

CUTTING for Christ

Non-Pro World Champion Joe Howard Williamson
takes a message with him on the road

article and photos by Jill J. Dunkel

Two turns off the highway on a dusty, rough road in rural Archer County, Texas, a cattle guard bears a rudimentary cross constructed out of old barbed wire. Further down the road, "Switchhouse Ranch Shipping Pens" is welded to the top rail of the pipe fence, along with a cow and her calf, and another cross. Another mile down the road, just up the driveway to the Williamson home, is a set of hand-made metal gates that feature cutout portraits of the ranch's history, and show each member of the family working on the ranch. The top of each gate bears the ranch's brand. And yet another cross.

There's a central theme on this place—a central theme found in the life of Joe Howard Williamson, whether he's

weaning calves on the ranch, cutting a cow in the fourth round of the Non Pro World Finals, or counseling a teenager to resist the lure of drugs and alcohol.

A licensed preacher and rancher, Williamson and his family, wife, Tracy, and daughters, Denver, 19, Jordan, 15, and Rebekah, 11, are red-hot in the cutting pen. Joe Howard and Denver both garnered World Championship titles at the World Finals in the Non Pro and Senior Youth, respectively. Jordan claimed the Texas High School Rodeo Championship in Girls Cutting this summer and is headed to Nationals. And "Reka" won the second go round of the Junior Youth at the World Finals.

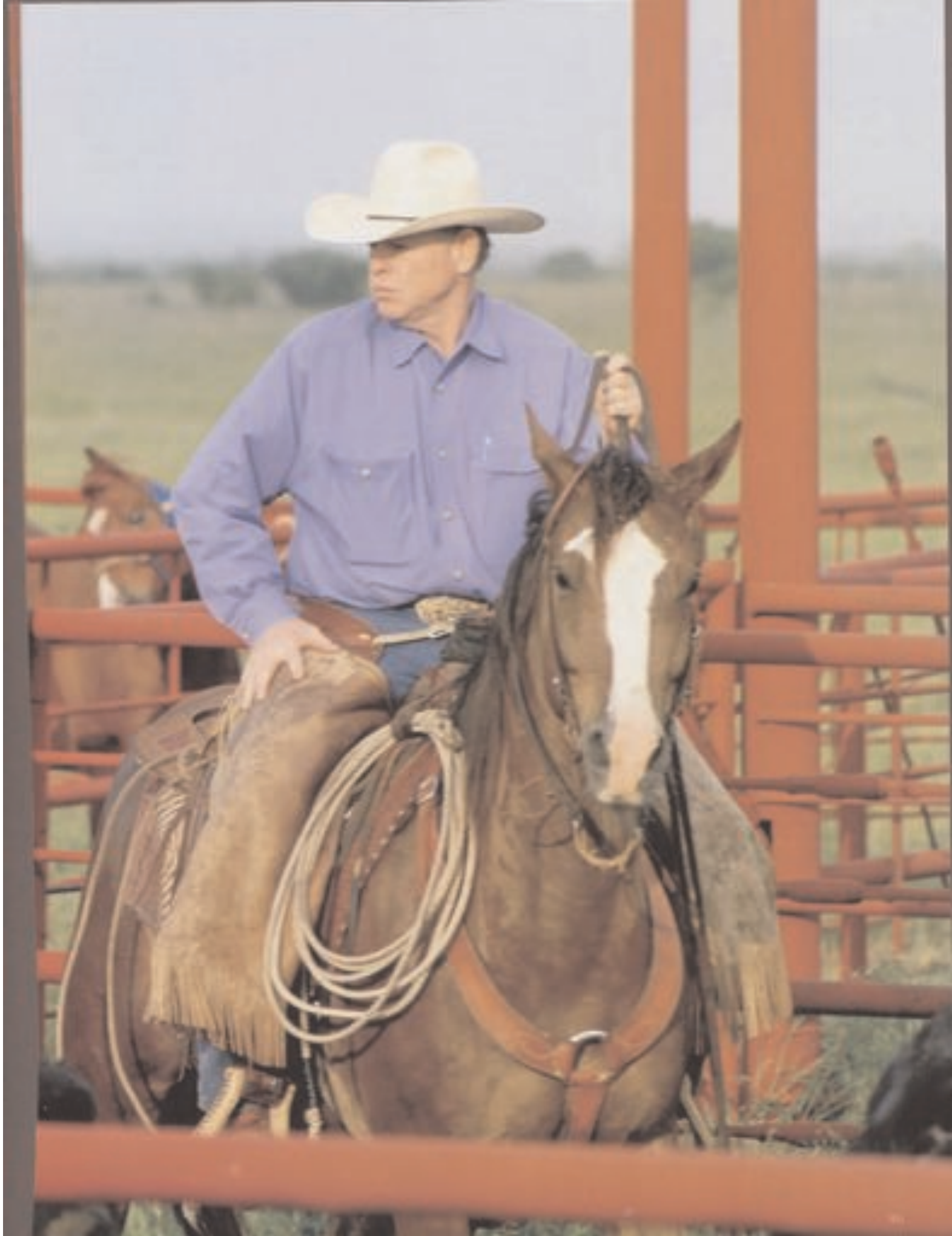
Williamson's ministry, Horsemen For Christ, has grown by leaps and bounds since its inception 11 years ago. The cattle market is strong. His ranch's stock tanks are full of water and the pastures have plenty of grass. But the picture hasn't always looked so bright for this NCHA Hall of Famer.

Ranch-raised with two brothers near the sleepy town of Iowa Park, just outside of Wichita Falls, Texas, Williamson grew up around horses. His family was in the banking and ranching business, and horses were always a part of his life. "We always had show horses and rodeoed," he said. As for cutting horses, Williamson said he had minimal exposure as a child. "A fellow



The entire Williamson family (left) is active on the ranch and in the cutting pen. Rebekah, Jordan, Tracy, Denver Jo and Joe Howard live on the Switchhouse Ranch in central Archer County, Texas.

Williamson initially was drawn to cutting because of its similarities to ranching. "For me, there are so many similarities in ranching and cutting. We cut dry cows out of our herd, or sort cows and calves. So much of it is similar," he said. Joe Howard and his daughters use their cutting horses for ranch work throughout the year. "It makes them better horses. It keeps them fresh in their mind. We even drag calves on them."



named Jim Pearson worked for Dad, and he trained a couple of paint cutting horses for us. And I had the opportunity to stay at Sam Wilson's for a few days and ride a cutting horse there when I was in the sixth grade."

But it wasn't until 1985 that Williamson purchased his own cutting horse from Earnest Wilson. "I was looking for something to do. There are several cutters near Wichita Falls, like Jim Lee, the Crumpers, and the Gaines. I had always admired them and admired their horses. Plus it seemed to fit in with ranching," he said. "I really credit Earnest for getting me started in cutting."

It was around this time in Williamson's life that he made a change. Much of his life to this point was spent addicted to drugs and alcohol. He lost his first wife in a car wreck and had gone through a divorce with his second wife. He was at rock bottom. Williamson wanted a fresh start.

He had recently married a woman he met while getting a hair cut in Reno. They had a baby girl. Seeing his new daughter was motivation to get his life straight. A stint in drug rehab still left him with an empty feeling inside, a feeling that was fulfilled when he accepted Jesus Christ into his life.

With a new purpose and will, Williamson continued

to cut and learned more about the sport. Jim Lee, Brady Bowen and Earnest Wilson were all early influences to him in the cutting pen. "I never met anyone who didn't want to help me," he said. "The Lord put me with them."

In 1994, Williamson felt the Lord called him to start a ministry to the horse industry, primarily the cutting horse world, and Hoosemen For Christ was born. Every Sunday morning, Williamson held chapels at cuttings where he was participating.

The next few years, Williamson's ministry grew and his skills at cutting continued to improve, along with the quality of his horses. The mid-1990s found him competing handily in the Non Pro, with trips to the NCHA World Finals in 1997, 1998 and 1999.

Jiggin Little Lena (Smart Little Lena x Eggs Cat by Doc Quisote) was Williamson's choice mount in 1999. After a tough year of hauling, Williamson entered the World Finals just ahead of Wade Rust for the Non Pro World Championship. "I lost a cow that first night, and that just about put us even. I had to do good the last night to win it."

Williamson persevered and claimed the 1999 Non Pro World Championship title.

When he's not on the road, in the cutting pen or preaching, Williamson is working on the ranch just like any modern-day cowboy.



"I learned a lot that year...things to do and not to do, how to get along with people better. I tried not to get into the head games and such, but I probably fell into a lot of them from time to time that I wished I hadn't of. But God always pulled me through and kept me straight. It was a great experience."

Williamson said his most recent World Championship was a lot different. "I didn't think a lot about winning the World at the beginning of the year. My horse, Squeaks My Alias, (Squeak Toy x Haidalias by Haidas Little Pep) was getting solid and working good," he said.

Shortly after the Super Stakes, Williamson and his driver, J.R. Coody, hauled several nights to get to shows in Florida and Batesville, Mississippi, and ended the week in Weatherford, Texas. The long haul earned Williamson \$7,000 in one week. "That's when I decided to definitely make a run for it."

"Several people asked me what I thought I was doing. I don't think they had the confidence in Squeaks My Alias that I did. Any time you're up against Mary Jo [Milner] and her roan horse, you're up against one of the best."

Williamson made several trips to Florida in 2004. "The people in Florida, Billy Kidd, Ted Sokol and others, they were big-time helpful to me."

Williamson knew from the beginning it would be an uphill battle. "Trying to stay true to the ministry God gave me, trying to stay at home some, trying to have some idea what was going on here at the ranch... It was difficult to do. Without L.B. Rainbolt (Operations Officer of Horsemen for Christ), Sebastian Flores and Nelson Clark (who work on the ranch), Tracy and my family, it never would have worked. There was just too much going on. It takes a

lot of people to help you win the World."

Few gave Williamson a true shot at the title. Going into the World Finals, most thought at best he had an outside chance. "I don't believe anybody expected this. Mary Jo didn't have her roan horse (Red White And Boon) in Amarillo, but Mary Jo is tough no matter what she's riding. I didn't think about what horse she had," he said.

"I didn't go to the Finals to beat Mary Jo. I came to try to win the Finals because I had never done it. If I won the Finals, I might have a chance to win the World, and that's how it worked out."

Williamson said there are many people who have contributed to his success. "I'm so thankful to my wife, Tracy. She does so much, especially playing a double role at the house so much of the time. And the girls have a big hand in warming my horse up. Bronc Jones, Nelson Clark, Cotton Elliot, and Sebastian Flores for keeping things running here at home; my neighbors Doug and Jill Dunkel, my veterinarian Dr. Larry Fellhauer, my farrier Ray Taylor, my drivers J.R. Coody and Colby Hunt. Thanks to all the Florida people, Jim Graham and his wife, Billy Kidd, Ted Sokol and several others there."

"My main help during the cuttings were Curly Tully, Greg Welch, Bronc Willoughby, Kobie Wood, Chubby Turner, Brady Bowen, and Robert Rust. Thanks for Robert's help and encouragement; he picked out a lot of good cattle for me. I also appreciate all the people in Montana."

Reflecting on his year, Williamson noted the passing of two good friends, Duane Newton, with whom he rodeoed and who worked for his dad, and Greg Welch. "Greg was such a tremendous encouragement in cutting and my ministry. It was tough on me and everybody to lose him."



Williamson said Edley Hixson, Chris Benedict, Dick Gaines, Buster Welch, and his preacher, Roger Deerinwater, are all great influences on his life. "They are all men of wisdom and have a unique perspective on life. Since my dad is no longer around, they all kind of take his place, in a manner of speaking."

For this World Champion, the rewards of cutting don't necessarily come in the form of cutting titles. "My rewards are on the ministry side of it. I wouldn't be doing this if not for the ministry," he said.

"Edley Hixson once asked me if I cut to preach or preach to cut. I think God has given me a platform of two World Championships to preach and witness from, and I've tried to use it that way. Horses have been what God has used to open up the ministry for us," he explained. "Don't misunderstand me. You don't have to be a winner to be a Christian, and not every Christian is going to win. But a good friend once told me that no one likes to listen to a loser. God provided me with those two horses I won the World on. He's opening doors for us."

Today, Horsemen For Christ not only ministers to the cutting horse world, but it also has a growing prison ministry and delivers youth drug, alcohol and sex education programs. This year the ministry offered its first ever marriage seminar, and plans are on track for a financial seminar next year.

The people of the NCHA have a special place in the Williamsons' heart. "We love them," Joe Howard said. "The NCHA is full of good, caring folks that are concerned about their fellow cutters. I've never seen a group as a whole as good as these are. They look beyond their own circumstances. They are giving to our ministry. They are just a great group of people."

When it's all said and done, Williamson gives Christ the glory for it all. "God has given us everything, and I pray we don't misuse it."

For more information on Horsemen For Christ, visit www.horsemenforchrist.com ★

Opposite page: Seven years ago, Williamson started a broke and cutting horse camp that was named after Whitney Welch. This year, he added Greg Welch's name to the camp as well. The camp, which is held at Silverado on the Brazos, is one of the highlights for Williamson's Horsemen For Christ ministry. At this year's camp, 27 people made decisions for Christ.

This page: Williamson has been a licensed preacher since 1994. He offers chapel services at cuttings across the country, delivers a message to youth to stay away from drugs, alcohol and sexual promiscuity and has an active prison ministry.

