



# Mark Overstreet

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO CONTINUE A FAMILY LEGACY

by Leslie Shepherd

Cattle rancher, Mark Overstreet, describes himself as a competitor. “I am not one to sit on the sidelines,” he says. Other words that describe Overstreet are “tough, determined, experienced and good natured.” What defines him least is the wheelchair that has been a part of his life since he was paralyzed from the waist down. Overstreet has run his family’s ranch since 1974, just four years after a rifle fell from a gun rack and accidentally discharged into his back. A man with a firm handshake and an infectious laugh, he is glad to tell his story.

Overstreet refers to the four years after his accident as a defining time in his life. At just eighteen years old, he was a country boy that stood six feet tall and weighed 180 pounds. “There was not an ounce of fat on me,” he says and laughs at the memory of being young and full of himself. A former high school athlete and the son of a rancher, he found himself looking at the life he knew and realizing that it would be forever changed.

He spent the first nine months after the accident at the best rehabilitation facility in the country at that time, Howard Rusk Institute in New York City. He then returned home to his family and the 7,000-acre Overstreet Ranch, between Lakeland and Dade City, that was his

birthright. The transition was awkward and frustrating at times. Overstreet does not deny feeling depressed and distant from his father, Charlie Mack Overstreet. He recalls wondering to himself, “Where will I go? What will I do?” Eventually, he tried working for the game department as a radio dispatcher, but soon lost interest. He then worked for a while as a taxidermist. During this time, old friends encouraged him, and new friendships with other paraplegics and quadriplegics inspired him. He joined a basketball team, entered fishing tournaments, and enjoyed hunting, once again. Slowly, his spirit and drive returned. Then, he says, “I just woke up one morning and decided that I was going to work this ranch.”

Overstreet believes that his father took the news in stride only because he wanted to see what he was made of. Overstreet does not recall his father openly praising him or his efforts. “Because that’s not my father’s way,” he says. In the years that followed, he claimed the legacy of the Overstreet family that began in 1939. He did it with a focused mind and a determination not to just give orders. Instead, riding a three-wheeler, he worked the cattle and tended to the land.

Today, Overstreet has the benefit of his truck, a Jeep, a Honda 450 and his

unyielding tenacity. Aside from his personal accomplishments, he has improved his family’s pastureland, and is continually upgrading his herd of cattle. He keeps himself fit and values time spent with friends and family, especially his daughters, Kristen and Heather.

Overstreet and his father share a love and respect for Florida’s natural beauty. “We have received offers from developers for our land for more than a decade, but we didn’t want to see the property in houses,” he says. Overstreet’s family has recently sold 5,098 acres of their land to the State of Florida to be used as a park. This is the second time they have donated some of the proceeds from the sale of land to the University of Florida for spinal cord research. “We have given more than thirteen million dollars for research,” he says. This fact reminds Overstreet of the words of his grandfather. They go something like this - “Yuh can’t keep an Overstreet down, if yuh want somthin’, work for it ‘til yuh get it, don’t give up.” In conclusion, Overstreet says, “I walked for eighteen years, and I have been in a chair for thirty-seven. I plan to spend the end of my life walking.” •