

A different kind of wrestler

Real estate tycoon Bergeron takes on steers, alligators

BY KEVIN CARMODY

Rodeo cowboy at heart, Ron Bergeron never thought twice about riding bareback horses and bucking bulls, roping steers and calves and even jumping on the back of an alligator.

Alligator wrestling?

Although it's not sanctioned as an official ProRodeo event, Bergeron, of Hollywood, Fla., says that type of wrestling comes rather naturally to a sixth-generation family member and native of South Florida and the Everglades region.

But he seemed rather amazed at the worldwide publicity he's received.

"I've been wrestling alligators for about 50 years," said Bergeron, 62. "It's old Florida cracker culture and is handed down from many generations. I give tours in the Everglades to raise money for charity, and I always wrestle an alligator. I've only been bitten twice in 30 years. I've been pretty lucky."

His latest encounter came earlier this month on a tour of his private nature reserve. He suffered a shattered left pinky finger, a broken ring finger and several puncture wounds through his palm.

It's just another colorful story for this

one-of-a-kind character.

In 1963, Bergeron started Bergeron Land Development, Inc., with a few hundred dollars and a used tractor. Today, the multi-millionaire tycoon runs 30 companies, oversees 1,000 employees and is responsible for one of Florida's most successful road builders that has developed most of southwest Broward County.

Long before that, however, Bergeron lived life as a cowboy, paving the way for his success today.

"I started rodeoing when I was 16," Bergeron said. "In the little town of Davie, which back in those days, only 400-500 people lived in the little agricultural community that was in the Everglades. It was very quaint. There were more places to tie your horse than park your car."

His father, Percy, opened a grocery store in Davie and later organized an effort to build an open-air rodeo arena on a sandlot. Most of Bergeron's childhood memories don't stray far from the Davie Rodeo Grounds.

"That was our entertainment," Bergeron said. "There was no golf, no tennis. Basically, you didn't know what they were. When you're raised in that culture, heritage and roots of that kind of community, that's all you know."

While spending time on horseback and in the rodeo arena, Bergeron became acquainted with a cowboy by the name of Troy Weckley who also had strong roots in South Florida.

Weckley, with brothers Dan and Wayne and longtime friend Donald Parrish, founded Five Star Rodeo Inc. in 1986 and have played host to the monthly Five Star Championship Rodeo series ever since. They've gotten plenty of help from Bergeron, both in and out of the arena.

"We grew up together," said Weckley, a rodeo committee director on the PRCA Board of Directors. "Ronnie has been very instrumental in helping keep the rodeo here once a month. He's been a big part of helping keep the Western heritage alive down here."

Bergeron began his amateur rodeo career in 1960, competing in riding events and later picking up team and tie-down roping before joining the PRCA in 1987. He qualified for the Southeastern Circuit Finals Rodeo several times and still competes today - despite losing the tip of his ring finger on his right hand some 20 years ago in a roping accident.

His zest for the rodeo and the Western lifestyle isn't relegated to just competing. In 1995, Bergeron made major contributions for parking improvements and landscaping for a new entrance at the Davie rodeo grounds. The area was renamed the Bergeron Rodeo Grounds, an honor that still pleases him today as he continues to compete and watch the next generation take the reins.

"Through all my business success, I continued to rodeo and live in the Everglades and maintained my heritage," Bergeron said. "I didn't trade in my roping horses for a thoroughbred and my airboat for a yacht. I'm very proud of keeping the culture of the old West. My family has been here for six generations, all the way back to my great-grandparents."

His oldest son, Ronnie Jr., 37, runs his company's highway construction division, while his other son, Lonnie, 34, handles the property and real estate portion of the company. His daughter, Debbie, 38, takes care of



Ron Bergeron, right, isn't your typical cowboy. The 62-year-old real estate tycoon has been instrumental in the Davie, Fla., PRCA rodeo and has been known to wrestle alligators in addition to steers.

all public relations duties and Everglades preservation efforts and charity work.

Bergeron's oldest daughter, Lisa, is a missionary in Georgia, while his two youngest daughters, Diamond, 14, and Star, 13, are honor-roll students and budding barrel racing champions.

Bergeron takes particular pride in the

town of Davie, which he has seen grow from 500 to 80,000. While surrounded by expensive homes, busy commercial districts and a growing education center, Bergeron has managed to preserve the flavor of the small-town Davie with old-style Western architecture, riding trails and parks that give the city a link to a different era.

Family. Culture. Heritage.

"It's wonderful to share your life with your family," Bergeron said. "Family is most important to me. But I still love rodeo, and I still love to be in the swamps and wrestle alligators. I just wouldn't recommend it to anyone."

That's a true South Florida cowboy.