

PART RODEO CLOWN, PART ARTIST, PART RANCHER,

Ash “Crash” Cooper has a lot on his plate as he makes a name for himself south of the border.

Ash draws on his athleticism when performing at rodeos across the United States and Canada. “I was always an athlete,” he says. “So it was natural for me to incorporate that into my routines.”

STORY BY **KYLE PARTAIN**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **ROSS HECOX**

A BULL STALLS IN THE CHUTE, forcing a young cowboy to dismount and start his pre-ride routine from scratch. Sensing the delay, a harried announcer instinctively throws out a shout to the barrel positioned in the center of the arena.

Within milliseconds Ash “Crash” Cooper can feel thousands of eyes turning in his direction.

“Anybody can be funny just standing around talking with friends,” Cooper says. “But when you have to be funny *now*—on command—in front of thousands of people, it’s a whole different scenario. And when you have to do it in 10 seconds so they can get back to the action, it’s even more difficult.”

Such is the life of the Senlac, Saskatchewan, rodeo clown. He’s spent more than a decade clawing his way to the top of a profession where he’s only as good as his last performance—or even his last joke. But he’s found a way to keep the crowd laughing, which makes for happy rodeo committees and even more demands on his precious time.

You see, Ash isn’t just a rodeo clown. He’s a rancher, running 100 head—half beef cattle and half young bucking bulls—near his boyhood home in western Saskatchewan. He’s also a Western artist who cranks out everything from pencil drawings to cartoons to watercolor paintings. Add in some big plans for the future and 200 nights a year on the road and Ash is one busy cowboy.

“I’m not sure what I’d do if my life was simpler,” he says. “It’s always been pretty chaotic. Everything I’m doing now complements everything else I’m doing.” >>>



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THE SON OF A RANCHER,

Ash grew up around rodeo and the Western way of life. A gifted athlete, he excelled in hockey (he's from Canada after all) and rugby. He played elite-level hockey in both Canada and the United States. But watching the Canadian Finals Rodeo in the late 1990s, he decided to take up bullfighting.

"It just hit me that year that I wanted to be a bullfighter. I always liked rough sports, and I thought bullfighting would be about as rough as it gets," he says. "I went to a weekend bullfighting school while I was still playing hockey and going to college to study fine arts. But I had to quit hockey after I broke my foot in a car wreck on my way to a rodeo. Then I started fighting bulls full-time."

Ash credits much of his success to the support he received from his parents, Jim and Sharon Cooper. They supported him through it all, with the exception of bullfighting.

"My mom wasn't a big fan of it," he says. "When I went to a rodeo, she would always tell me to wear clean underwear in case I got run over by a bull and had to go to the hospital. My reply was, 'If I get run over by a bull, do you think my underwear is really going to be clean?'"

A few years into his new profession, Ash began to notice the shortage of clowns on the rodeo circuit.

"I went out the first performance and I was so horrible," he recalls. "The next day it poured rain and I made up an act that involved flopping around in the mud the whole time. The crowd loved it. After that, the whole clowning thing didn't seem so bad."

But that doesn't necessarily mean he improved.

"For the first three or four years, I was still horrible," Ash admits. "But I kept getting work because there just weren't enough clowns to go around. Had there been more clowns to choose from, I wouldn't have kept doing it. But I slowly got better. And I realized that it often paid better than fighting bulls."

Moving from in front of the chutes to the barrel was an adjustment for Ash's ego, as well. As a bullfighter, he continued to think of himself as an athlete. Moving to the barrel—a place where many bullfighters end up as they get older and can no longer handle the wear and tear of fighting bulls—caused Ash to look at himself differently, at least at first.

"What I realized was that I could incorporate my athleticism into my routines," he says. "Once I decided to be a clown, I worked really hard at coming up with original material. I didn't want to just copy every other guy who'd worked the barrel. That would have been fine if I was doing it part-time or as an amateur. But once I decided to make this my profession, copying other people was not an option."

"One thing I've found is that my athleticism allows me to do things that some clowns simply can't copy. I have some springy stilts that I can jump in and do back flips with. I don't always have to be funny. Sometimes people are equally entertained by a wild, crazy stunt that they wouldn't even

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Above: Applying makeup isn't something Ash had experience with before becoming a clown. These days, however, he can have his clown face on in a matter of minutes.

Opposite page top: "I wouldn't be much of a cowboy if I didn't have any cows," says Ash, checking on the herd with his wife, Kat. "I can't rodeo forever, but I'll always do my artwork and have cattle."

Opposite page bottom: Mostly self-taught, Ash's artwork is much like his life—all over the map. He does pencil drawings, cartoons and even watercolors. And he's hoping to begin working with oils in the near future.



As is the case with most clowns, Ash is always willing to go the extra mile for a laugh. In this case, that involved leading his ranch horse into the old church that now serves as his art studio.

dream of attempting. If I'm successful, that's great. If I'm not, everyone loves to see a crash."

Another thing Ash learned is that he must be ready to "perform" at any given time. As a kid, he always fixated on the clown's every move. Kids today are no different.

"Someone is always watching me, so I always have to be doing something. Even if I'm not talking or doing a routine, I need to be doing something that will entertain whoever is watching. I have to remember that now I'm that guy who's being watched all the time by somebody."

One way the Canadian cowboy went about improving his clowning skills was signing up for a two-day competition for stand-up comedians. He was supposed to compete on just the first day before heading to a charity hockey event. But a rough start brought out his competitive nature.

"I canceled the hockey thing and spent the whole night rewriting my material," Ash says. "I went back the next day and won the thing. It's tough to be a stand-up comedian and have all these people staring at you with these 'make-me-laugh' looks on their faces. I did it because I knew it would be hard, and that it would make me a better clown in the long run." The experience also benefited Ash in his roles as host of the *Cowboy Country* television show, and as an emcee at various events.

These days, Ash works mostly rodeos in the United States. He works a few performances each year in Canada and has been selected as the clown/barrelman at the Canadian Finals for the last seven years.

SWINGING AROUND THE BACK OF AN OLD CHURCH

in "downtown" Senlac, Ash enters his sanctuary. Converted to an art studio, the church offers a brief respite from the outside world and all of its distractions. What it doesn't offer much of, however, is heat. Portable units make the room just comfortable enough for Ash to get some work done, while still inspiring him to work quickly during the bitter cold of winter.

"I'd really like to have more time for my artwork," Ash says. "It's just something you have to work at all the time to improve. If I were just an artist, I'd probably be a recluse. But like I said earlier, everything I do compliments everything else I do."

Ash's artwork benefits from both his rodeo and ranching adventures. He often carries a camera while out working his or his father's cattle. The family's ranching follies through the years have been forever captured in more than a few of Ash's works. At the same time, his full-time rodeo job provides not only inspiration, but plays a role in selling his art, as well.

"If I'm doing an art show at a rodeo, I'll often sell more than the person beside me—even though that person might be a better artist," Ash says. "Artwork is about the story, and buying my art makes for great conversation. The buyer can tell friends how they saw me in the arena with the bulls and I made them laugh. My artwork wouldn't be a conversation piece if I wasn't a clown."

As is the case with everything he does, Ash is all over the map when it comes to his art. He can do a true-to-life, bring tears to your eyes pencil drawing of a well-known area rancher, and then turn around and crank out a gut-busting cartoon. But he started in watercolors.

“I started doing watercolors because I thought it was the easiest to do, especially on the road,” Ash says. “Come to find out, watercolor is one of the most difficult and technical art forms. I guess that shows how much my one year of fine-art training paid off. I’m basically self-taught, which is kind of a trend now. They call it a naïve artist, which is what people seem to want today.”

In addition to commission pieces, Ash is producing greeting cards for Leanin’ Tree, and is one of the company’s top sellers.

“I took less rodeos in 2009 so I could get some artwork done,” he says. “I was really getting behind on my commissions, and I signed on to illustrate a children’s book about a bucking bull. When it’s nice out, I don’t feel like being in the studio. I’d rather be out fixing fence or checking cows.”

Ash’s wife, Kat, plays a pivotal role in keeping his worlds from colliding. She travels with him much of the year, and is always there to take care of issues that might arise.

“I always tell people, ‘Kat’s trying to hold onto her sanity, and I can’t wait until I lose mine,’” Ash says.

“I WOULDN’T BE MUCH

of a cowboy if I didn’t have any cows,” Ash says. “I’m not home near as much as I would like to be, but I’ve always had cattle and I always want to have cattle.”

Having cattle forces Ash to come home at least a couple of times each year—a trip he always welcomes. While he enjoys traveling and seeing other parts of the United States and Canada, there’s no place like Senlac (population: 40) for the Cooper family.

“I’ve thought about moving closer to Calgary at times,” Ash says. “But what I realized is that even though it takes longer to get here, once I’m here, I’m happier. I spend most of my year on the road meeting people, and I love it. But it’s nice to come back here—where there aren’t too many people—and hang out with my family and cattle. It’s not a big deal for me because I

grew up here. I’m used to driving half an hour or more to get anywhere.”

While he doesn’t know how long he might continue to rodeo, Ash has ideas about what the future holds. The plan, for now anyway, is a dude ranch catering to a mostly overseas clientele.

“One thing a lot of people in Europe like is open space, because they don’t have much of it there. That’s one of the assets I have here—we’ve got plenty of open ground in western Saskatchewan. We’ve got some things in mind, and hope to really start putting that together in the next five or six years,” Ash says. “It takes a long time to get to the top in any profession. And now that I’m in the general vicinity, I’d like to enjoy it for a few years. It took too long to get here for me to just give it up tomorrow.”

A fan of the road less traveled, Ash prides himself on finding different routes when traveling from rodeo to rodeo.

“If we take a different route, we might stumble across an antique store we haven’t been in before or meet someone we would haven’t met otherwise,” he says. “Traveling is the best perk of my job.”

Much like his driving habits, Ash works hard to steer rodeo performances in a different direction every night. Now that he’s working larger, multi-day events, he realizes many in the stands might have seen the previous night’s performance.

“At the Canadian Finals, 80 percent of that audience is there every night,” he says. “I think some clowns would prefer a different audience for every perf, but I don’t repeat myself from day to day, or even year to year. With so many of the same people at the CFR every night, I can develop a real relationship with that crowd and even refer to things that happened the night before. I also see it as my job to entertain the cowboys, as well. If I can make them laugh, I know I’ve done a good job because they see and hear so many clowns during the year. They are my toughest critics. And if they’re laughing, usually the crowd will be laughing too.” 🐾

Kyle Partain is a Western Horseman associate editor. To learn more about Ash Cooper, visit crashcooper.com. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.