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Cowboy with ALS gets back in the saddle

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It didn't take long for the cowboy to come out in Dave Alvarado.

Pouring sweat after riding a dozen laps around the therapeutic horseback riding facility at Marvin Picollo School on Thursday afternoon, Alvarado was asked if he wanted to stop.

He smiled instead and said simply, "One more."

The longtime Reno Rodeo volunteer and former bull rider, who is battling amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, often referred to as Lou Gehrig's disease, was having too much fun.

"Once we started going, he just lit up," said Picollo Principal Matt Burak, who helped escort Alvarado around the arena with other members of the Picollo therapeutic horseback riding program. "He said he hadn't been on a horse in

14 years."

Alvarado, 49, was diagnosed with ALS four years ago and is in advanced stages of the disease, which affects nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord.

The disease has taken away most of his motor skills. It has not, however, taken his spirit.

"His exact words were, 'The only thing I want to do is get back on a horse,'" said Megan Testa, executive director of ALS of Nevada.

Alvarado said the same thing to Bob Butler of the Reno Rodeo Association, who worked alongside Alvarado on various committees, and who has been a regular visitor of Alvarado since the disease was diagnosed.

"I first met him when he was on the specialty sales committee with me," Butler said. "He was a real quiet guy who just worked behind the scenes and worked hard. He was a workhorse, not a show horse."

Butler approached the Reno Rodeo Foundation, the rodeo's charitable arm, about helping Alvarado get his wish.

Thanks to previous work by the foundation, everything was in place.

In 2002, the foundation had purchased a custom saddle for rodeo volunteer Don Balliette, a quadriplegic who had been injured in a drunken-driving accident. The \$5,000 saddle is kept at the Picollo School, which serves mentally and physically challenged students in Washoe County.

A year later, the foundation spearheaded construction of the indoor riding facility at Picollo so the students there would be able to use the therapeutic horseback riding program year round.

The school was happy to help make Alvarado's wish a reality. Administrators and volunteers know first-hand what the horses and facility mean for their students.

"The reaction you saw from him today was the exact thing we see when we get our kids up there on a horse," Burak said. "It's really something special. This guy was just delightful."

After his ride, Alvarado was taken on a tour of the school and given an invitation to come back for more rides.

"We said let's not think of this as your last ride," Burak said. "Let's do it again anytime you want."



Dave Alvarado, a longtime Reno Rodeo volunteer who is battling ALS, takes a ride Thursday with the help of the staff at Marvin Picollo School. Alvarado, who was diagnosed with ALS, or Lou Gehrig's Disease, four years ago, had a wish to ride a horse again. The Reno Rodeo Foundation arranged the ride at Picollo. (PROVIDED TO THE RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL)