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For young rodeo roper, a bitter sweet legacy

As Dakota Shipp competes in the International Youth Finals for team roping, the memory of his rodeo-loving father, lost to suicide, will be with him.

By DAWN REISS
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HERNANDO - Dakota Shipp's right arm rotates. His wrist snaps quickly, deceptively, for it is his forearm that truly controls the lasso above his head.

The movement slices the morning heat as wooden rope and air make contact. The whipping noise is commonplace here, where horses, donkeys and cattle roam on 52 acres.

Behind Shipp is a 300-by-100-foot fenced rodeo arena that he helped build with his father.

It's that arena that has shaped the 18-year-old Shipp into a four-time National High School Finals Rodeo qualifier, his practice there taking him to Shawnee, Okla., where he will compete in the International Youth Finals on Monday.

It is also where Shipp grew up quickly, dealing with the loss of his father, who committed suicide when Shipp was 13, and his juvenile diabetes.

"Before I never had to do anything," Shipp said. "I just had fun. If anything broke, my dad fixed it. Now if something breaks, I have to fix it. It's all the little stuff you never think of until you have to do it. "

But Shipp has persevered.

Sometimes, he says, he thinks about what life would be like if he still had his father, what life was like when they both trained as team ropers.

Shipp remembers that August morning when his father, Gary, died.

"We were having severe financial problems at the time," said Shipp's mother, Kathy. "People don't believe this, but I do believe men go through a type of menopause through their body and depression sets in. When you get real depressed your mind makes you think things that aren't so. You can't see the light at the end of the tunnel. He thought, 'I'm 50 years old, I can't start over again.' "

But Shipp knew he had to go on - and he has.

The youngest of five, Shipp started team roping as an 8-year-old, after seeing one of his father's friends in action. It sparked something inside Shipp and rejuvenated his father, an amateur team roper, who had stopped roping when Shipp was born.

"Whenever I started, I knew I was going to do it for a long time," Shipp said. "I didn't know how good I was going to get."

He learned how to "head" and "heel" - tying up the steers on both ends - practicing on motorized models between school and farm chores.

He began homeschooling in seventh grade so his parents could monitor his insulin levels - and to allow more time for team roping.

For the next year, Shipp and his father roped daily, until he died.

Then everything became tougher. Shipp began repairing fences, mowing pastures and picking up the horse manure.

Still he hung in, and found a way to excel at the sport he and his dad both loved.

Shipp said says quitting was never an option. The pain of his father's death lessened after a Christian-based Joshua Cowboy Ministries Young Pro Tour team invited Shipp to travel with

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them, despite his age. Shipp was three years younger than the normally mandated age of 16.

"Because I couldn't drive, I always had to stay up to keep everyone else awake," Shipp said about the eight-week tour. "So I never got a lot of sleep."

During the next three summers, Shipp traveled around the country with Young Pro, competing as a team roper and teaching rodeo clinics.

"It was tough, big part of my life," he said. "Touring helped me a lot, because it didn't let me think about it as much and dwell on it. My father is still a big part of my life even if he's not here."

Dawn Reiss can be reached at dreiss@sptimes.com or 352 860-7303.

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