



REBECCA OVERTON

**Father-daughter team:** Watkins and his daughter, Nikki Jo, enjoy roping together. Here, Watkins heels off Drums Classy Lad, while Nikki Jo uses "Zig" to turn a steer.

Watkins is a seven-time PRCA California Circuit finalist and a California Circuit Finals champion. In 1995, he was the United States Team Roping Championships (USTRC) Southern California Champion Heeler.

In 1992, Watkins also earned the fastest time at the Bob Fiess Invitational (BFI), which accepts only 100 teams and is the richest-paying roping event in the world. In 1999, he was APHA's Outside Competitive Activities Program (OCAP) leader in roping.

Readers of the *Paint Horse Journal* may recall seeing a photograph of Watkins that ran several times in an ad for APHA's Paint Alternative Competition (PAC) program. The image, which shows Watkins roping off Docs Capilynx, a chestnut tovero mare, at the Bakersfield Paint Horse Show, has become a symbol of PAC.

Some of the awards on the office wall belong to Sherrie. In the early 1980s, the attractive blonde placed in the Top 10 in barrel racing in the In-

ternational Professional Rodeo Association (IPRA).

Nikki Jo has already earned some titles as well, including four belt buckles in heeling, a sport that runs in the family. Dusty's cousin, Denny Watkins, has competed at the NFR 19 times as a heeler.

Todd Hampton, Dusty's stepbrother, is a World Champion APHA and AQHA heeler. Ed Watkins, Dusty's uncle, also heels.

Dusty's father, Orvel, who was a bareback rider, is a header.

Perhaps Watkins was destined to be a roper. One of five children, he cowboied and ran cattle on 5,000 acres 50 miles from Bakersfield that his step-father, Johnny Taylor, leased when Watkins was a youth.

But, despite working outdoors and riding horses, his childhood was anything but idyllic.

#### **Bittersweet memories**

In a way, Watkins' youth sounds like a song penned by Buck Owens or

Merle Haggard, the Country-Western music legends from Bakersfield.

But, unlike some songs that are partly fictional, Watkins' childhood rang true.

Born in the small town of Taft, 60 miles southwest of Bakersfield, Watkins and his siblings moved with their mother to Los Angeles after his parents divorced when Watkins was 5 years old. They returned to Taft after his mother married Taylor, a welder and alcoholic who was mean when he drank. Taylor died in 1988.

"We went through a lot of hard times as kids," Watkins recalled.

But a bright spot for Dusty was junior rodeo, where he met Sherrie. Because he wanted to earn his own living, Watkins began working for her father, Curt Williams, a stock contractor who owned a construction company. Williams bred black-and-white Paints.

After being beaten by his stepfather, Watkins left home when he was 17. He ran to the house of a neighbor,