



DANIE HUFFMAN/DEMOCRAT PHOTOS
The Chicks gather for a photo op, greet spectators, sign autographs and let fans meet their horses before the grand entry at the Fort Worth Stockyards Rodeo. Front row, from left, Yelch Carter with Mattie Carter (daughter), Chicks, Ella Humber, Steele Bauman, Gailie Carter, Whitney Carter, Malli Brown and Katherine Brown. Back row, from left, Michele

By DANIE M. HUFFMAN

Special to the Democrat

If you are talented enough to trick ride a horse with skills at an Olympic level with the heat of the August sun beating down on you, during the chill of a January ice storm, in the rain with mud slinging in your face, keep your school grades up, carry leadership qualities and be willing to "Cowgirl Up," then you just might have what it takes to become a Weatherford All-American Cowgirl Chick.

There are 18 such girls who do. They possess traits that set them apart from any other rodeo drill team. They ride in grand entries, parades and perform numbers during rodeos, blazing from the gates with honor and determination while sporting flags and fireworks that display their American patriotism. They have rode in Humble, St. Joe, Henderson, Mesquite and Glen Rose. They have traveled as far as Denver, Colo. Yet the most meaningful performance for the Chicks was in the Fort Worth Stock Show Rodeo. They tried to ride in the Will Rogers Coliseum for years but learned that it was by invitation only. Last January, their dream came true and the Chicks gave a perfect performance.

"That was a great honor for us," said Trish Carter, the Chicks' head coach and drill coordinator. "But it was an even greater honor to be asked to return and perform there next year."

Each time they ride in their red-, white- and blue-sequined uniforms, they do it for a cause, one that they take straight to heart.

The Chicks began their crusade six years ago performing for crowds of spectators at rodeo events across the Metroplex doing what they love. A year later they discovered that 6-year-old Ty Washburn, son of their horseboer, Kim Washburn, had a rare form of cancer. Devastated, the Chicks brainstormed on how to help Ty out. They decided to ride in honor of Ty and donated all proceeds to his chemotherapy treatments and medical expenses. Since their ride for Ty, the Chicks have performed in honor or in memory of more than 100 "heroes."

"We call them our 'heroes' because they are who inspire us," said Carter. "Ty has lost half of his face and one eye due to cancer and even at 10, his attitude is fantastic."

Assistant Coach Katherine Brown said, "It would be so easy to give up as a child having cancer but his sense of humor is unbelievably phenomenal."

They say it's worth the ride every time they perform.

"For eight minutes they get a pain free



The Cowgirl Chicks performed with style and finesse at this year's Parker County Sheriff's Posse Rodeo.

ride. Cancer can't beat that kind of smile," said Carter.

Yet even at the end of their performance for their hero, they continue their acts of kindness. They donate their retired horses to the cancer patients they ride for in order to boost self confidence and for physical therapeutic riding. They take part in the Make a Wish Foundation, Special Olympics and have been known to deliver holiday dinners and Christmas presents to patients at Cook Children's Medical Center.

The Chicks have been invited to perform at various competitions but decline simply because their motives aren't for self glory; they ride for the satisfaction of the smiles that they receive from their heroes.

Guy Carter, manager and booking agent for the Chicks, said, "Trophies and

plaques are great but the girls aren't in need of them. They ride in more than 70 rodeos per year. They keep busy and don't have the time for competitions."

Guy Carter also handles the wranglers who help coordinate the efforts behind the scene.

"We can't do without them, they're the wheels that make the clock spin," said Guy Carter. "They handle the horses, tack and music. Each arena is different in length and width; it takes a lot of hard work and effort to customize each performance."

The girls that make up the Chicks are as unique as the group. They range in age but their determination is at the highest level. They describe themselves as a close-knit family that will be there for each other no matter the cost.

"It's such a joy and a privilege to ride

and be a part of this team. It's a dream come true," said Michel Willis, who has been a Chick for six years since their first ride. "It takes every one of us to make it work. I'm glad to be associated with these girls."

Caryn Sauer is the mother of two Chicks, Britni and Jaeci. She stays involved with her girls and comes to every performance.

"They've learned so much about life since joining with the team," said Sauer. "They've developed some of the greatest friendships and have learned responsibility; mainly because Trish demands it. It's an opportunity they wouldn't have gotten through any other means. The Lord put us here, sometimes things just fall into place and you know it's meant to be."

Erin Mullis has only been with the Chicks for a month but shares the same sentiments that are found throughout the team.

"They are so supportive, they just welcomed me in like I'd been there forever," said Mullis. "It's challenging work — the last thing I want to do is lag behind but they are so considerate and make it so fun."

The Chicks have learned to adapt to every obstacle that is thrown their way — from last minute changes in their routines, to the death of their lead horse, Dude. Dude had to be put down after an accident during one of their performances at the Parker County Sheriff's Posse Rodeo last month. Kara Lowe, Dude's rider, and the Chicks suffered a hard blow with Dude's passing but Lowe performed the very next evening along with the Chicks on a borrowed horse. Despite their terrible loss, they continued their usual tricks like the hippodrome, fender drag, four way cross, the death drag, a crowd favorite called the pinwheel and chutes 'n ladders, all while making their horses dance do-si-do style with amazing timing, speed, accuracy and awe-inspiring pageantry.

"These girls do this at their own expense with desire and tenacity," said Guy Carter. "They should be commended for that alone."

They make their horses run full speed, stop, jump, turn on a dime and give you nine cents change. And they perform each dangerous routine with such precise movements that make every little girl say, "I wanna be a Chick." And they keep the fans coming back for more of the greatest show on dirt.

To view the Cowgirl Chicks' schedule and learn more about the Chicks, log on to www.cowgirlchicks.com.