

Working dogs motivate Winton man to keep doing what he loves

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STEVEN Elliott is a talented craftsman and working dog trainer. He is also confined to a wheelchair.

The Winton man was involved in a rodeo accident in 2003, which turned life as he knew it upside down. But it also led him to find his niche.

When using a welder to adjust the height of his table, as his wheelchair couldn't fit underneath it, he made a cattle brand for his mate's son.

He realised then there might be a demand for his skills.

Fast forward to today and he has sold hand-crafted brands to cattle tycoon and mining giant Gina Rinehart, as well as legendary NRL coach Wayne Bennett.

While making brands, and also whips, pays the bills, training working dogs is his passion.

Recently, one of his dogs was auctioned for \$9000 – a personal record for him.

This week the *Rural Weekly* caught up with Steven to talk about how being in a wheelchair hasn't stopped him from doing what he loves.

On New Year's Eve 2003, Steven Elliott participated in the Black River Rodeo near Townsville.

Little did he know he would spend the next seven months in hospital.

"I was riding a bucking bronc and while I was jumping off my foot got stuck and I dived off, next thing I knew I was on the ground and couldn't feel my legs," he said.

"I dislocated two vertebrae in my neck and damaged my spinal cord.

"It was a big shock, leaving home being able to walk and then coming home seven months later in a wheelchair."

Mr Elliott said he it took him a while to adapt to his new way of life.

"It was pretty scary coming home because at the hospital there were electric doors and nurses to help you make a cuppa but at home there wasn't any of that," he said.

“I couldn’t change the hose so I made a hook out of some wire so I could do that and I had to raise my tables up so I could get the wheelchair to fit under them.

“I just had to take it day by day, one step after another.”

For two years after his accident Mr Elliott spent his time in front of a computer screen.

“I was just on it every day,” he said.

“Then one day it blew up and that was the end of it. I no longer have internet or email and I don’t use any social media at all.”



Steven Elliott makes whips, branding irons and trains border collies despite being in a wheelchair.

For the past six years Mr Elliott has been dedicated to training his working dogs.

He said he has up to 10 dogs, on average, at any time.

“I breed my own border collies and train them but recently people have been sending me pups to train for them,” he said.

“It is hard selling the dogs because you love them so much, but when you start getting too many you have to.”

The training process for the pups starts when they are just five weeks old, learning basic manners such as waiting for their food.

“Training the dogs is like breaking in a horse. As a pup they learn really quick,” Mr Elliott said.

“You have to get a balance of respect and trust. Training them is a lot better and easier when you have that.

“Teaching them to stop is one of the most important things to teach them, then getting them to come and going left and right.”

Mr Elliott said he doesn't prefer one breed over another but he likes the border collies because of their nature.

“You don't want them to be aggressive so having a calm-natured dog is ideal,” he said.

“But I just really look for the working and herding abilities in my dogs.”

Mr Elliott said the working ability in a dog's parents was also something he looked for when breeding them.

“I try and look for a male and female that have the same working ability and herding instinct,” he said.

“If a male has one thing and the female doesn't, it doesn't mean the pup will have it too, so I like to see the mother and father work before breeding.

“In saying that, every pup is different and they can take anywhere between 18 months and two years to train.”

Recently, one of Mr Elliott's dogs sold at the Open Dog Trial and Working Dog Sale during Beef Australia 2018 for \$9000.

“That dog was definitely worth the money,” he said.

“Definitely had the working and herding ability I like to breed in my dogs.

“That's the most I've ever sold a dog for so it felt a bit special.”

The dogs also provide Mr Elliott with a form of therapy to help him deal with his injury.

“The dogs motivate me to get out of bed every morning,” he said.

“Some days you just don’t want to get out and then remember you have to go and let them out and continue on with the day.

“It’s a pretty good feeling when you see the dog work after training them because what you put into them you get out and it’s very rewarding.”



One of Steven Elliott’s dogs in action.
For the past 10 years he’s been making branding irons, and more recently whips.

The branding irons started out when he made one as a gift.

“I started making them while I was welding the legs on my tables to make my wheelchair fit under them,” he said.

“I made one for my friend Kerry’s son and I was asked to make one by someone else and I’ve been doing it ever since. They’re pretty popular.”

Mr Elliott said he started making whips as part of his dog training.

“Some graziers still use whips and sometimes the dogs are scared of them,” he said.

“I got someone to show me how to make one and I use them to get the dogs used to the noise.”

Mr Elliott has made 476 branding irons during the past 10 years and has even made one for NRL coach Wayne Bennett and mining magnate Gina Rinehart.

“A mate of mine knows Wayne Bennett pretty well,” he said.

“He has a hobby farm and needed a brand made. I think I made it pretty much straight away. I’m really proud of what I do and I enjoy doing it. I try to do the neatest job possible.