

# Loren Janes

## Living Life to Its Fullest

Written by Carl Ciarfalo

Photos courtesy of Loren Janes Library

John Ross and I recently had the honor and pleasure of interviewing Loren Janes, one of the true legends of the stunt industry. As we drove out to Placerita Canyon and then continued on several miles more into Angeles National Forest, I found myself thinking, "How do I write this article? What makes someone a legend?"

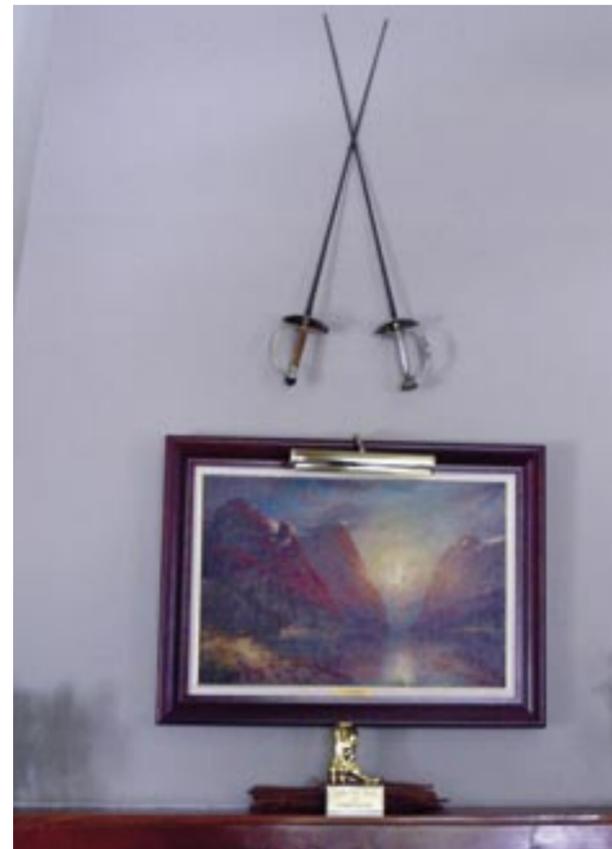
Rounding yet another curve, the road led to rolling tree-lined hills where the air was

filled with the scent of pine. The city was gone, and we were treated to nature at its finest. The farther we traveled into this slice of heaven, the more I felt the strained thoughts of the day slip away. Hiking trails, pine trees, birds, deer, fresh air—*nice*.

Who would choose to live here? I'm thinking it's no ordinary person. Around just a few more curves, there he was. Silver haired, tan, strong, fit, with an American

flag pinned to his shirt. Loren Janes, flanked by his loyal companion, a husky-shepherd mix named Cindy, welcomed us to an afternoon filled not just with reminiscences of stunts and filmmaking, but also with lessons in living life to its fullest.

As we walked up the drive, Loren pointed out his vehicles. His wife's car has a Semper Fi sticker in the window and a personalized license plate reading MEAN PNO. Loren



Swords from the movie *Scaramouche* (1952) mounted above Loren's Golden Boot Award.

was full of pride when he explained that his wife, Jan, is a concert pianist. Then we came to his truck. Loren's license plate reads USA 1789 . . . the year the constitution was signed. Reaching the garage, we saw photos of American eagles and banners honoring the Marines. I was beginning to get a picture of who this man is.

We took a short walk to his guesthouse, where we met Jan, who is as lovely as Loren is handsome. Together they walked us around the room and into the past via walls covered with memorabilia from Loren's fifty years in the industry and Jan's long and celebrated career as a concert pianist. Photos of Doris Day, Steve McQueen, John Wayne and President Reagan (wearing a Stuntmen's Association hat!) were on display, alongside production stills and personal photos of some of the most recognizable faces in our industry.

As we walked out, Loren mentioned that he has three more boxes of "stuff" but nowhere to put it. "Why not in the beautiful main house?" I asked myself. I was about to

find out. Stepping through the arched front door we entered a warm and tastefully decorated home brimming with plaques, commendations and awards Loren has so rightfully earned throughout the years. On the mantle rests the Golden Boot Award, a prestigious award presented by the Motion Picture & Television Fund Foundation to honor the achievements of cowboy heroes and heroines, as well as those behind the scenes, who made significant contributions in film and television Westerns. As a member of this illustrious club, Loren joins such honorees as John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, John Ford, Yakima Canutt, Buddy Van Horn and Terry Leonard.

Displayed on a nearby wall is Loren's Silver Spur Award, an honor bestowed upon

those men and women whose achievements have blazed new trails in the Western film, television and music industries. Deserving actors, actresses, directors and stunt professionals alike have been recipients of this distinguished award. As a recipient, Loren stands along with the likes of legendary actors Burt Reynolds, James Garner and Jack Palance, and stuntmen Richard Farnsworth, Roydon Clark and Erik Cord.

Another wall features a plaque awarded to Loren from the World Acrobatic Society, inducting him into their Hall of Fame as a legend. He keeps company there with Doug Coleman, Dar Robinson, Leigh Hennessey and our own John Ross.

The next honor is from the Western Hall of Fame for Loren's contributions to the genre of the American Western. Take a look at the Westerns on his IMDb listing, and then be sure to see those classic films—no wires, no CGI, just unforgettable, hard-nosed action designed and performed by extremely talented stunt professionals.

In the center of the room is a baby grand piano Jan uses for work and entertaining. It's also the spot where Loren laid out a couple of volumes of his ongoing history of the industry. In those pages, his work is archived: 50 years of film and television history, over 500 films and more than 2,000 television shows, all just waiting to be opened and explored as if it were a newly discovered pyramid.

John and I could only stare at the treasures in front of us. Loren was very matter of factly saying things like: "Here's a picture from *Spartacus*, where I doubled Kirk Douglas. Here I'm doubling his son, Michael, on *The Streets of San Francisco*. Here I am with (the



Loren poses for *Inside Stunts* in his Angeles National Forest office.



Twenty-three-foot broadjump on *The F.B.I.* television series (1965-1974).



Doubling Steve McQueen on *The Hunter* (1980).



great) Jock Mahoney. Here's one with Steve McQueen from *The Sand Pebbles*. This is me with Candice Bergen—I dated her. Here's one of the Duke. I did fourteen pictures with him." It was a virtual "Who's Who" of Hollywood's hey-day. These and several more volumes feature personal photos and letters of praise and gratitude from actors, directors, producers and stuntpeople we've all heard of and wished we could have worked with. John and I were overwhelmed. This man worked with Gable, Cooper and Heston back when they were all busy creating themselves, their craft and transforming Hollywoodland into the Hollywood we know today.

As Loren took us around the room, pointing out his various awards and accomplishments, he wasn't boasting. Rather, he was speaking in the way the Professor would explain radio waves to the Skipper and Gilligan. These were simply the facts of his career. He spoke with steady confidence, knowing that this is what comes with dedication and hard work. It was

almost as if he had had a life vision since he was a child. And you know what? He did.

When he was a kid, Loren found a collection of Tarzan books and read them cover-to-cover. This, he says, was the start of his wanting to be an adventurer. Then, at the ripe old age of eleven, Loren made his first hike on the John Muir Trail. He did it three more times before he turned eighteen. Just so you know, we're not talking about puffing up Fryman Canyon here. This is a 222-mile trail through the Sierra Mountains that seldom dips below 8,000 feet and crosses six passes in excess of 11,000 feet. Each time, Loren did it alone, carrying a knife, wearing a loincloth and living off the land. Who says reading the classics doesn't influence young minds? Can you imagine the Janes household of the early 1940s in the sleepy California foothills? "G'morning, son. Got your knife? All right then, have a nice walk. See you in a week or so."

That was just the beginning for this amazing natural athlete. Loren later qualified for not one, but two Olympic teams in the

pentathlon, becoming the first non-military athlete to do so. That makes five events in which he is an expert: shooting, fencing, swimming, riding and running. He also studied to be an opera singer (tenor), served as a second-generation Marine (his father was killed at the battle of Guadalcanal in WWII), squeezed in graduating from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and went on to teach high school calculus . . . all before he got into the movie business.

Loren's start as a stuntman came while he was still teaching. A student's father was a producer and was looking for three guys who could and *would* dive from an eighty-foot cliff on Catalina Island for a film. Loren got an introduction and took the job, as did two other young men. All three made the dive, but Loren ended up saving the two other "stuntmen" because they had both hit the water flat and were knocked unconscious.

Loren's good looks and talent didn't go unnoticed. He was soon cast as a lead actor in an episode of *The Cisco Kid*, a hugely popular episodic program of the time. Not

surprisingly, Loren did a great job with his thirty-six pages of dialogue, and was quickly noticed by the suits from Warner Bros. Loren, young, handsome and fresh into the business, was invited to meet them in their office on the lot.

He tells us there were three "studio guys" in the room. One of them told him that he had done such a wonderful job acting in *The Cisco Kid* that they had decided to make him a star.

Loren said to them, "What do you mean, you're gonna make me a star?"

"You just leave that to us," he was told.

"And, there's nothing else?" Loren asked.

"Well, there are a couple of little things. You can join the Communist front or you can give twenty-five percent of your salary from now on to the Communist Party, but no one will ever know it."

"Are you serious?" Janes asked.

"Yeah," said the suited man sitting on the corner of the desk. "What's your answer?"

His answer? Loren caught the guy with a straight right that sent him back over the

table. Clearly these guys had no idea who they were messing with: a second-generation Marine, a two-time Olympian and someone who could sing the Star Spangled Banner better than anyone else on the lot.

After a long period of being banned from the studio (go figure), Loren finally found himself once again working at Warner Bros. Walking on the lot with a friend one day, he asked, "Hey, who's that guy over there?"

"Oh, that's Jack L. Warner," his friend told him.

"That's the guy I knocked over the table!"

From there, Loren went on to build a legendary career in the film industry. He shared his action reel with us, and it's nothing short of spectacular. The reel opens with him doing a fire burn from the Nicolas Cage movie *Wild at Heart*. It was a minute and ten seconds worth of full body burn during which he needed to ignite the whole apartment he was in, from the couch, to the curtains, to the table and finally the

chair. This was almost twenty years ago! He didn't want to fall on an air bottle during the stunt, so he got his air by running a breather tube under his driving suit.

Next on the reel is thirty seconds of the flight of a soaring eagle and then the title—American Eagle Films Productions—appears. I think if Loren had lived during another time in history we would have read about him hanging out with Thomas J., Ben F. and the boys in Philly signing documents, or perhaps wearing a coonskin cap with Danny at a fort in south Texas. In grade school we might have been learning about the Lewis, Clark and Janes Trail, and we'd probably be seeing his face on today's currency.

Loren is clearly a very special person and a talented stuntman. When is the last time that

you knew of a stuntman doubling for the same actor for twenty-eight years? Steve McQueen, no low-budget movie star, called on Loren throughout his career, and Loren never disappointed him or production. Take a look at the movie *The Hunter*. Janes, as McQueen, hangs off of a ladder swung out at a 90-degree angle from the top of an "L" train traveling at 55 mph in Chicago—free handed, and they shot for three days. No harness, no clips, no CGI. What he brought to everything he did was strength, determination and talent.

Some of the folklore surrounding Loren's career is based on the famous photo of him flying off the top of a moving train and into a sixteen-foot cactus in *How the West Was Won*. Loren set up and prepped this wonderfully calculated and performed gag himself. He dug down and cut the roots of the cactus tree, burned off the thorns and then worked out the timing of leaving a moving train in time to smack face-first into the cactus and roll down the embankment of desert sand



A highfall from *The Other Side of the Mountain* (1975).

and rock. As usual, it went off perfectly, and it received a standing ovation from the audience at its premier in France.

Why was Loren in such demand? For one thing, he moved effortlessly. His physicality, unlimited talent and professionalism made him the perfect choice to stunt for such stars as Steve McQueen, Kirk Douglas, Paul Newman, Chuck Connors and even Debbie Reynolds. He was also a perfect fit for the glut of television Westerns of the 1950s and 60s. With his mastery of horsemanship, shooting and archery he was able to play both cowboys and Indians with ease—a valuable commodity in those days.

As a highly sought-after stuntman, Loren was privy to the inner workings of the industry, so in 1961, he heeded a suggestion from Mickey Rooney and set out to create an organization of qualified stuntpeople. He realized that they could become a strong force for producers to deal with as well as a nucleus from which professional stuntpeople could be hired. Loren, partnered with Dick Geary and along with a select group of



Loren enjoys the music played by his wife, concert pianist Jan Sanborn.

stunt professionals, created the Stuntmen's Association of Motion Pictures, the first stunt organization of its kind. By doing so, they changed the face, the politics and the future of stunts and action in the industry. To this day, we all benefit from their commitment to professional excellence and integrity.

A consummate pro in everything he does, Loren is a man to be studied and learned from. He doesn't spin his stories or add an extra foot or ten when talking about his high falls. When he speaks of knowing famous celebrities, it's because they're his

friends, not because it's cool for us to know.

When asked who he thought were some of the best stuntmen of his day, Loren didn't hesitate, rattling off the names of Ronnie Rondell, Mickey Gilbert, Freddy Waugh and Royden Clark without a second thought. (Jeez, what a gang of talent!)

Today, Loren may be retired from stunts, but not from life. He keeps a rigorous schedule of workouts and still jumps on the trampoline at Bob Yerkes' as he helps train those who are lucky and smart enough to listen. He swims, hikes, runs, practices archery and

## popular opinion

Ronnie Rondell, or Big Ronnie, is one of the best talents and most loved gentlemen to have ever come along in our industry. So, I gave him a call and asked him what his thoughts were on Loren. There was no hesitation in his answer either: "Loren was extremely talented. He had tremendous body control, unreal coordination and ability. A great horse backer and the sweetest man you've ever met. Great sense of humor! In those days we had to be all around."

I then turned my attention to Fred Waugh. Freddy's physicality and stunt sense comes from years as a circus performer before becoming one of the industry's top

stuntmen and action directors. I posed the same query to him, and Freddy said, "I like Loren a lot. He's a great acrobatic talent, good in the air, and a really good horseman. He probably was the best all-around stuntman of his time."

High praise from just two of several incredibly talented peers. The respect and camaraderie these gentlemen have for each other is tremendous. I'm guessing it's because they were some of the first to perfect the way today's gags are performed and that took working closely together day after day. It was a much different time. Remember, there were only a handful of stunt people then, compared to the hundreds we have in our business today.

could most likely still out-stunt most of the industry if he wanted to.

Loren also still spends part of his time teaching. He lectures to grade schools, high schools, colleges and private firms about movies and filmmaking. He cuts into his discussions behind-the-scenes and rehearsal footage that he shot on the set of half-a-dozen movies (yes, he had the presence of mind to shoot film back then) and explains how a production goes from rehearsal to finished product.

There's so much to learn here. One lesson in particular is evident: Have foresight and determination, believe in yourself and put your thoughts into action. It's obvious that Loren's been practicing this philosophy his entire life.

Before we left for the day, Loren asked Jan to play for us on the baby grand. We were treated to a wonderful original composition she had written. It was a take on a Christmas song that filled the room with good feelings and a true appreciation for Jan's extraordinary talent. Throughout the tune, there was Loren, a calm smile on his face, mesmerized by her beauty and her art. It was apparent that greatness recognizes greatness.

Explorer. Marine. Olympian. Teacher. Stuntman. Stunt Coordinator. Husband. Father. Innovator. Leader. Speaker. American. Legend. This circles me back to my original question: What makes someone a legend? The most concise answer I've found is inscribed on Loren's Golden Boot Award: "This true American art form has left its imprint on the world, and like the cowboy, it is unique, powerful and timeless."

Loren Janes, unique, powerful and timeless, has left his imprint on our world, and we in the stunt and film industry, along with all the students and fans he has touched along the way, are all better off for it. 



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