

Dallasite is the Go-to Physician for Professional Bull Riders

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Dallas' Dr. Tandy Freeman at work in the bull-riding arena in Las Vegas. (Photo by Christopher Thompson)

There's no telling how many injuries are suffered by professional athletes in general, let alone professional bull riders. Concussions, internal bruising, broken bones, and ripped ligaments are all part of the dangerous sport.

When it comes time to treat those injuries, the bull riders turn to Dallas's Dr. Tandy Freeman.

As medical director of the Justin Sports Medicine Program and the Professional Bull Riders Sports Medicine Program, Freeman knows a thing or two about bulls. He also knows how the sport and sports medicine have changed in recent years. In contrast to today's sports medicine programs, he says, "a bottle of aspirin and a six-pack of beer was sports medicine in the 1980s."

A graduate of UT Southwestern Medical School, Freeman started out as an orthopedic surgery resident at Parkland Memorial Hospital. During his surgical training he spent time working with Dr. J. Pat Evans, then the head team physician for the Dallas Mavericks and the Dallas Cowboys. Evans “was the original sports medicine doctor in Dallas,” Freeman says.

Evans encouraged Freeman to focus on sports medicine as well. Freeman followed Evans’ lead and, over the years, has treated athletes in a variety of sports, from the U.S. Ski Team and the Dallas Freeze (of the Central Hockey League) to the Mavericks, where he too became the head physician.

In 1995, Freeman decided to shift gears and concentrate on treating professional bull riders. One thing that attracted him to the Colorado-based Professional Bull Riders (PBR) organization was the challenge. A bull rider’s injury isn’t as simple as an ACL tear in a ball-and-stick sport, he explains: “You see high-energy trauma in people—things that can be, and are, life-threatening.”

Freeman doesn’t just relish the challenge of treating professional bull riders; he also enjoys their company. “They’re all unique,” he says. “They don’t have contracts. They have a need to compete, which provides challenges because you want to get them healthy.

Sometimes, that’s hard. “I’ve been involved in an instance where one athlete was injured and lost his life, and two instances where two athletes have had spinal injuries and were paralyzed,” Freeman says.

For a physician, there isn’t much time to factor what’s going on in the arena, he explains: “The job is to determine what’s wrong, make sure you’re keeping them safe, [don’t allow] further harm, and [get] them transported appropriately.”

As the go-to physician for the nation’s professional bull riders, Freeman will be on hand on Feb. 24, when the sport’s top riders compete in the PBR’s Iron Cowboy event at AT&T Stadium in Arlington.