

“He would run a framing crew all day, then drive to the barn and work with horses until 10 or 11 at night. It began to wear him out.”

They were also selling horses, which they bought at sales, then trained and sold.

“We rarely bought anything that didn’t have color,” Watkins said. “Sherrie and I both liked Paints. My first Paint rope horse was a bay overo gelding named Iron Eyes Cody. I’ve always liked Paints because they are different, they’re a little flashy.

“I always looked for horses that were shapey and nice-working.

“Paints paid the rent for us.”

Not so easy

Eventually, the couple had to decide if Dusty was going to be a full-time trainer. The decision was difficult, Sherrie said.

“I knew I would need to help run the business, so I would have to quit my job, too,” she explained. “It was so scary to drop both of our incomes.

“Plus, we didn’t want to let my dad down, but at that point, there wasn’t a lot of demand for construction. We decided if we could sell one horse a month, we could make it.”

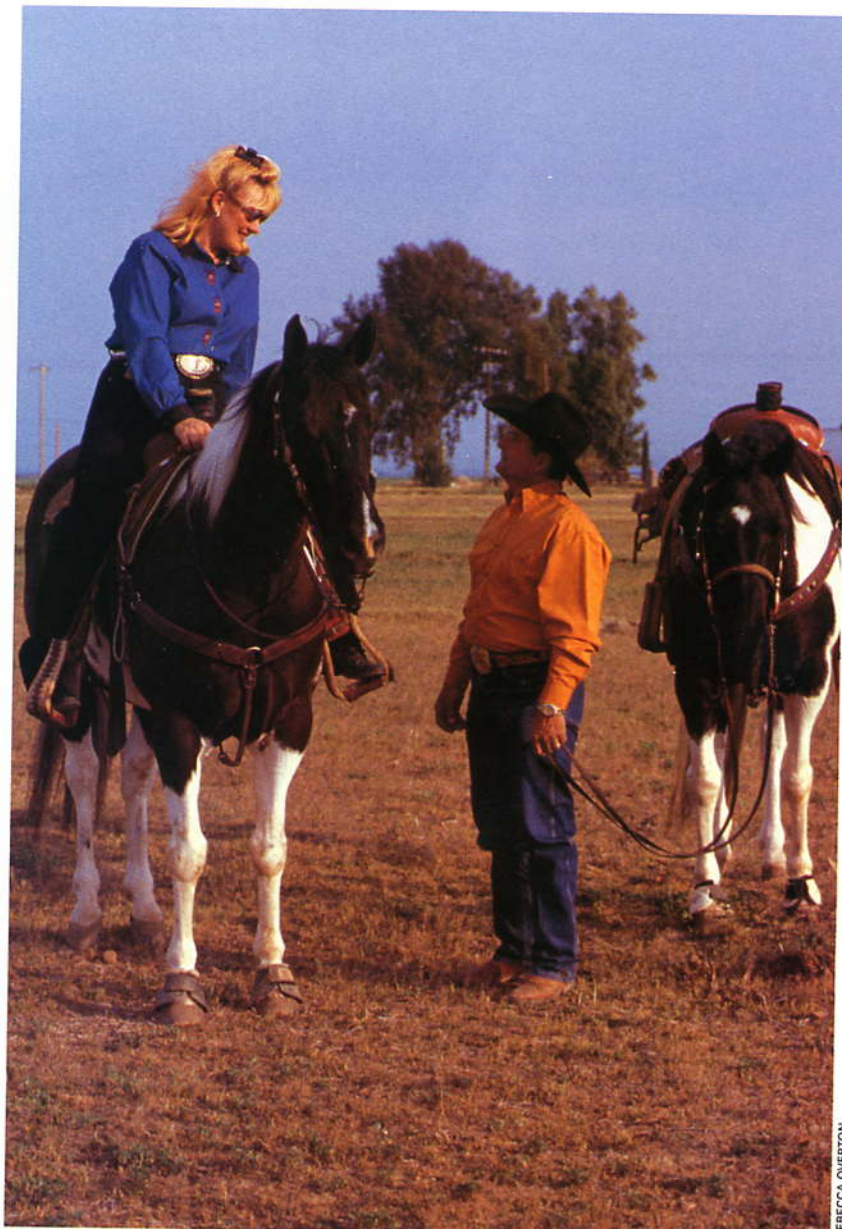
Then there were the rodeos, where Dusty would have the opportunity to add more titles to his resumé. But following the circuit can be a hand-to-mouth existence.

It can be dangerous, too.

Several years ago, someone tried to steal the receiver hitch on Watkins’ horse trailer while he was competing at a rodeo in Sacramento with Bars Image, his Quarter Horse gelding. The Watkinses didn’t discover the keeper pin on the hitch had been removed until the couple were driving home.

“All of a sudden, the trailer dropped down on its little steel wheel, moved over and passed us on the highway,” recalled Dusty. “When the trailer hit the median, it flew high into the air and flipped end-over-end. It crossed over some oleander bushes and landed upside down in oncoming traffic on the other side of the freeway.”

After Dusty ran to the trailer, he saw that the horse, whose barn name



She’s Number One: Watkins’ wife, Sherrie, is the biggest secret of his success. “I wouldn’t be where I am today if it weren’t for Sherrie,” he said.

was “Mouse,” had been knocked out, but was still breathing.

“The only thing that saved Mouse’s life was that the trailer flipped so fast it kind of glued him to the top of the trailer,” Dusty said.

“When the trailer came down, it landed on the tail gate, which threw Mouse backwards, instead of forward, which would have broken his neck.”

A young man who nearly hit the trailer stopped and helped Dusty pull Mouse out of the vehicle. When they got him out, the horse regained consciousness and stood up. Meanwhile, a crowd of people had also stopped and helped Dusty upright the trailer.

“We took Mouse to a vet,” he recalled. “Even though the next day he looked like he’d been in a fight with Mike Tyson, he was OK. We were very fortunate.”

Where’s the money?

Making enough money to compete on the rodeo circuit was another challenge. But it worked out that just when the couple was almost down to their last dollar, Dusty would pull a win out of the hat.

“It seems like some of the best wins I’ve ever had have been at times when we were at our lowest point financially,” he recalled.