

Tony Coleman, UTM’s first full-time rodeo coach

By Karen Campbell
Press Reporter

If not for a chance encounter with a rodeo photographer, UTM might have missed the chance to rope in both a champion and a coach in its early days of rodeo.

Tony Coleman had been a student for two quarters in 1970-71. Disgruntled, he left and only returned in 1973, when, after meeting photographer Burn Gregory on the road, he learned that UTM had joined the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association.

As a member of the team, Coleman ultimately won back-to-back regional All Around championships and a national all-around title. He then became a part time coach from 1979-91 and fulltime from 1991-96. Accomplishments during his time as competitor and/or coach include:

First ever appearance by a team east of the Mississippi River at the national championship in 1974

Part of the team that won their first Ozark Region championship in 1976. Eventually Coleman would see UTM rack up 17 regional championships from 1976-1996, many times with undefeated records.

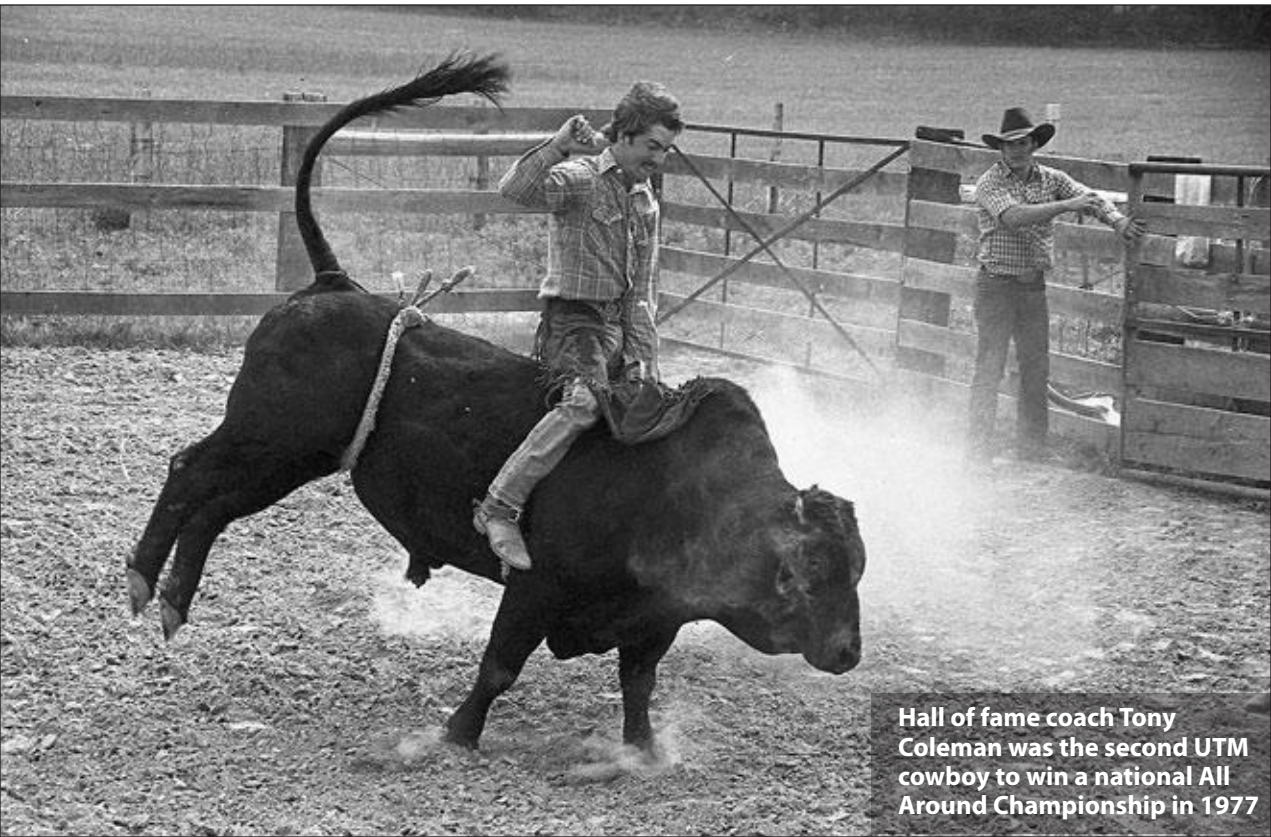
Coleman became the second UT Martin cowboy to win a national All Around championship in 1977

In 1992, leading the women’s team to finish third in the nation, its highest finish ever to that date.

Administratively, Coleman’s coaching responsibilities extended far beyond the arena.

“I had to get all the contracts for the rodeo, recruit kids to come, manage the scholarship program, procure practice stock, run the practice pen, and then there is some coaching that goes into it,” he acknowledged with a chuckle.

During his tenure, many of the activities and structures now known as “the rodeo” come into being:



Hall of fame coach Tony Coleman was the second UTM cowboy to win a national All Around Championship in 1977

The annual university rodeo moved on campus for the first time to an outdoor arena on the north side of campus in 1979.

Launch of Martin Rodeo and Roundup Days

The dedication of the West Tennessee Agricultural Pavilion

The acquisition of the new Equine Center, with its 85-acre complex offering the UTM teams expanded area for practice stock

In his final year at the coaching reins, Coleman witnessed both the UTM teams win the Ozark Region and advanced to the College National Finals in Bozeman, Montana. When former all-around national champion, George Mesimer, took over as full-time coach while the search for a replacement began, both teams finished among the top 15 in the nation.

In 1996, Coleman was inducted into UTM Rodeo Hall of Fame.

When UTM went from peer-to-peer to bringing on a part-time coach, Coleman was a natural choice.

He had experience in every event but bull riding so, he acknowledged, “I knew a little bit.”

One thing he knew was that recruitment wasn’t always about finding the standout. “It’s not always the talent,” he said. “A kid’s gotta have the want to and try. Those are things you can’t teach. A lot of times I’d try to recruit kids that had the talent but weren’t quite there yet, because other schools wouldn’t be going after them.”

Finding women riders proved to be a special challenge due to the lack of earlier opportunities for competition. Barrel racers were much easier to come by than those who could rope and tie goats he explained. Plus, coaching a coed team often meant being a referee.

“You get three girls in the same room and two of them are going to gang up against the other,” Coleman recalled. “When guys have a disagreement, they go out behind the barn have a fist fight and it’s

over with.”

As a result, Coleman stressed fairly regularly, “If we are going to be a team, we are going to be a team. Everyone is going to pull together. Everybody needs to help everybody.”

For all the successes in his 20+ years of involvement, Coleman and the UTM team weren’t immune from tragedies.

In 1994, Valerie Deviliers, a 20-year-old rodeo team member from France, died in an accident in the practice arena.

“It hurt the whole team,” Coleman explained. “Everybody knows, rodeo is rodeo. It can happen. I’ve seen four or five guys die in the arena.

“It’s like everybody has the attitude it’s going to happen to the other guy. It’s not going to happen to me,” he noted of the realities of the inherent risks.

When asked what makes a rider return to the arena, knowing that the outcome isn’t guaranteed, Coleman reflected on the growth that comes from asking more of

one’s self.

“Sure, you compete against everybody else,” he said. “But it’s really about you and the head of stock that day. You compete against that draw. Most of the time, if you don’t win, it’s not somebody else’s fault. It’s your fault or you didn’t draw a good enough head of stock.”

Still, even Coleman admitted to one competition he avoided. “Bull riding ... even if you make the whistle you still have to hit the ground, and I hated to hit the ground.”

In 1996, Coleman left coaching and went into construction. More than a decade later, the rodeo champion did “hit the ground” in an on-the-job accident severely injuring his back. While difficulty walking and maneuvering stairs means being on site for events inside the arena like the 50th anniversary aren’t viable, he is looking forward to seeing old friends at some of the informal gatherings around town.



1968
Rodeo became a collegiate sport at UT Martin

1969
First UT Martin Rodeo Invitational Championship

1970
Built corral, and won UT Martin rodeo for the first time

1971
Won UT Martin rodeo second year in a row

1972
Won UT Martin rodeo for the third year

1973
Joined NIRA and Ozark Region

1974
First trip to NIRA National finals

1975
Skip Emmett becomes UT Martin’s first national champion

1976
The rodeo team won the Ozark Region for the first time

1977
Rodeo held in Martin for the first time

1978
Rodeo team was undefeated in Ozark Region competition

1979
Rodeo became social event in Northwest Tennessee

1980
Newly formed Rodeo Booster Club implemented Roundup Days

1981
Ozark Region Champions

1982
Mark Curry got reserve champion in calf roping

1983
Finished in the top 20 at CNFR

1984
Dedication of the West Tennessee Agricultural Pavilion

1985
Men’s team placed third in the nation

1986
Never lost a regional rodeo

All Cowboy hats priced to move!

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