

A Bull Rider Beating All Odds

Lee Akin is a true testimony to the saying, “Cowboy Up”

By Chelese Beck



Lee Akin injured March 8, 2007, during the SLE Rodeo in Montgomery, Ala. *Photo courtesy of Mary Akin*

Some people call them adrenaline junkies, some just call them crazy, but to those who know and love them, they are bull riders. Whenever one of these cowboys prepares himself mentally and physically for an 8-second ride, he knows that he is about to participate in one of the most dangerous sports on earth.

But that doesn't matter. He is doing what he loves and experiencing life to its fullest.

The families and wives that love these bull riders don't dwell on the possibilities either. Life is uncertain regardless of what approach you take to it. So better to take a chance doing what you love more than anything than be miserable doing what the world might think is wiser.

Unfortunately, the love of these families is often tested, as was Lee Akin's on March 8, 2007. It wasn't Lee's first rodeo. It wasn't Lee's first injury. However, it was the most life altering to date.

During the Southeastern Livestock Exposition's 50th Anniversary Rodeo held in Montgomery, Ala., Lee Akin drew Smith Pro Rodeo's Dick Dasterdly. Though an accomplished bull rider, Thursday, March 8, was not his night to be on top. After being bucked off, the bull turned on Lee before bull fighters had a chance to react. Stepping on his head, the bull fractured his skull.

Please indulge me as I recount the last few months from a very personnel perspective. I had the privilege of coming to know Lee's family, and of learning what an amazing person he is through them, and I was there, behind the chutes, when he took the blow from the bull.

When the reality of what we were seeing took hold, those of us in the stands could only hold our breaths and say a quiet prayer. The moment is hard to grasp. While I couldn't see the actual impact from my vantage point, I was able to witness the bull spinning toward on Lee as he struggled to find his feet and clear the arena. Then I saw the anguish on one of the bull fighter's faces as he turned away once the bull had exited, wondering what he could have done differently. From my point of view, nothing.

Being the next to last rider of the evening, the rodeo came quickly to an end after the final bull. Lee was evaluated on the scene and then transported by a stretcher to the ambulance. As vice president of the Montgomery County Cattlemen, I found myself only a few feet away, standing with other concerned Cattlemen and CattleWomen. I didn't know this man, but my heart ached at this tragic turn of events. Watching him being carried out, covered in blood and bandages, none of us had any idea what lay ahead for him. None of us had any idea how this one man and his family would affect not only the bull riding community, but area and even state residents.



At home in Weatherford, Okla., Lee shares a fun moment with daughter Jada. *Photo courtesy of Mary Akin*



Lee and Mary's love for each other is evident. *Photo courtesy of Mary Akin*

Lee received the best care possible from the moment of impact. Medical personnel were by Lee's side within seconds. One of the first to arrive was Dr. Wil Smith, president of the Montgomery County Cattlemen and an orthopedic surgeon. He remained dedicated to Lee and his family throughout the bull rider's stay in Montgomery. Ironically, Dr. Smith lost his own son to a bull riding tragedy several years prior. This doctor and father knew this family's pain first hand.

Lee's wife Mary and the couple's six-month old daughter Jada flew in immediately from their home in Weatherford, Okla., courtesy of Stace Smith and Pete Carr, the event stock contractors. Mary's and Lee's mothers, along with other family members, came to be with Lee and Mary over the next few weeks to offer strength throughout the waiting process. There were also a number of friends that made the trip, including Lee's traveling partner and friend, Corey Navarre, who would sit at Lee's bedside and read their daily devotionals.

The Alabama Cattlemen's Association (ACA), along with the Southeastern Livestock Exposition (SLE), immediately stepped up to provide support to the Akin family, establishing the Lee Akin Fund. Debbie Vandiver, Consumer Information Director for ACA, has done an excellent job of fielding inquiries and providing information to the public regarding Lee's status, and she continues to do so.

According to Debbie, as of June, more than \$15,000 has been given to the Akin family through contributions donated to the Alabama Cattlemen's Foundation to assist the family's financial needs, and contributions are still being received for the Lee Akin Fund.*

During his stay at Baptist Medical Center South, Lee underwent several surgeries; one of those involved removing a portion of his skull due to swelling on the brain. While Lee lay in a drug-induced coma, Mary and Jada were welcomed into the Montgomery area community with loving arms, and the residents made every effort possible to sustain the Akin family. A woman of deep faith and conviction, Mary found renewed strength through constant prayer and the friendships formed here. She became involved in Frazer United Methodist Church where she was overwhelmed by the care and concern offered to her.



Over the course of several weeks, a number of fundraising events were held throughout the area including a car wash by the Pike Road Volunteer Fire Department. Cattleman and volunteer firefighter, Jason Minor, organized and promoted the event, which took place on an overcast Saturday in April. Despite the gloomy day, the fire department raised approximately \$1,000 to help the Akins.

Cattleman and firefighter, Jason Minor, and the author were privileged to first meet Mary and Jada during a fundraising event organized by Minor. *Photo courtesy of Jason Minor*

During this event, I had the opportunity to first meet Mary. She was overjoyed to report that Lee had reacted to pictures of Jada, and that the respirator was being removed in the next couple of weeks. Once that was done, Lee could be transferred to a regular hospital room. Then it was only a matter of arranging a flight home so that Lee could begin rehabilitation.



Mary and Jada Akin enjoying a moment at the Little Boots Rodeo hosted by the Montgomery County Cattlemen's and Women's Associations. *Photo by Clyde Mills, www.cfmills.com*

Two weeks later, a benefit horse show was held at Lazy W Arena, with proceeds being donated to the family. NBHA AL03 director Sherry Moore, and Joy Hill, Elmore County's 4-H director, put the event together. Due to a wonderful turnout and high participation, more than \$5,000 was raised for the Lee Akin Fund.

The next weekend, May 5, the Montgomery County Cattlemen's and Women's Associations held their annual Little Boots Rodeo, also at the Lazy W Arena. Mary, Jada, Mary's mom, and family friend, Sondra, ate with the group at their annual barbeque the night before. During the barbeque, Mary updated everyone on Lee's condition. Mary relayed that Lee's respirator had been removed, and he had been transferred from ICU. She glowed when recounting how Lee, sitting in a wheelchair, had not only fed Jada that day at the hospital, but had even pushed the bottle into her mouth when it fell out. Every day, Mary and the doctors were seeing progress.

At the barbeque that Friday, I enjoyed dinner with Mary and her family, and I came to admire this lovely lady all the more. Her mom, Beverly, told me how Mary and Lee met, and I laughed at episodes of Mary's childhood – including how she literally picked up a pig and threw it into a truck bed, despite her manicured nails, when her brothers couldn't accomplish the task. I discovered how much in love Mary and Lee are and how truly dedicated she is to his complete recovery.

Mary is very thankful and appreciative to everyone in Alabama for their consistent dedication and support in providing an apartment, food, clothing, diapers, meals, and other assistance during the family's stay in Montgomery. Although Mary was constantly by Lee's side, she felt words would be inadequate to express her appreciation, so she made arrangements to be present at these fundraising events with Jada, who of course, was the center of attention.

Over the eight weeks they were here, many in the community grew incredibly fond of the Akins family. Mary's spirit and positive outlook are contagious, and she remains grounded in her faith. The Monday after the children's rodeo, where Jada was presented a tiara and named an honorary princess, the Akins were on their way back home to Oklahoma.

Not long after returning home, on May 14, Lee underwent the surgery to replace the missing piece of his skull. Mary was elated to say that surgery was a complete success. Since that time, the family has been concentrating on Lee's recovery and rehabilitation, which has gone amazingly well. Mary can see how God has truly worked a miracle in their lives. Though the road is long, she knows that God is faithful, and she has more friends that are pulling for Lee's complete healing and recovery than she ever imagined possible.



Lee's bull riding partner and friend, Corey Navarre, joins Mary and Bob Crittenden of WBLF on the air at Faith Radio in Montgomery, Ala. *Photo courtesy of Debbie Vandiver*



Picture from left to right: Beverly (Mary's mother), Mary and Jada Akin, Brooke Sansom (Debbie Vandiver's niece), Dawn and Doug Singleton (Debbie's sister and brother-in-law). *Photo courtesy of Debbie Vandiver*

Because of the need to focus on her family, but wanting to keep their extended network of family and friends informed about Lee's progress, Mary attempts to update her MySpace page once a week. It can be found at: <http://www.myspace.com/runningmary>.

Lee Akin's personal testimony can be read at www.rodeoministries.org/lee_akin.htm. Next year, it is Mary's belief that Lee will have a new testimony to share. Recently, Mary expressed to me her plans to return to Montgomery, Ala., in March, a year after Lee's injury, with her husband standing by her side. Mary writes, "Things here are great, and I am praying and expecting for the healing to go on like this. God has been so good to us. Our plan is to be back in Alabama next March sharing our story."

I know I speak for many when I say we look forward to seeing the Akins again.

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Anyone who wishes to contribute to the family's continued financial situation may send donations to either of the following on the Akins' behalf:

*Alabama Cattlemen's Foundation (payable to)

Lee Akin Fund

P.O. Box 2499

Montgomery, AL 36102-2499

or call the Alabama Cattlemen's Association at (334) 265-1867 or 1-800-622-8853

Pro Bull Riding Outreach (payable to)

American Bucking Bull, Inc.

Attn.: Lee Akin Benefit

713 NE Highway 66

Sayre, OK 73662

If you wish to send Lee and Mary your personal thoughts and wishes, you may contact them at:

Lee and Mary Akin

P.O. Box 2154

Weatherford, OK 73096