



Indian Nationals Final Rodeo 2015 READY FOR RELEASE #3

## BACK IN THE SADDLE

by Lee Allen

Canadian cowboy Orville Memnook was born about the time Weebles appeared, those toys that could be knocked down, pushed down, or kicked down --- and always rose back up. Over the years, Weebles became symbolic of resilience, an ability to take what life threw at you and always bounce back.

Memnook, a Cree bull rider/bareback rider from Good Fish Lake, Alberta, exemplifies those qualities. "I got started in junior bull riding in my early teens, left school and told my dad I wasn't going back unless he bought me a rodeo membership. He purchased me a Lakeland Rodeo Association semi-pro card and I never looked back."

With a day job as a journeyman carpenter, he rodeoed for the Lakeland College team until he went full out at age 21 and started chasing events cross country. "Things didn't come together until I was about 28 when I traveled more and entered more," says the now 36-year-old who won the bareback INFR Tour title in 2011 --- before life took a 180-degree turn in the form of Multiple Sclerosis.

"I was packing for a rodeo in Las Vegas when things hit me," he said. "My back was sore and I felt feverish. I thought I was coming down with a cold. My wife (Candace) pleaded with me not to go, but being the stubborn guy I am, I hit the TransCanada 4-lane highway and set the cruise control. Things got worse. I got really dizzy and disoriented and objects started getting blurry. When I got to Edmonton, I checked into a hospital and after an 8-hour series of MRI's and Cat Scans, neurologists diagnosed me with MS."

Although he wasn't in pain, he could only take a few steps before being unable to continue. His initial concern was 'will I ever ride again?' Doctors told him: "It's totally up to you. Some people, when they are diagnosed, go down and stay sick, while others fight it." Memnook is the fighter kind of guy. "Right then and there I said 'no', I'm not going to lay down and take a beating. I'm going to fight back because I couldn't see myself being pushed out of rodeo for something that wasn't my fault. If there was a way to fight it and beat it, I made up my mind I'd do that."

And he's not slowed down since. "I've been to seven rodeos in the past month with about two scheduled for every weekend. If anything, MS, for me, was a blessing in disguise once I accepted and respected it."

Stop for a moment and re-play that statement: "MS was a blessing in disguise."

"The disease turned my life in a different direction. It was a wake-up call and I started appreciating life more than ever. I went from a grumpy, miserable, son-of-a-gun to where I am now. Ironically, part of the condition is that MS makes my face form a smile. I don't cuss or swear any more. It's helped me make a spiritual connection. I've always believed in God, but now I try to live a better life. And the renewed spirituality is helping me ride better. My rodeoing is the best it's ever been because I have somebody else riding with me."

Memnook has seen how MS can be acrippler and he's not taking anything for granted. "I don't have any unrealistic expectations of how it might turn out. I just live every day to the fullest and make each day as good as I can, glad to have another chance to do what I love to do. A big part of this MS thing is in your head, where all you do is think about it, but rodeo helps me heal my mind. When people see me suit up, they're shocked at my motivation, but I have a passion for rodeo that's off the charts."

So far off the charts that his goal this year is to be at the Indian National Finals Rodeo --- one way or another. "I'm doing everything I can to achieve that goal, hitting association events and INFR tour rodeos in an attempt to qualify. I'll do everything in my power to be there."

Whether he's in the arena on a horse or in the stands cheering on fellow cowboys, Memnook (President of INFR Region 10 Northern Alberta Native Cowboys) will be at the 40<sup>th</sup> annual event in Las Vegas on November 3-7 and he invites other rodeo fans to join him.

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