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# THE DARK HORSE

He was an underdog from the beginning. Formative years imprinted grit and durability into his persona as an advocate. Here's how criminal defence lawyer, Greg Dunn melds his rural roots with his profession.

By Jenn Webster • Photos by Tara McKenzie Fotos

It may come as a surprise to no one that Greg Dunn is pretty quick on the draw. Whether he's dressed up in a suit locking in a closing argument in court or dressed down in jeans on his southern Alberta ranch, the quick wit keeps coming.

Today he is wielding that banter as a hypothetical cutting trainer, conducting his own 'mini clinic' for everyone in attendance.

"See this mare, she got a big engine on her... so I'm gonna draw her back... draw her back..." he says, stifling a laugh.

Conversing in a faux accent and flashing a cheeky grin over his shoulder, he's enjoying himself. Dunn rides around in his large square pen with the picturesque Alberta foothills in the background. It would all seem like great material for a meme – given his penchant for digital punchlines – were it not for Dunn's affinity for the quiet sorrel mare beneath him.

"See that? She gon' listen to me now..." he quips.

A criminal defence lawyer in the city of Calgary, Alberta by day, Dunn is about as far away from the legal element as one could possibly imagine, here in a sand arena. Wearing a buckskin Smithbilt and spurs – not one of his 20+ suits in sight – he looks like the feedlot rider he doubled as while articling at a big corporate firm. Now some 20 years after being called to the bar, Dunn has been able to meld his roots seamlessly with his profession, albeit now practicing his craft in criminal courts instead of corporate boardrooms. Part of his mystique is his ability to tread that bright line

which runs between city and country, urban and rural, and straddle the worlds of lawyers and cowboys, and everything that comes with.

Dunn grew up a rough-and-tumble kid, the only brother to two sisters and the son of a Mountie. He was born and raised in Red Deer, Alberta until he was 12, when his father was transferred to Edmonton.

"Back in those days when the RCMP told you that you were moving, you moved," Dunn recalls. The family relocated to a new town, with a new school, but new friends never came as easily.

"I moved to a new school when I was in grade six and because I was small, I ended up fighting – paying my dues. It's what you did. We didn't have safe spaces in the '80s," he tells.

As a result, Dunn developed what he describes as an 'outlaw mentality.'

"Instead of keeping my head down and 'turtling' or trying to suck hole, I just said 'screw it' – I'll blow it all up," he recalls.

"I pretty much became the school pest and tormented the other kids and my teachers."

Dunn was labelled a delinquent in his new school, an epithet he doubled down on when he entered junior high the following year. However, the pivot point was still to come.

"I remember one time my folks got called in for a 'special meeting' with the principal and all of my teachers. I was in middle school. They lined up the three of us; mom, dad and me. All the teachers seated themselves in a semi-circle around us. They had their little note pads and they clucked away, telling my folks how much

of an idiot I was. I think one teacher broke out in tears – which was the highlight of the meeting for me," he recollects.

Citing irreconcilable differences of ambition, Dunn's teachers weren't sure what to make of him. They suggested to his parents that he downgrade to the remedial course selections and enter drama classes.

If the takeaway from that meeting was that Dunn was headed for failure, the reality was otherwise – his educators were catastrophically misguided.

## DRAWN BACK

Dunn can trace his family roots back a long ways. In fact, his first well-known ancestor was Melenchiour Quantz, a hessian mercenary, who immigrated to Canada in 1795 receiving a Crown land grant for service with the British Army during the American revolution. A district in Markham Ontario, Quantztown still bears the name of its founder. Dunn's paternal great-grandfather Frank Isenberg was another Canadian pioneer who homesteaded near Craik, Saskatchewan. At his peak, Isenberg had over 200 Percherons in his fields, employed in a custom threshing operation. That same land has been in his family since 1905.

When Dunn's father joined the Mounties, it was not feasible for the family to live in the country. However, they returned to the grandparents' homesteads every chance they got on weekends, in the summer and during harvest. It gave the young Dunn children a very visceral connection to rural life.



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“I remember being a kid of about eight years when we went back to my grandparents’ place,” he tells. “They had two dogs. One was a heeler named Blue and the other was a Shepherd they called Rover. I took them out ‘exploring’ with me.”

Dunn isn’t entirely sure how it all started, but he remembers sending a stampede of his grandfather’s cattle through a fence with the help of the dogs.

“I got in a bit of trouble that day,” he chuckles.

Though he didn’t live there full-time, Dunn got his country cred through his grandparents. He recalls weekends in an open-air combine and time spent butchering chickens by hand.

“The interesting thing about my parents’ generation was that when they were growing up, they couldn’t wait to get off the farm. Mom went into the city for high school and was gone as soon as she got the chance. Dad enrolled in the RCMP. And now their kids can’t wait to get back to the farm. The sad part about it, it’s taken almost half of my natural life to get there.”

The rolling landscape of the southern Alberta foothills are now what Dunn considers home. Though downtown Calgary is where his law firm, Dunn & Associates is located, he’s always felt compelled to return to a life in the country. In 2008, Dunn married Trina Percival of Blackie, Alberta. Trina grew up on a cattle and grain operation and won the title of Calgary Stampede Queen in 2003.

Trina, too, always knew a home in the city was never her final destination.

“Ultimately, when you have kids, it changes the trajectory of your life. You want to give them the experiences you had growing up that most kids don’t get anymore,” Dunn explains.

Greg and Trina have two daughters, ages two and four and the girls have quickly adapted to life outside of the city limits.

“Life is real out in the country. It’s a fuller existence. It’s more difficult, but it’s also more rewarding. I truly believe a rural lifestyle makes for a different kind of people. They understand self-reliance, hard work, cause-and-effect. They know things don’t come with instant gratification. You have to learn patience for the natural order of things. Growing crops takes a season. Raising a futurity foal requires a few years. Nothing happens overnight.

“Where I found living in the city there is always that access to instant results, instant returns, instant gratification. Everything happens without effort or struggle. It just happens. And it changes a person to expect the world to always work that way and to wonder what the hell is going on when it doesn’t.”

## FORGED FOR BATTLE

Considering he came from a police family, choosing to pursue criminal defence law was a curious twist of fate. Dunn remembers a significant moment in his childhood that gave him a chance to give the budding defence lawyer in him a test-drive.

“I must have been maybe 13 or 14 at the time – I was rifling through my father’s briefcase and found some intelligence briefings on the

biker war which was going in Alberta at the time,” Dunn explains.

“This would have been sometime in the mid 80’s before the Hells Angels’ ‘patchover’ when every city had their own bike gang. You had the Reapers mostly in Red Deer, the Kings Crew in Calgary and the Rebels in Edmonton. I was mesmerized by a photo of a cadaver with one leg blown off.”

He explains that an ‘A-sheet’ of a suspect was attached to the photo. The young Dunn was looking them both over, when his father busted the breach.

“In an effort to avoid a beating, I immediately took to the offensive, and questioned him about the authenticity of these documents. At one point I remember asking my father, ‘Dad how do you know this guy is guilty?’ He said simply, ‘Son I wouldn’t be charging them if they weren’t guilty – now don’t let me catch you in my briefcase again.’

“That memory of some 30 years ago reminds me even today that police officers and much of the general public – all good intentions aside – think in absolutes. So when people at cocktail parties say, ‘Hey Dunn how can you do what you do and sleep at night?’ It’s because if I’ve learned anything in 20 years of practicing criminal law, seldom is anything ever absolute.”

He goes on to clarify that criminal defence lawyers do two things in society; one, they defend the wrongfully accused – a concept most people understand; and two, they act as a check on the power of the state.

“It’s difficult for most people to understand how defence lawyers pump the brakes on overzealous cops, but it’s really the most important thing criminal lawyers do,” he states matter-of-factly.

“Unfortunately, the public and sometimes even the media don’t see the big picture. Instead, it’s ‘fancy lawyer tricks’ or winning on ‘technicalities.’ People just don’t get it – or if they do, they don’t want to acknowledge it because life is easier in absolutes.”

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With seven lawyers practicing exclusively criminal defence, Dunn & Associates is one of the larger boutique criminal defence firms in the city of Calgary, AB.

“We take on all types of cases, from mischief to manslaughter,” Dunn says.

When asked what marks the difference between a successful defence and a criminal conviction Dunn remarks:

"Field vision. More than anything the strongest attribute an advocate can have is to think strategically. You need different approaches for different cases. Sometimes honey, other times vinegar. Lots of lawyers are great in the trenches. People say, 'I want a pit bull.' I say, 'Do you really?' You need a pit bull when you need it, but most times it's not what you need."

## IN THE COMMUNITY

Though his career often subsumes his life, in an effort to give back to the community Dunn has served on a number of boards in the horse and rodeo industries. He was a director of the Alberta Cutting Horse Association (ACHA) and the Canadian Cutting Horse Association (CCHA). He does pro bono legal work and advises the Foothills Cowboy Association (FCA) and Bullriders Canada on various legal issues. In the past, he also assisted in conducting steer riding clinics for indigenous youth with former Canadian Bull Riding Champion Guy Johansen.

In his younger years he rode bulls for a while, mostly in the amateur circuits of the Foothills Cowboy Association (FCA) and Chinook Rodeo Association. Dunn contended in some Canadian Professional Rodeos (CPRA) and in a few Professional Bull Riders (PBR) events south of the border, too.

"I still have the program from the Ponoka Stampede with my name in it – which today, seems to be disingenuous because to be fair, I wouldn't say I rode bulls. Let's just say I got on and then fell off."

After rodeo, Dunn shifted to cutting events.

"My wife cut all through her childhood but quit when she started university, simply because the cost of cutting is prohibitive for a student, especially when you factor in horses and training and shows. When I first met her, she had just finished her reign as Stampede Queen but wasn't cutting anymore. I was just in the twilight of rodeoing," he tells.

Trina slowly sold her husband on the discipline of cutting – the intelligence and athleticism of the horses in the sport being added bonuses. "Eventually I quit riding bulls completely and we started cutting together. We laugh now because we often tell people that the only reason we got married is because I got too old for rodeo and she was too broke to cut."

The Dunns collectively had some success in the cutting arena. Trina in her early years, excelled in the show pen and was a Canadian and

Alberta Senior Youth Champion. Greg has also won Canadian and Alberta titles in the \$30,000

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Non-Pro division. And they both have taken home the reserve champion buckle in the 7 Up class at the Calgary Stampede's Cutting Horse Futurity, in alternative years, on the same horse.

This year the Dunns made the transition from cutting to team cattle penning, simply because they found the sport to be more family-oriented. "We cut for 10 years and it was terrific, but now with two small kids it's tough to go to shows and focus down on your horse – getting it ready and showing is a good hour or two. The kids have pretty much trashed the joint by the time you get

finished. Where in penning, you can hop on your horse and a minute later you're back. Plus, the cost of penning is just more affordable. Multiply that by a family of four and it's a lot more cost-effective." He acknowledges the change has been fun but, "...a big adjustment in so many ways."

As for a chosen mount, he's not sure he can pinpoint one for certain. "I think my favorite horse is a matter of

situational preferences. I have some which are great on the trail, but ride like a shopping cart and others which drive like a Ferrari but blow up over a puddle," he laughs.

"For me picking horses is a bit like practicing law. Just like a defence lawyer might use different strategies for different cases, I pick different horses for different jobs. And just like people think they need that 'pit bull' in the court room, horse people think they need that pretty blue roan, with Hancock bloodlines. Nine times out of 10 they don't need either." 



Though his career is all-consuming, Dunn enjoys taking time away from the city to spend with his horses.