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New Heights for a Tough Cowboy

by JOSH RITTENBERRY



Down a dusty patch of road in southwest Missouri sits Dusty Elkinton, a textbook ag operator and pilot. High flying and adventure-seeking, one thing you'll be certain to learn about Dusty, in a textbook or elsewhere, is that he does very little sitting, unless you find him in the cockpit of an airplane or on the back of a bull.

Raised on the family's cattle ranch, Dusty's formative years were spent immersed in agriculture. He worked his way through high school and college as a farmhand, the business and trade of it virtually imprinted on his DNA. It was while hopping from field to field in his 20s and 30s that Dusty took notice of the bright, shiny birds in the sky treating corn and wheat across the Missouri-Kansas border. As his attention turned back to farm chores, Dusty would often stop for small talk with neighboring farmers who would grumble about the lack of aerial applicators in the region to treat their crops. Slowly, the idea began to form that Dusty could channel his energy to the air and fill a gap in the application market. Soon the power of his adrenaline would take him to new heights.

The beginning of Dusty's Air Service began humbly in the form of a wingless Pawnee in the summer of 2014. Dusty and his buddy Aaron Phillips pulled it home on a trailer from central Kansas. At this point in time, Dusty and Aaron were private pilots, who had chipped in



to buy the Pawnee so they could build time and experience while they worked on their commercial pilot's license. A year later with license in hand, Dusty purchased a 1977 Ag Cat and went straight to work.

"I never had any formal ag training. We just bought the Pawnee and took off in it and figured the rest out on our own," Dusty recalls.

The start of the operation was fairly manageable. Fortunately for Dusty, he had already built solid relationships with the farmers he worked for, so he had a knack for dealing with the business side of the operation.

"All of the farmers were very understanding and knew that I was new and they were still willing to give me a shot."

Most of the challenge came from flying. In an area that was ripe for the picking, there was more than enough work to go around. "Keeping up the pace while working cleanly and safely was hard." But as the first season progressed and eventually came to a close, Dusty was able to find his footing, and so began a bustling business.

In the early days, Dusty chose to stay close to home, never operating long distances.

"I missed out on a lot of work in other areas, but it paid off in the long run because I was able to be available at home. It was those local farmers who helped build the business."

Dusty's Air Service was and remains virtually a solo operation, except for when Dusty's wife and kids pitch in, helping him load chemical or seeds in the airplane. Otherwise, Dusty has done all the flying, billing, and, to this day, he even delivers chemical to the farmers for whom he works.

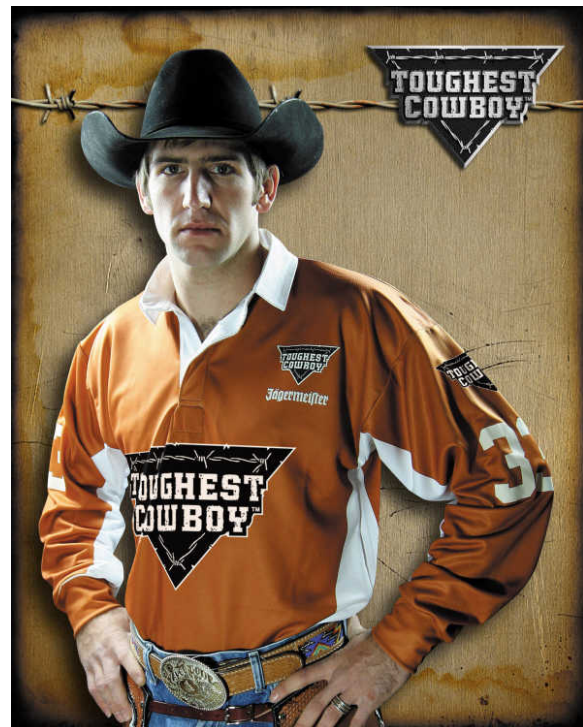
The business has turned out to be so profitable that Dusty was able to trade-in that trusty Ag Cat for an AT402 and now operates an AT502.

"I've had another record year, and I'm really happy with the work that can get done with the AT502."

Something a textbook might not tell you is that before Dusty became a successful operator, he was a local celebrity, taking part in "Toughest Cowboy", a reality TV show competition whereby contestants compete in the three rodeo rough stock events of bareback bronc riding, saddle bronc riding, and bull riding week-by-week until a winner is crowned.

"The competition took place every weekend for nine weeks. I got to see some big cities, and for a couple of days we were the stars of the city."

You don't get chosen for a rodeo competition by sheer happenstance. By the time he made the producer's cut of contestants, Dusty was a pro. He started bull riding as a teen at amateur and local rodeos, then continued to rodeo at Fort Scott Community College, and finally rode



bulls and barebacks at Fort Scott Community College in Fort Scott, Kansas near his current home. In all, he spent 13 years with the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association.

Busy as they are, the Elkinton family also raise cattle and harvest pecans on the family farm. Supporting Dusty while in the air, or checking cattle is his wife of 17 years, Aubrey. Together they share three equally adventurous children. Halley, 16, is a high school tennis champion. Talya, 14, is a volleyball star and trick horse rider. Ryden, 12, competes in the motocross circuit.

With some time to reflect while on the road to take son Ryden to his latest motocross race, Dusty says that none of the fruits of his successes have come easy, "But anything will work if you work hard enough at it."



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N61955**

7300 A/F TT, 770 SFRM, Continental IO520, 285 HP, Audio Panel w/ 3 Light Markers, Garmin 430 WAAS, Garmin 255 Com, Garmin GTX 345 w/ ADSM In and Out, Glide Slope, Stormscope, S-TEC-50 Auto Pilot with Altitude Hold, Rosen Sun Visors, VG Kit, Horton STOL Kit, Float Kit, Cessna Turbo Vents for Cabin Cooling, Backup Altimeter, Backup Artificial Horizon

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**1996 THRUSH S2R-G1
N2237D**

9688.0.0 A/F TT, Hatfield Bottom Load Fuel, A/C, Vortex Generators, New Satlock Bantam, Flow Control, Stainless Steel Spray System, AFS Check Valves, CP Nozzles, Agrinautics Pump, Lane Electric Brake, Aircraft Radios, Fresh Eddie Current, Spar Caps 3220 of 6,200 Hour Life

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90.0 A/F TT, Aerosport IO375 210 HP, PMA-8000B Switching Panel with 4 Place Intercom and Three Light Markers, Garmin SL-40 Com, Garmin 430 GPS, Garmin GTX-330 Transponder, Garmin 496 GPS (Panel Mounted), Digiflight II Autopilot w/ Altitude Hold, PFD/MFD

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**1998 Air Tractor AT-802A
N5094H**

12,152.6 A/F TT, 1230 HP, 2000 SPOH, Reabe Digital Hopper, Quantity & Spray Boom Pressure, E-TEC Inc Fast Start System, Comm Radio, Hemisphere G4 GPS, RT Side Boom Shut Off, Smoker, Hydraulic Gate, Air Conditioner, Wipaire Vortex Generators, Wingman Wing Due at 15,823.2, Gear Due at 12,798.2, Eyebolt Stabilizer Due at 14,798.2, 4479.7 Hobbs

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**1988 AIR TRACTOR AT-301
N69WN**

8,900 A/F TT, 600 HP, 530.0 SPOH, 320 Gallong Hopper, Ag Pilot X GPS, Flow Control, Smoker, Stainless Steel Boom, Air Conditioner, VGs, Lane Electric Brake, Botton Load Fuel, 25-Inch Gate, 2 Each Spreaders

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**1997 Ayres, S2R-G10
N773CC**

6500.0 A/F TT, 400.0 SPOH, Cool Start System, Hatfield Single Point Fueling, ATS-VGs, Ag-Tips-Marburger, Kawak Hydraulic System, Satloc, G4, Load Hawg

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