

Larry Mahan (1943–2023)

By Timothy Bergquist

Larry Mahan was a six-time all-around world champion cowboy and a two-time bull riding champion and “the best living advertisement in the history of professional rodeo,” according to the ProRodeo Hall of Fame. “He was Elvis before Elvis knew who he was,” announcer Bob Tallman wrote. “Larry had an aura about him and a following. People moved to him like a magnet.” Mahan was named to the Oregon Sports Hall of Fame in 1985.

Larry Edward Mahan was born in Salem on November 21, 1943, the son of Ray and Reva (English) Mahan. The oldest of four children, he grew up in Brooks, near Salem. His parents bought him his first horse when he was seven or eight years old. Just weeks later, he entered calf-riding at a children’s rodeo at St. Paul and took home a six-dollar prize riding calves. When Mahan was ten, the family moved to Redmond, where at twelve years old he was in his first junior rodeo. When he was sixteen, Mahan returned to Brooks and attended North Salem High School, where he competed in wrestling and won District 8 A-1 championships in wrestling (at 141 pounds) in 1961 and 1962.

In 1960, competing in his first professional rodeo, Mahan won the bull riding competition in Klamath Falls. He also fell in love with flying and had his pilot’s license by 1966. He chartered an airplane to fly to rodeos around country, and eventually owned his own twin-engine 310 Cessna and flew a World War II era P-51 fighter.

Mahan made the Rodeo Cowboys Association World finals for the first time in 1964. He was the winner of the World Bull Riding Champion in 1965 and 1967 and won the All-around RCA championship six times—every year from 1966 to 1970 and again in 1973. He was the first competitor to qualify in all three roughstock events in a single year (bull riding, bareback riding, and saddle bronc riding) in the National Finals Rodeo (rodeo’s version of the Super Bowl). He also set a record—that still stands—by qualifying twenty-six times in National Finals Rodeo roughstock events.

Mahan published *Fundamentals of Rodeo Riding: The Physical and Mental Approach to Success* in 1972 and was the subject of *The Great American Cowboy*, a documentary of his comeback after the injury-plagued years of 1971 and 1972 and his competition with Phil Lyne for the 1973 RCA all-around world championship, which Mahan won. The film won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 1974, and Mahan appeared on the cover of the December 1973 *Sports Illustrated*.

After retiring from rodeo in 1979, he bought a ranch near Phoenix, AZ and developed the Larry Mahan Cowboy Collection, a popular line of cowboy hats, boots, and clothing that is still being marketed. He also starred in several movies, including *The Honkers* in 1972, *Sixpack Annie* in 1975, and the TV movie *The Good Old Boys* in 1995. He started a rodeo training school and provided color commentary for televised PRCA rodeos. During the 1970s, he had his own cowboy band and recorded an album in 1976 on Warner Brothers Records entitled *Larry Mahan, King of the Rodeo*. He is one of the title characters in the song *Ramblin’ Jack and Mahan* by Guy Clark.

Mahan was inducted into the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association Hall of Fame in 1979 as part of its inaugural class and again in 2010 as a Legend of ProRodeo. One of the inaugural group of five athletes inducted into the St. Paul Rodeo Hall of Fame in 1998, he was included in more than ten other Halls of Fame throughout the country, including the Pendleton Round-up. In 2007, he received the Ben Johnson Memorial Award from the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City.

Mahan died of bone cancer on May 7, 2023, at his ranch in Valley View, Texas. He was married four times and had three children.

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