



Horses, cattle and ranch life keep Ace Dilday focused, busy and interacting with his family, despite his challenges with autism.

# Raising Ace

Raising a child diagnosed with autism is a daunting task, but Russell and Tanna Dilday confront it like anything else they face on the ranch.

By Kate Bradley Byars

sound (called “stemming”).

Yet, here is Ace. He’s running a loud machine in the bright Oklahoma sunlight. To get Ace’s attention, Russell yells his name until Ace opens the Kubota window. While a magnitude of difficulties can accompany a child with autism, Ace is pulling his weight on the ranch.

“They’ve been helping us cowboy since they were 3 or 4 [years old]. There is nothing we can’t do with them,” Russell said. “They can run every piece of equipment we have. Ace can even drive the big truck, but just in the hay field and not on the road. Ace is learning to read and write in homeschool, then learning life skills out here with me.”

A full-time cattle rancher and reined cow horse trainer, Russell moved the family to Oklahoma from California in 2012. There were challenges to living in California, so the Dilday family happily relocated their operation. When they did, both of their boys remained in homeschool programs.

Today, Ace and Colt are an integral part of the daily routine on the ranch. The Dildays may not be the typical ranch family, but they’ve found a way to function in the face of their challenges.

**The skill with** which 15-year-old Ace Dilday maneuvers the Kubota skid steer up to the flatbed trailer, loads a round bale of hay, then maneuvers it into the barn and stacks it is commendable for any youngster, but it is outstanding for someone diagnosed with autism. The Wynnewood, Oklahoma, teen is a shining example of how someone with a disability can lead and maintain a purposeful life — and that is exactly what his parents, Russell and Tanna Dilday, intend for him to have in the future.

When their child was diagnosed with

Autism Spectrum Disorder, Tanna and Russell could have taken several routes to handle the news, but they chose to treat Ace just as they treat his 16-year-old brother, Colt. Both boys help on the ranch, do chores at home and travel to horse shows with the family. For a child with autism, that is more than what is expected in many cases.

Autism affects each person differently, but the predominant characteristics are a person not meeting eye contact, not liking to be touched and being non-verbal, as well as often being overstimulated by things like

## Something is Not Right

In Porterville, California, Tanna and Russell were ranching, raising performance horses and the parents to two happy toddlers. The boys hit all developmental milestones as babies; Ace walked at 9 months. The family lived on a ranch and the boys’ closeness in age meant they grew up as each other’s best friends. Neither Colt nor Ace talked overmuch. It wasn’t until Ace was around 3 years old that someone pointed out that things didn’t seem quite right with the toddler.

“My mom was the first one that thought something was different,” Russell said. “Both

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Moving hay using the skid steer is only one of the many chores Ace accomplishes on the Dilday family's Oklahoma ranch. The tasks give Ace purpose.

[boys] took forever to talk. But Ace was non-verbal and lacked eye contact.”

The family was friends with Israel (“Izzy”) and Danielle Paskowitz. Danielle rode cow horses and Izzy was a professional surfer; their son, Isaiah, is autistic. The Paskowitzes noticed similarities between Ace and Isaiah.

“We took him to a specialist when he was 3,” Tanna said. “They confirmed we had a child with autism and then we had to figure out what to do. We mulled [the diagnosis] around for a bit. Autism was 1 in 120 when Ace was diagnosed, so not as prevalent as now, when it is like 1 in 50 boys. We enrolled them in a preschool, Hoops, that was religious based and focused on having kids act right — they said good morning and shook hands.”

The pediatrician who diagnosed Ace directed Tanna and Russell to state or federal programs set up to assist with autistic children; however, those programs didn't sit well with Russell.

“The state or the federal government is paying for these programs that don't teach [special needs individuals] a trade or skill or service,” he said. “That is what is needed. Give them a purpose. A job or a work program gives them a life; it lets them interact.”

Though Ace thrived in Porterville, California's Hoops Preschool, the family knew his biggest challenges were yet to come. Speech and occupational therapy are offered in classes for children with special needs, but it takes immersion in activities at home to aid in independence and motor skill development. The Dildays surely did that with Ace by getting him horseback and

involving him with the family business.

### Finding Their Own Path

In California, Russell became involved with Surfers Healing through their “Surf and Turf” clinics. The Paskowitz family started surf days and clinics for autistic children and adults in 1996. Russell started helping with the combination surfing-horseback clinics in 2008. Through their connection to the Paskowitzes, the Dildays found a community.

“That really helped Tanna and me to get around other people dealing with this,” he said. “We didn't surf, but it formed a community. We saw people from different walks of life and how they were dealing with this [diagnosis].”

In Russell's mind, there are in-town people and there are ranch people, and the Dildays are ranchers. Using the lessons he's learned training horses and dogs, Russell understood that when someone sees the world as black and white — with no gray area, as Ace does — it takes clear instruction. It also means doing a task doesn't mean doing it perfectly.

“We can't say no to something one day, allow it the second, then say no again on the third. That doesn't work for Ace,” Russell explained. “Living creatures need boundaries. When you have a kid that is not normal and you live in town, how do you figure out how to handle it?”

“I've been training horses and dogs a long time. Some horses and dogs are just terrible, but they still learn to sit and stay, or whoa. If we lived in town and I never saw something that wasn't perfect still have a job in life, how

would I teach my ‘imperfect’ kid that he has worth?”

Using that as the base of their plan to teach Ace social and life skills, as well as the basics of reading, writing and mathematics, the family set out to make life black and white for both their sons. Colt and Ace follow the same kind of rules.

Today, both boys homeschool, but Tanna and Russell credit their early years spent at Hoops with giving the kids a solid lesson in manners. Russell laughingly said Ace was able to “wrap his teachers around his finger” and managed to get out of some schoolwork. Prior to moving from California, Tanna made the decision to teach both her children from home.

In Oklahoma, the boys were enrolled in EPIC, a charter homeschool based in Oklahoma City. The program facilitated specialists to work with Ace and adjust his curriculum.

“The boys' school is online and over Skype. Ace loves his teacher, Rachel Cash,” Tanna said. “We are lucky enough to live this dream where he [Ace] can do this schooling and be outside. I can't imagine raising him in town because he is so busy. We have kids here all the time, and Ace can outwork all of them, except Colt.”

More than half of young adults with autism remain unemployed and unenrolled in higher education in the two years after high school, according to AutismSpeaks.org. It isn't book learning that Russell and Tanna focus on for Ace's future, but life skills.

They also teach Ace in a way that Colt will

## According to Ace

**When someone meets** Ace Dilday, he sticks out his hand in greeting. The 15-year-old may face the challenges of autism, but he is also a well-mannered, ranch-raised kid who loves typical teenage things. Here's what Ace told **Quarter Horse News (QHN)** about his likes and dislikes.

**QHN: WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE THING IN SCHOOL?**

**ACE:** Math. I love it.

**QHN: WOULD YOU RATHER STAY AT THE RANCH OR GO HORSE SHOW?**

**ACE:** Stay here and ranch.

**QHN: WHY DO YOU LOVE THE RANCH?**

**ACE:** Riding cows.

**QHN: WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE HORSE TO RIDE BAREBACK?**

**ACE:** You mean cow?

**QHN: NO, HORSE!**

**ACE:** Chub. A horse that is getting a baby. And Lizzy.

**QHN: WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE THING TO DO WITH COLT?**

**ACE:** Tease him.

**QHN: WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE COLOR?**

**ACE:** Blue

**QHN: WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE FOOD?**

**ACE:** A hamburger patty with cheese and fries

**QHN: WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE FRUIT?**

**ACE:** Apples

**QHN: WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE SONG OR RADIO STATION?**

**ACE:** POP 2K

**QHN: WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO BE WHEN YOU GROW UP?**

**ACE:** A cow rider. Riding bulls.

**QHN: WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE MOVIE?**

**ACE:** "Secret Life of Pets" and "Angry Birds"

**QHN: WHAT DO YOU WATCH ON TV?**

**ACE:** Spider-man



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Colt Dilday (left) joins his brother, Ace (right), in most of his tasks on the ranch. The brothers are close in age and best friends. The boys' parents say, in many ways, Colt is the unsung hero in Ace's life.

have an easier time in the future. Russell and Tanna said they know, at some point, Colt will have to watch over his brother full time.

"Ace will probably live with us until we die," Russell said. "Hopefully Colt will be able to look after him then. Whether Colt is in this [ranching] business or not, we can leave enough of this kind of cattle operation so Ace can live on that place. If Colt is in the [cattle] business, Ace can help him. He has purpose."

Of the nearly 18,000 people with autism who use state-funded vocational rehabilitation programs, as reported in a 2014 study conducted by Autism Speaks, only 60% leave the program with a job. Those from the study who did have a job had a median weekly rate below poverty level at \$160. That is not the family's goal for Ace.

With Colt at his side, Ace can accomplish practically any task. Whether the brothers gather a pasture and sort cattle or take the truck into the hay meadow to pick up bales, the boys spend most days together.

### A Place Horseback

It's not unusual to see a lanky teenage boy astride a cow in the middle of a pasture outside of Wynnewood, Oklahoma. The tales of Ace's talent riding cattle stretch from Oklahoma to Arizona, where fellow reined cow horse trainers like Corey Cushing bring out a photo of Ace aboard a cow, frequently

behind the feed truck. Autistic children and adults often have awkward social interactions, but Ace is right at home on the ranch or at a horse show, where he is typically astride.

Tanna smiled when she said that Ace knows immediately if a new horse is one he can ride bareback, a favorite pastime of his.

"Whether we say yes to him riding it or not, he is going to ride it if he wants," she said. "But some, he never rides. He doesn't look very athletic, but he very seldom comes off a horse or a cow. He has great balance and a great sense of self-preservation. He doesn't pick a cow [to ride] that will hook him or kick him. He has a sense of these things."

He makes a connection, said Haley Solum, who met the Dilday family in 2011. She first saw Ace riding Russell's stallion Topsails Rien Maker, called "Slider," and noted how at ease he was horseback. Since the first time she met the family, the self-described "horse show nanny" has visited them at their ranch and also watched Ace with other children at horse shows.

"At first, you could tell Ace had autism, but he was so with it, so outgoing," said the 23-year-old from Pilot Point, Texas. "Ace has become my little best friend. With them, how the family has embraced it [his autism], he is treated like any other kid."

The "other kid" is Colt, who Solum said is the "greatest sibling." Autism Speaks cited

COURTESY OF RUSSELL &amp; TANNA DILDAY



Before his death, Topsails Rien Maker was Ace's favorite horse to ride. A stallion that topped reined cow horse competitions like the World's Greatest Horseman, the horse was gentle and patient with his young rider.



At Surfers Healing this past summer, Ace surfed solo for the first time in more than 10 years — a giant accomplishment for the teenager.

COURTESY OF RUSSELL AND TANNA DILDAY

that 63% of the 1,167 children on the Autism Spectrum aged 6 to 15 in its study had been bullied. Thanks to Colt, that is not happening to Ace.

"Colt loves Ace, builds him up, encourages him and includes him," Solum said. "There are times I've seen Ace very frustrated, but everyone handles it so well. Colt always helps Ace get through it. Russell and Tanna made sure that Colt treats Ace like a regular sibling. There is always sibling picking going on, but Colt understands him."

Ace's understanding of instructions is two-dimensional, according to Russell. He will gather a pasture and put the cattle in the proper pen, but after that, Ace relies on his brother to give him the next step, such as sorting off bulls. The two work as a team in many instances.

"Colt is the most overlooked helper with Ace," Russell said. "Colt is by far the best at letting Ace have fun but not getting out of line when we aren't there. They work together so much that they have to get along."

Though the brothers are together frequently, Tanna and Russell started sending Colt to help at horse shows more so he has more social interaction in the last couple years. And, at the start of the 2019 school year, Colt decided to attend the local high school.

As a trainer, Russell travels to events

across the country. Social interaction is necessary, not only for Colt but also for Ace, and one way the boys get to visit with other people is through horse shows. There is a tight-knit group of trainers and competitors Russell and Tanna credit as good role models for their children.

"The horse shows, we are lucky because of the good people," Tanna said. "No one ignores either boy. No one and none of the kids have ever been mean to Ace. We are very lucky."

Russell added that Ace even gets one-on-one lessons with the professionals.

"Jake Gorrell is their mischievous uncle! Corey Cushing helps Ace with his leads; [Chris] Dawson gave him a reining lesson. [Todd] Crawford loves Ace and thinks he is hilarious no matter what he does," the proud father said.

Even with the inclusion felt at reined cow horse events and Ace's ability to jump into any task at home, Russell and Tanna worry for their son's future like any parents. Their goal is to continue to challenge him in school and with social interaction, like attending the Paskowitzes' surfing day.

In 2019, after attending Surfers Healing in California for years, Ace finally rode a wave. Russell said once he was on the longboard, it was hard to get him off.

"Until this year, Ace had never surfed on his own. He would hang out in the waves and play," Russell said. "Izzy surfed with him when [Ace] was little and in rough water. Izzy had gotten him up, but Ace never got his own feel. This year, the water was easy and he was able to stand up. Ace rode the wave all the way in. He surfed a bit longer, then went to the beach. Later, as everyone was eating lunch, Ace just got a board and went out by himself to start surfing. He was ready. With something new, he doesn't just jump in to take a beating."

The Dildays hope Ace's sense of caution keeps him out of trouble and that the life skills he's learned at the ranch give him purpose. While autistic, Ace is lower on the spectrum and can function higher than many with the diagnosis. This is what enables the Dildays to make adjustments and still include him in their ranch lifestyle.

"The way we handle Ace fits our personality and our lifestyle," Russell said. "There are people who don't hold as strict a line on their kids as we do. That isn't what makes [an autistic kid act] better or worse, it is finding what works for you. What I think about, with Ace, is that here he is learning to read and write in homeschool, then life skills here with me. He can ride, gather, sort, work the skid steer and more." ★