FREE REIN

Eighteen-year-old world champion Tuli Dowers changes the horse industry from within.

By **Miles Dwyer** Photos by **Max Unkrich**





Tuli Dowers rides Hot Rod into a sliding stop.

You can't see Triple D Ranches from the road. Instead, it sits two miles east of State Route 264, the only paved road running through Dyer, Nevada — a town in Esmeralda County with fewer than 300 residents and seemingly more farm machinery than buildings. Tucked between the Sierra Nevada and the Silver Peak Range, a thick layer of dust, kicked up by a quick and steady wind, floats through town. The road through Dyer is not longer than a few street blocks, highlighted by a bar illuminated by a Miller Lite sign and the Esmeralda Market. Passersby, hypnotized by hundreds of miles of highway, may miss the town if they don't take the time to look. The magic lies in what you can't see, a few miles east of the road.

Tuli Dowers wakes with the sunrise every day at Triple D, her family's ranch. She has to feed the cows. Feeding herself always comes later. An 18-year-old high school senior, Dowers' life revolves around her animals and the ranch she's lived on her entire life. Each morning, Dowers hauls a flatbed trailer stocked with hundreds of hay bales down a long fenceline, crowded with cows who brim with anticipation. Before she can deliver the hay, Dowers must cut the twine binding the bales, which she does by pinning a 20-inch machete between her arms, slicing down through the twine in one familiar swing. She rushes to finish her chores, so she can spend as much of the day in the saddle with her horses, loping figure-eights and spinning tight circles in a dusty arena under a warm desert sun. Despite these unseen hours of effort on the ranch, she doesn't see herself as a cowgirl.

"I think my brother is a cowboy," says Dowers. "I see myself as just a little horse girl who rides her horses and feeds her cows in the morning. I never really wear a cowboy hat, and I don't like button-ups. I just like to ride."

She's also a budding phenom in the sport of reined cow horse, a circuit of horse shows where trainers and riders showcase their horses' abilities in simulated ranching situations. The sport's top horses, some of whom are trained by Tuli's father, Nick Dowers, can carry six, sometimes seven, figure price tags. Dowers has shown horses in regional shows since she was 14. In late 2025, she competed in her first national circuit show: the National Reined Cow Horse Association (NRCHA) Snaffle Bit Futurity. It's the premier western show for 3-year-old horses known as "The Greatest Show on Dirt."

There, riding one of Nick's horses, Dowers competed in the Non-Pro Boxing division and won the title. A few months later, at the 2026 NRCHA Celebration of Champions, this time riding one of her own horses, Dowers once again beat out a field much more seasoned than herself and was crowned Limited Non-Pro Boxing World Champion.

Dowers was born with arms that never fully developed beyond her elbows. She refuses to let her disability stand in the way of her many goals, and while it poses some challenges, there are very few tasks for which Dowers hasn't already constructed her own solution.



Tuli Dowers slices through hay twine with her machete.

“A lot of people ask if I need help all the time, but I usually don't,” says Dowers. “I'll ask if I really do. People don't have to feel sorry or feel like it must be so hard. It's not that big of a deal, honestly. I just do it.”

Once she finishes her chores, Dowers makes her way to the tack room. There, her go-to mount, High Stressin Cat, a 13-year-old bay-coated gelding known to everyone as “Hot Rod,” stands tall, waiting patiently tied to a wall-mounted ring. Pinning a brush between her arms, Dowers grooms him before tossing her saddle on his back and draping her bridle over his face. At one point, her mom, Jackie, asks Dowers if she wants help grooming Hot Rod, to which Dowers calmly replies, “I got it.”

Once Hot Rod is ready, they walk together to the arena. Dowers warms him up and runs him through different segments of her reining routine — one of three disciplines, along with cutting and cow work, riders demonstrate in Non-Pro Boxing.

Readying their own horses in the tack room, her younger siblings, Crue and Jovi, are chatty while working the ranch. In contrast, Dowers remains hyper-focused on her current objective. In the saddle, she settles into her element, guiding her equine partner with confidence and compassion. Loping around the arena, she and Hot Rod glide in sync. Every so often, she’ll sit back and stop Hot Rod. She’s abrupt but not forceful. She’s making sure he’s still paying attention, like a teacher cold-calling on a student whose eyes have drifted away. Even in the slow-paced valley of her Nevada home, Dowers remains driven, always striving to accomplish what she couldn’t do the day before.

“She's very serious,” says Jackie. “All of her siblings will be around friends, and she's with her dad studying. She's been the adult her whole life. She’s all business all the time.”

After working through her reining routine with Hot Rod, spinning, loping, and sliding across the arena, Dowers drops her reins to Hot Rod’s neck, surrendering control. It’s a major show of trust, meant to reward Hot Rod for his trust in her. Dowers finds peace riding horses and completing her chores, but in the show pen, she comes alive.

“I’ve always been competitive,” says Dowers. “If I’m not at a horse show, I'm watching a horse show.”

Strutting into the John Justin Arena in Fort Worth, Texas, atop an energetic three-year-old red roan quarterhorse named Tha Rizzler, Tuli Dowers remained calm. In mid-October 2025, Dowers breathed easy in the center of a grand show pen. All eyes in the stands were pinned on the then 17-year-old rider from Dyer. She had never competed in a national reined cow horse competition, let alone The Greatest Show on Dirt, but the weight of the moment was the furthest thing from her mind. She held her focus on her teammate.

Cow horse competitions are divided into three events: reining, cow work, and cutting (also known as herd work) — all of which are designed to mimic real ranching scenarios — with a panel of judges scoring the events. Reining demonstrates a horse's athletic and working traits like speed, control, and the ability to decelerate on a dime via the famous sliding stop. Cow work, or "boxing" in Dowers' division, tests the ability of horse and rider to run and direct a cow back and forth along a fence line. Cutting is the act of separating a cow from the herd and preventing it from returning, like a lockdown defender keeping a point guard from driving to the basket. Allowing that cow to slip back into the herd usually marks the end of the road for any competitor. For Dowers, a lost cow was the way in.

Just 24 hours earlier, Dowers was not listed as a competitor anticipating her debut on the NRCHA circuit. She was in Fort Worth as a fan, cheering on her dad, a renowned pro horse trainer who entered three horses, including Tha Rizzler, in the Open division of the Futurity. When Nick and Rizz lost a cow in the cutting section of their run, a shocking mistake, his chance to win the Open disappeared. But there was still the Non-Pro Boxing (a competition category for trainers who don't make their living on the show circuit), and Dowers, Nick's pupil, made the perfect rider-in-waiting. Dowers and Nick only had a few hours to decide whether to enter the Non-Pro Boxing event. After some deliberation, Dowers and her family decided to compete with Tha Rizzler the next day.

One night is too little time to build a bond with a horse she'd only ridden a handful of times, but that didn't stop Dowers from trying. One-on-one with Rizz, Dowers waved and brushed a handheld flag around his body, aiming to acclimate him to her presence, while also trying to better understand his sensitivities. Like many stallion colts, Tha Rizzler is a firecracker, and while his abundance of energy can prove challenging, it's also what makes him so special. That, and his rare athleticism.

Walking tall and strong to the center of the arena, Dowers and Tha Rizzler looked like a horse and rider that have been attached at the hips for years, not hours. In the reining section, Dowers got off to a hot start, pirouetting Rizz in tight circles and shifting him from a full sprint to a rapid sliding stop like a locomotive pulling into the station. In the cutting prelim, Dowers jumped to a comfortable lead atop the scoreboard.

Horse shows like the Futurity take several weeks to complete, sometimes with days-long breaks in between rounds. Typically, competitors stay on location and prepare for what's to come. Dowers chose to forgo her chance to rest and booked a flight home to attend her senior homecoming dance, not wanting to disappoint her friends who had spent weeks begging her to go. She returned home to a hero's welcome.

"Usually, they don't know about the horse show stuff," says Dowers. "They're just kind of like, 'Oh, Dowers are at a horse show,' but since it was so big on social media and my brother was still home, he was watching and telling his friends. When I got back, they were like, 'That's so cool.'"

After cutting a rug on the dance floor in Nevada, Dowers had to dart back to Fort Worth for the rest of the competition, with the cow work prelim still to run before the finals. As each round passed, the crowd watching Dowers doubled. By the end of the competition, Dowers and Tha Rizzler had packed the stands and sat atop the scoreboard with a wide margin between them and the next pair.

"She competed outside her skillset," says Nick. "People think we could've just plugged and played anybody to ride that horse and do what Tuli did. Not a chance. She competed."

After fantastic prelim runs, Dowers held a massive lead heading into the final round. It's common in cow horse shows for riders with large leads to take conservative approaches in their final rounds, looking to prevent disaster and coast to victory atop their large point cushions. But for Dowers, playing it safe was never an option.

"You have to take risks and expose yourself to do great things," says Nick. "And I think it would have been really easy for her to just be safe, but she wanted to be great, and so she competed at the level it takes to be exceptional. That's what I was proud of her for."

Just days after throwing her name into the hat, Dowers and Tha Rizzler were crowned Non-Pro Boxing champions of the Snaffle Bit Futurity, beating out a large crop of older, more experienced, and more prepared trainers in reined cow horse's top horse show.

"I just know what I want to do," says Dowers. "I just kind of set my dream goals high, and I know I can do it. So then when it happens, I'm like, 'Yeah, I knew I could do it.' I'm proud of myself and all, but I'm on to the next."

Dowers has been showing elite bridle horses for years, but she wasn't always cruising to victory like she did at the Futurity. After watching her younger brother Crue compete in several shows, a 13-year-old Dowers was driven to prove that anything her brother could do, so could she.

A year later, she was saddling up Hot Rod, who was not far removed from his time as Nick's top bridle horse and one of the highest-performing horses in the sport. Dowers and Hot Rod spent plenty of time in the saddle leading up to the Reno Snaffle Bit Futurity, but once Hot Rod found himself back in the show pen, his engine revved up, and Dowers couldn't handle his higher gear. After her suboptimal rookie run, in which she scored zero points, Dowers walked from the show pen to the stalls. Along the way, she was flooded by people congratulating her and telling her how well she'd done, despite her poor scores.

"That pissed her off," says Nick. "She was like, 'I don't want them to tell me good job just because I rode a horse — just because of my hands. I don't want them to tell me good job even though we all know it was crap.' That probably motivated her more than anything."

After her stumbles in Reno, Dowers returned to Dyer, determined to find her groove with Hot Rod. After a while, the pair began to sync up and soon found success. These days, the pair are as in sync as two sovereign beings can be, their misstep four years ago in Reno a distant memory.

"I was very mad, for a couple of days, just because I knew I could do better," says Dowers. "He was a little excited to do his job, and so we had some bobbles, but we learned from it, and now every time I show him I have a good chance at winning if I don't mess up."

One of those chances to win came in February 2026 at the NRCHA Celebration of Champions, back in Fort Worth, where winners are crowned world champions. Just months after from her improbable win at the NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity, Dowers and her family set off for Texas to compete in the opening event of the 2026 show season. This time, Dowers wasn't scrambling to enter the competition on a horse she barely knew. She and Hot Rod entered prepared to win. A lifelong goal setter, winning a world title with Hot Rod at the Celebration of Champions had always been at the top of Dowers' list. After two more weeks in Fort Worth, she crossed that goal off her list.

"I didn't know when we were gonna retire him, so I really wanted to win the World on him," says Dowers. "I'll show Hot Rod a little bit more this year, and probably the World Show next year, and then retire him. He's given his heart to us."



Tuli and Jackie Dowers adjust their horse's bridle.







The first lesson many Western riders are taught is how to start and stop their horse, a lesson that can be oversimplified by the phrase, “Kick it in the belly to go, pull back on the reins to stop,” the latter of which has never been an option for Dowers. Sure, she wraps her reins around her arms, but it doesn’t give her the kind of control anyone holding a set of reins with five fingers has. Dowers harnesses control through her legs, guiding the horse through subtle cues, instead of making demands.

“I've been dealt a different situation,” says Dowers. “So these horses have to be so responsive to me in different ways, and when they are, and it comes together, it’s just so special. I definitely use my legs a lot more than my hands. I use my legs more than most people notice or know.”

Riding hasn’t always been a smooth or enjoyable activity for Dowers. One of her first times riding, at 4-years-old, Dowers sat atop an old, laid-back horse named Fudd. Standing in the middle of their arena, Dowers couldn’t convince Fudd to move. No matter how much she kicked or tried to pull, he stood still. She didn’t yet know how to play the hand she was dealt. Soon, her eyes flooded with tears.

With the help of her father, Dowers began to train and mold horses to fit her skillset. She was faced with unique problems, like what to do if she ever dropped her reins, or if her horse saw red and began to charge. As a kid, these uncertainties made Dowers wary of taking some risks in the saddle. Even today, when she asks her horse to do something, she has no backup plan.

A breakthrough came when Dowers was 13, after Nick trained one of their horses, Tachita, to carry a reinless rider. Dowers now had a partner tailored to her skillset. She could ride with nothing more than her feet, and she could ride fast. She didn’t even need a bridle. Soon, Dowers was inseparable from the arena, on track to compete in her first show a year later, and win The Greatest Show on Dirt five years later. After a life of uncertainty in the saddle, she finally had total control.

“She can't bully a horse to do what she wants,” says Nick. “She has to teach it, and the horse has to want to do it. If I need to pull a little harder, I just pull a little harder, whereas in reality, I probably need to just wait a little longer. I can just force it. She can’t.”

As Dowers developed her unique skill set, it became clear that her disability allows her to approach riding differently than anyone else. With no failsafes, she has cultivated a deeper understanding of the relationship each horse has with her, and she’s a better rider for it. Dowers hasn’t been in the cow horse world’s spotlight for long, but she’s already making an impression on the sport that is sure to grow as her success continues.

“That's going to change the industry,” says Nick. “People already talk about it. Tuli's going to open the industry's eyes to how much of a true partnership, how much of a team, horse and rider can be.”