yank my left from the rope that anchors me to his back. It doesn't budge. More terrified, I try again. This time it pulls free, just in time for one last upward thrust. I carom off of his right flank and land with a *thwap* on the arena's hard, earthen floor. Bullfighters spring into action, distracting the beast long enough for me to hurdle over the nearest fence to safety.

"That son of a buck pancaked your ass," shouts Gary Leffew from his observation booth, flashing a smile that matches the curve of his cowboy hat. "Come on over and I'll show you what you did wrong."

Leffew, a former world-champion bull rider and veteran of the sport, has been teaching students the art of bull riding for the past decade on his private ranch near the Los Padres National Forest in California. Most of his trainees are young—the average age is 19—nearly all hail from Canada, Mexico, and the western United States, and every last one shares a common goal: to become the next Tuff Hedeman, Lane Frost, or Donny Gay, modern-day legends in a sport that knows no shortage of tough-guy heroes. Theirs is a world that is lived 8 seconds at a time, and Leffew's 2-week boot camp will teach them the timing, technique, and mental calm to ride any bull that comes their way. For me, it's a chance to experience something I've dreamed about since attending my first rodeo 20 years ago: the rush of pitting myself against an opponent that's 10 times my weight, severely ill-tempered, and bred for one purpose only—bucking cowboys.

Rodeos first lassooed American culture soon after the end of the Civil War. By the time of "Buffalo Bill" Cody's Wild West extravaganzas of the 1880s and '90s, they were part of the fabric of the country. But unlike a rodeo's other standard events—bareback riding, calf roping, steer wrestling—bull riding wasn't a natural outgrowth of the ranch hand's duties. It was and still is an exhibition event, a demonstration of the cowboy's prowess and ultimate superiority over the beast. And since there's no way to outmuscle a bull, the key to victory is outsmarting him.

Leffew's approach smacks of linebackers practicing yoga. "Bull riding is 80 percent mental and 20 percent talent," he figures, launching into



"Do I look like a horse? Then get the \$#&* off!"

a lecture on the power of positive thinking. Then it's a session of group meditation and visualization. Next it's off to the barn to analyze video footage of some of the sport's greatest rides. ("To become the best, you have to copy the best," he says.) We also spend a solid hour refining our technique on stationary and moving barrels. The point of these exercises is to transform the act of bull riding from a series of conscious thoughts to a stream of subconscious reactions. "Champions don't ride where they think a bull is going," says Leffew. "They ride where instinct tells them." Learned instinct, that is.

By noon I'm sitting on my first bull inside a narrow chute, with a cocktail of adrenaline and terror washing through my veins. My left hand is secured to the bull's massive backside by a thickly braided rope, which is wrapped around the bull's forequarters. For protection, I wear a mouth guard (bull riders are more chopper-challenged than the average hockey player), a Kevlar vest (to deflect wayward horns and absorb well-placed kicks), spurs (to grip the bull's flanks), and a cowboy hat (a thick beaver hat can mean the difference between a bruise and a gash). Once in position, I lean over the bull's shoulders, lift my right arm to indicate that I'm ready, and brace myself for combat.

The chute door opens, and the bull barrels into the arena like a derailed freight train. Each time he jumps, I dig in with my spurs, break forward at the waist, and lunge aggressively over his shoulders. When he kicks, I release my spurs, come back to a seated position, and let the bull's momentum carry me into the next cycle. The countermoves allow me to maintain my balance and position, but the goal is to follow the bull the way one might follow the lead in a tango or Viennese waltz. »

ESSENTIAL SKILL

The Dismount

Step 1: If you're holding on with your left hand (typical if you're right-handed), look backward over your left shoulder.

Step 2: Swing your right leg up and over in front of you and let go with your left hand.

Step 3: Use the momentum of the bull's next kick to launch you as far away as possible.

Step 4: Land squarely on all fours.

Step 5: Stand up and run like hell.

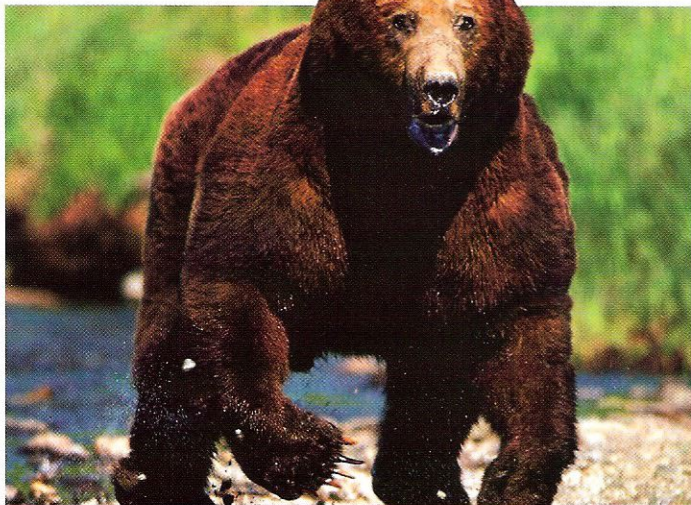
Leffew recounts the story of a student whose riding ability improved by leaps and bounds after he learned to ballroom dance.

The real trick, of course, is the dismount. Since these animals don't bow down nicely like trained elephants, the bull rider employs a rather acrobatic maneuver that essentially uses the animal the way a gymnast uses a springboard. Sticking the landing, in this case, means hitting the ground squarely on all fours. On my first ride, I end up in an awkward sidesaddle position that causes me to roll off backward and land on my shoulders.

By week's end, after riding eight different bulls, I've progressed from bumbling city slicker to fumbling novice. I've also acquired my fair share of injuries—tendinitis in both arms, a pulled muscle in my back, and two massive bruises. But these wounds pale in comparison to the pockmarked medical histories of my fellow students, in which broken ribs, busted jaws, and even fractured skulls are common. Fact is, every 15 rides, a professional bull rider sustains an injury requiring medical attention. And according to the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, seven of its riders have died at the hand of a hoof over the past decade. So why ride? Donny Gay once answered, "I'm too lazy to work, too nervous to steal, and too jealous to pimp." But there's more to it than mere cowboy machismo. There's also a lot of cash—last year's Professional Bull Rider's tour pot was \$9.5 million.

For me, that's gold at the end of a very distant rainbow. Nevertheless, after 5 days of busting my butt as a dilettante rider, the life of a cowboy doesn't seem so far-fetched. Really, it comes down to man versus two beasts: the one beneath his butt, the other between his ears. **MH**

Kayaker: It's what's for dinner.



Destination: Beast

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▷ MONTANA

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in the Missouri Valley and winding through the Big Belt Mountains, then back again. Finally, a use for your lasso outside the bedroom. \$1,680. montanacattledrive.com

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Northwesterly winds funnel 55,000 hawks past the Cape May peninsula between September and November each year. In just one 10-hour period last fall, 4,500 hawks passed the spot. There wasn't a poodle to be found. Free. njaudubon.org

▷ SOCORRO ISLANDS, MEXICO

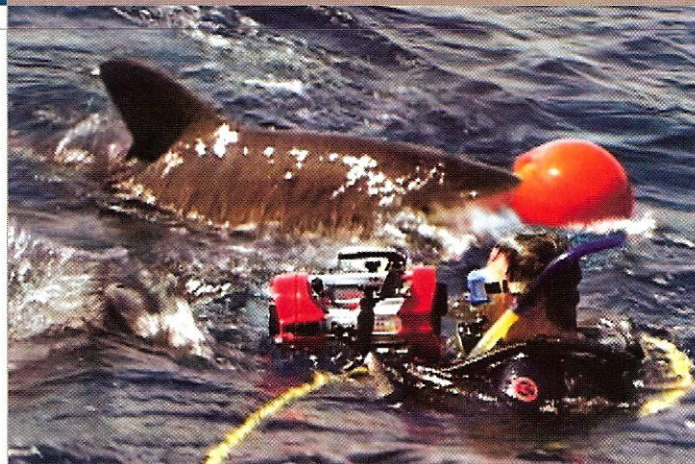
CHASE GIANT MANTA RAYS

The world's largest predators eat here. Dive among whales and sharks, and cozy up to 22-foot, 3,000-pound giant mantas. \$2,900. solmar.com

▷ SOUTH AFRICA

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They look so peaceful canned. But try paddling through a school of several thousand sardines—and the dolphins, seals, sharks, and whales jockeying for position in the food chain. \$3,000. incredible-adventures.com



Chris Kentis filmed this summer's shark flick, *Open Water*, with two cameras, a shoestring budget, and a cast of 50 man-eating sharks

ALL IT TOOK WAS A MENACING BASS LINE, JERKY CAMERA WORK, and an animatronic fish for *Jaws* to whip our shores into a collective frenzy 30 years ago. That's yawn inducing by today's standards, so filmmaker Chris Kentis made like chum while filming *Open Water*, the true-ish story of two scuba divers stranded mid-ocean. "It's all real," he says of the film, which opens nationwide on August 20. "We were in the middle of the ocean, with real sharks and no stunt people." We figured a guy this brave must be either very stupid or very knowledgeable. We're still not sure which.

MH: Your boat sinks, and you're stranded. How do you stay atop the food chain?

KENTIS: If you're with other people, stay huddled. Remain vertical. You'll look like a tasty seal if you float horizontally. Take off any jewelry—anything shiny can look like a fish. Bare skin, too, so cover it. And don't splash around—you'll look like a wounded animal. Also, don't wear yellow to begin with. Shark experts call it "yum-yum yellow."

What if you're bleeding? Screwed?

Not necessarily. Blood attracts sharks that eat mammals, and most don't. Reef sharks are considered man-eaters, but it's accidental. They bite, don't like the taste, and swim off.

How do you fight off a shark?

I was instructed to just go with it. Most sharks will bite and let go. Don't yank or pull away, because then the shark will yank and do more damage. As far as fighting them off, I believe your best bet is to go for the eyes and the gills.

Any run-ins during your filming?

Not with a shark, but a barracuda bit Blanchard [Ryan, the actress who plays Susan]. We were instructed to swim with our hands cupped, fingers together—not spread out, because that looks like five sardines to a barracuda. The next thing I know, there's blood in the water and she's holding her finger. We rush to the surface, and she's like, "Did you get it? Did you get it on camera?" Shows how cool she is. I got stung by jellyfish a lot. But when you're a filmmaker and you get the perfect shot, you don't care.

—INTERVIEW BY LISA JONES