

Colorado's Rodeo Roots

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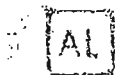
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B.A. Colorado State University, 2002

A Thesis Submitted to the
University of Colorado at Denver

In partial fulfillment
Of requirements for the degree of
Masters of History

2004




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ABSTRACT

This paper details the history of Colorado's rodeo from its beginnings at Deer Trail where one of the first rodeos with prizes was held through to the modern era. Many of the major rodeos that have been held throughout the state receive some attention. The influence of the Western film industry in Colorado is also discussed. From there the business aspects of rodeo are explored. Rodeo began as a profession than developed into a sport that generates million of dollars each year, through prize money, sponsorships, not to mention the stock contractors who make sure that there are animals to ride need to get paid. Than there are the rodeos that are held just for the real working ranch cowboys who still make their living herding cattle.

Rodeo does not exist in a vacuum and this paper than goes into the transmission of culture from one generation to the next. Rodeo is about families and there are many different programs that allow for the development of young cowboys, beginning with the Little Britches Rodeo and ending with College rodeo teams that provide scholarships to their athletes and their animals. Also mentions is the fact that rodeo is not just a sport for white men. Women, blacks, Hispanics, and others have all contributed to the development of rodeo throughout history

and their roles are not ignored. Finally the modern day cowboys and his challenges are explored. Problems that face cowboys in the twenty first century range from a high injury rate, issues with health care, to conflicts with animal rights groups, but despite this rodeo is still going strong and is in fact gaining spectators through cable television coverage allowing for rodeo to be discovered by city folk who have forgotten their agricultural roots.

This abstract accurately represents the contents of this candidate's thesis. I recommend its publication.

Signed 

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Introduction

Rodeo is an American Institution. It is the only sport that has developed in the United States from a way of life and a way of making a living. Rodeo culture and the cowboy are seen as defining aspects of this country. Americans are described throughout the world as cowboys. When the Olympics are held, Americans walk in with a cowboy hat. This is seen as a symbol of our country. The cowboy's were one of the groups that went west into the open spaces past the Mississippi. They fought for the land, they fought through the elements, the lack of water, and they came out triumphant. While the cowboys were not the only group to be found in the West, they are the group that is most closely identified with the region. The people of the United States claimed a wilderness and tamed it, we as a people followed the dream of Manifest Destiny. We spread from the original thirteen colonies to fill the entire continent. It is this frontier spirit that makes us who we are as Americans. In fact, one could argue that the closing of the frontier with the 1890 census was a highly traumatic event for our country that sent us searching for new frontiers. After all, frontiers are how we define ourselves. President Kennedy in the 1960s looked to the stars. In the Twenty-first century we must look to our Western past.

The rodeo that is in existence today consists of eight events that evolved from the skills needed to work with cattle on the range. These events are saddle bronc riding, bareback riding, steer roping, team roping, tie down roping, steer wrestling, barrel racing for the ladies, and the most popular, bull riding. Contestants that compete in these events are scored in different ways to determine the winner who will take home the day money, and to pick the champion of the entire rodeo in every event. Day money is the money that is given to the best cowboy in an event for the day. The champion is the cowboy with the highest score or best time for the entire rodeo. The money is important for cowboys because professional cowboys earn points for every dollar they earn at a sanctioned rodeo. The more money they make, the higher their ranking.

As for the scoring, for timed events, the winner is judged based upon their time. For example, the fastest barrel racer is the winner. The timed events are the Roping events and the steer wrestling. These are timed through the use of gates. When the contestants break through the gate their time begins. It is ended when the judge holds up the flag saying that they have completed their task. The rough stock events-saddle bronc riding, bareback riding, and bull riding, are judged on skill. The best riders with the most points who stay on their animal for the full time will win. These men are judged by their fellow cowboys, who award points based on style. If the cowboy draws an animal that does not buck well, he is given the option to draw a new animal to try again. This can be a risk for a cowboy, and

usually he will weigh his options and standings before going ahead with his second chance.

Most of these events require the cowboys to draw for an animal of some sort. The rough stock riders draw for the animal they will be riding. The timed events, except for barrel racing, draw for the animal they will be tying down or wrestling to the ground. This has allowed for the development of the stock contracting industry where animals are specifically bred to make the lives of the cowboys more difficult. In fact, a few former cowboys have retired and gone on to lucrative careers as breeders. One of the best examples of this is occurred in the 1930s when many former cowboys were beginning to branch out into other aspects of rodeo, which made the sport even more exciting. One of those was Leonard Stroud, a famous trick rider and roper, who later became a rodeo promoter.¹ According to the *Kiowa Country Press* of June 2, 1939, Stroud was just as interested in the men as the livestock, and by the '30s, one began to see the cattle gaining importance, from famous bucking horses like Midnight and Five Minutes to Midnight made names for themselves in the press, and among the cowboys who tried to ride them. Stroud and the rodeo committee of Cheyenne Wells for the rodeo celebrating the 50th anniversary of Cheyenne County, they imported a "herd of longhorn steers from old Mexico...for the steer riding and bull dogging event."²

¹ "Rodeos and Big Program Planned for Celebration" *Kiowa County Press*. 2 June 1939.

Today, stock contracting is an important aspect of rodeo, and in the case of certain horses and bulls used in rough stock events, the animals can get more publicity than the riders.

As for the events themselves, what is required of the cowboy differs every time. The skills used in rodeo all come from the old west heritage of both the Hispanics and the Anglos combined with the big cattle drives of the 1800s turned into western films coloring our view of our past and our sense of self as Americans. The roping events involve a contestant, or in the case of team roping, two contestants, to capture an animal, usually a steer or a calf. This would be done on the range to either cull the herd, which is to remove undesirable animals from the herd, or in the case of roping, a calf to be branded to prevent a valuable animal from being claimed by another outfit or by rustlers. Steer wrestling, or bulldogging as it is sometimes called, would have been used on the range for similar reasons, to return an animal to its rightful place.

The rough stock events have evolved for different reasons; however, the ultimate purpose was to aid cowboys in controlling the cattle. Bareback riding and saddle bronc riding were developed because cowboys need a good horse to chase after cattle and to drive them to their ultimate destinations, and good horses were running wild in the American West. The catch was you had to catch one and tame it to the saddle, which was no easy task. Cowboys would try to ride these horses

² "Rodeos and Big Program Planned for Celebration"

both bareback, and with saddles in an attempt to break the horse to the will of humans. Once the horse was broken and trained, the cowboy was set to go. This was the real start of rodeo, as cowboys would try to prove their mettle by riding horses that no one else could. Often wagers would be placed, and cowboys began the sport of rodeo. A sport that evolved from a profession today has become a profession of its own.

Chapter One

Colorado, the Birthplace of Rodeo

Rodeo is the only major sport that developed in the American West, but its roots go much deeper than merely cowboys on the range. Just the word rodeo conjures up images of Spanish Vaqueros riding the range and roping cattle, and when an ornery cowboy named Milt Hinkle decided to set his event apart from all of the other round-ups across the West in the fall of 1913, he went to the Spanish word for round up, which was rodeo.³ The term rodeo continued to gain popularity and eventually stuck.

In Colorado, the birthplace of rodeo, the sport is highly prolific. There are rodeos all over the state, from the Gunnison Cattlemen's Days, to the Routt County Fair, to the Head Lettuce Days in Buena Vista Colorado. County Fairs often have a rodeo attached, or the rodeo can be a stand-alone event. Either way Colorado is home to many rodeos, in the summertime especially, but throughout the year as well. Venues such as the Denver Coliseum, which was built with rodeo in mind, and the Pepsi Center, which can be transformed into a rodeo venue with lots of dirt and sweat on the part of the crew, allow for rodeo to be a year round sport.

³ Rodeo Tally Book of Contestants and Rodeo Records, 1957.

Today, the rodeo still has strong Spanish roots. For example, one of the biggest events at the National Western Stock Show since 1995 has been the Mexican Rodeo Extravaganza which features trick roping and mariachi bands. However the National Western was only a recent nod to the Spanish heritage of Rodeo. In 1976, Pueblo began the first international Charro Competition during the last weekend of August,⁴ although it is no longer held today. Most of the events at this competition were judged on skill, instead of the clock, and almost half of the events were Floreando, or rope art, a marked difference from the Americanized rodeo events such as steer wrestling, where strength is more important than precision. Another major difference is the Charros hold on to the animals in rough stock events with both hands, while in American rodeo, only one hand may be used.

Regardless of the roots of rodeo, the birthplace of the sport of American Rodeo was considered to be Deer Trail, Colorado in 1869. This was an acknowledged fact as early as 1889, when Denver's *Field and Farm Magazine*. It reported "one of the 'classic' chronicles of an inter-camp cowboy competition were the Bronco Busting contests held on July 4th 1869 at Deer Trail Colorado."⁵ A group of cowboys from neighboring ranches gathered to show off their skills and prowess in an event that would win one of the competitors a new suit of

⁴ Kit Flannery, "Charros Head for Pueblo," *Denver Post*, 22 August, 1976

⁵ *Field and Farm* 8 July 1889

clothing.⁶ Contestants from the Hashknife, the Mill Iron, and the Campstool Cattle outfits participated in the bronc riding and calf roping events. In some ways this first rodeo resembled modern rodeos. However important differences existed.

One of the biggest differences was in the bronc riding competition. Here, there was no stopping after a few seconds. Instead contestants were forced to ride their mounts until the horses tired. In the case of the winning bronc buster, that translated into fifteen minutes on Montana Blizzard, a fierce horse that gallantly tried to throw its rider. That rider was no Westerner either; he was an English gentleman by the name of Emilnie Gardenshire. This first rodeo had no chutes, no fences, and no stopwatches. One of the ways in which this rodeo did resemble modern rodeos is in how the mounts were assigned. Each ranch had a few “outlaw” horses. These were the horses that couldn’t be broken, and each of the contestants at this first rodeo drew lots to see who would ride each animal. According to accounts of this event, “saddles were allowed, but stirrups could not be tied under the horse, and the rider could not use spurs.”⁷ So these cowboys saddled their outlaw horses and rode them as long as they could. The winner would receive a suit of clothing.

⁶ Ralph C. Taylor, “Colorful Colorado; Colorado is Rodeo’s Birthplace,” *Pueblo Colorado Star Journal and Sunday Chieftain*, 19 October 1969.

⁷ Ibid.

Today, all that is left of that historic meeting of man and outlaw horse is an annual rodeo and a small marker in Deer Trail that reads, "At first, the rodeo had no chutes or fences or deadlines, just a cowboy and a horse, and the open prairie...through the years the rules have changed, but to this day, rodeo remains a match between willful cowboy and unwilling beast."⁸ Thus rodeo was born. According to Ralph Taylor, a Colorado Journalist of the 1960s, "It was natural for cowboy tournaments to start in Colorado. Calf ropers came from the plains, and the bronc riders generally were from the mountains where wild horses were to be found."⁹

From its slight beginnings, rodeo began to evolve due to the changing force of civilization that was rapidly taking over the West. Fencing of the range begun in 1880s, led farmers and ranchers to settle down. After settling they began to hold fairs to exhibit their wares. Afternoons at these gathering lent themselves to cowboy competitions to show the skills they had picked up on the range.¹⁰ One of the oldest annual rodeos, the Meeker Range Call was established in 1885, and today is still going strong with four days of celebration scheduled around the fourth of July with a rodeo, a reenactment of the Last Ute Indian Uprising, and a 5k run. These contests were still without fences; however, that would change with

⁸ Deer Trail Historic Marker of the First Rodeo

⁹ Taylor.

¹⁰ Ibid.

the Montrose fair of 1887. Here, an incident convinced cowboys and spectators alike that a proper arena was needed to enjoy the contest safely. Accounts of the event recall “the animal made a dash to where the ladies were seated and could not be checked before he struck Mrs. James A Ladd.”¹¹ After this event and others like it, fences and arenas became the order of the day, leaving only the cowboys to risk life and limb in the arena while the spectators watched from a place of safety, for the most part. There are still times when photographers who get too close to the action are trampled by the animals.

Rodeos were becoming major events for both spectators and for participants. One of the earliest rodeos held in Denver was put on by the owner of Commons Park, John Brisben Walker, on what is today the site of Union Station. This rodeo, which ostensibly celebrated the Festival of the Mountains and the Plains, drew a capacity crowd of 8,000 to its events. It also had an elaborate prize list, which corresponded to each event. The Class One Winner who had the best time in catching and saddling a wild bronc walked out with \$50, while the Class Six Winner who picked up twenty potatoes the quickest while going at a lope or

¹¹ Taylor.

faster received a silver inlaid bit donated by a publishing house. The bit was worth \$30.¹²

Denver fancied rodeo, and in 1887, the first regularly scheduled rodeo was to take place in Denver at the Denver Exposition sponsored by local businesses. It was billed as a cowboy tournament, and thirty cowboys registered.¹³ The events included catching, saddling, and riding a wild bronco; roping and hogtying a wild steer; tailing a steer (roping of a wild steer by two men and stretching him out for branding); foot roping of a cattle from bareback; and finally picking up a potato by a rider going faster than a lope.¹⁴ The contestants included many local cowboys. One man, registering as Dull Knife, had the flashiest outfit by far, but failed to place in the money. This proved that substance is a more important requirement than style in rodeo regardless of the time period. This early rodeo caught the attention of the Colorado Humane Society, and the Humane Society immediately began to protest the event on the basis of cruelty towards the animals involved. This was to be the beginning of a long-standing adversarial relationship between rodeo and animal rights groups. The Denver Chamber of Commerce, a major sponsor of the event, responded to the protests by eliminating the tailing event.

¹² Morton L. Margolin "Denver's River Front Rodeo Was Granddaddy of Them All" *Rocky Mountain News* 17 January 1960.

¹³ Margolin.

¹⁴ Ibid.

This did not pacify the Humane Society, but despite the protests, the Denver Exposition showed a profit of \$4,000 in two days.¹⁵

The following year, both the Boulder County Industrial Association and the Colorado State Fair in Pueblo held cowboy races. The one at the State Fair was five miles long with the riders switching mounts every mile which made for an exciting show at the mile markers. The State Fair had always had Wild West Shows ranging from Pawnee to Buffalo Bill. These shows would gradually become cowboy tournaments that would eventually become the rodeo we today. However, this would be a gradual process that would occur throughout the state in fits and starts. By 1890, a tournament of cowboys was planned for the city of Denver at the Broadway Athletic Park. This rodeo would have events ranging from roping and branding to potato racing. This was a highly controversial event, as the mayor of Denver at the time, Wolfe Londoner, threatened to arrest everyone if the event was held. The local Humane Society also protested the event due to the innate cruelty to animals that occurred during events such as branding.¹⁶ The show did go on, and this became the first cowboy contest held under electric lights. After all of the problems with this event, Denver backed away from cowboy

¹⁵ Taylor

¹⁶ Taylor

contests, a tradition that would endure until the National Western Stock Show began its rodeo in 1931.¹⁷

Around the turn of the century, it was often difficult to distinguish between Wild West Shows and what would become known as rodeos. Wild West shows were regular visitors to Colorado at this time. One promoter, Arizona Charlie, made his way from Denver to Pueblo to Leadville in 1895, with the Humane Society dogging his steps throughout and actually stopping the show in Denver.¹⁸ Despite their attempts, the Humane Society could not keep the cowboys down. Thad Sowder was a popular and famous cowboy both in Colorado and in Wyoming. His skills were legendary at the time. He won the Denver Horse Show Association bronc riding contest, and the title in the Denver Festival of Mountain and Plain. In fact this man was so famous that he is the mascot of the University of Wyoming, and the cowboy seen on all Wyoming license plates.¹⁹ He was the quintessential cowboy, who in the end joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show to help bring the American West to the rest of the world.

Another area in which cowboys could demonstrate skill on a horse was beginning to take off in Colorado after the turn of the century. This was the

¹⁷"Denver Greets Early Stock Show Guests" *Denver Post* 19 January 1931

¹⁸ Taylor

¹⁹ Ralph Taylor "Colorful Colorado 1900s Saw Expansion of Rodeos" *Pueblo Star Journal Sunday Chieftain*, 26 October 1969.

western movie business. Colorado was home to two motion picture companies during the silent film era the Selig Polyscope Company, and The Colorado Motion Picture Company, both of which were making films featuring men on horseback. Casting cowboys was an obvious choice. Colorado was an important area for the early film industry, and one of the most famous early westerns was shot here, the *Great Train Robbery*.²⁰ These western films featured daring stunts to thrill the audience and required able-bodied men who could ride a horse and perform these stunts for the camera. Many cowboys got work this way. This was a job that was somewhere between the Wild West Show and the range as the cowboys actors had to ride and rope with apparent ease, allowing them to show the art of the cowboy to a wider audience. Of course, this was before the perfection of stunts in movie making, and many accidents occurred. Horses stomped on actors; actresses fell off of horses while in the process of being rescued and were knocked unconscious.²¹ In other words, these athletes were injured in the same ways as their rodeo counterparts were, but at least their money was guaranteed. For rodeo cowboys in the arena, there are no guarantees.

Meanwhile early rodeo continued to develop and evolve, especially in the small towns and communities throughout Colorado. Contests sprung up in

²⁰ Emirich, David. Hollywood Colorado: The Selig Polyscope Company and the Colorado Motion Picture Company. Post Modern Company: Lakewood, Colorado 1997. p 15

²¹ Emirich. p 39-40

Glenwood Springs, at the Montrose Fair, at the Delta County Fair, the Las Animas County Fair at the State Fair in Pueblo, and as part of Independence Day celebrations statewide in towns such as Telluride. Others such as Gunnison, according to its Website, claim to hold the Colorado's oldest annual rodeo, established in 1900.²² This does not take the rodeo first held in 1885 in Meeker, Colorado into account. While the sport had not yet been christened with the rodeo name, the culture of Colorado was racing to embrace these contests as more and more small towns and communities rushed to add their own contests for the entertainment of all. Rodeo was quickly becoming a major phenomenon in Colorado, and it was gradually evolving into the rodeo we know today.

This evolution would also include the development of rodeo clowns. The first rodeo clowns were usually injured cowboys whose job was to protect the rough stock riders who were in danger from the animals. They have gradually evolved into a specialized profession of their own, complete with schools and training, and they are crucial for keeping the athletes safe once they have been thrown from their animals.²³ They are one of the more important aspects of rodeo, and they are usually overlooked due to their clowning around. That clowning around saves lives and many cowboys who have been thrown from their mounts

²² VisitGunnison.Com
(http://www.visitgunnison.com/navigate.cfm?nav=businesspage.cfm_businessid=368) Accessed 9/15/03

²³ National Western Stock Show Manager 1982-2001 Guy Elliot. Interview by author, 27 August 2003.

can attest to the skills of this group of men who risk their lives by distracting large angry animals away from defenseless thrown riders. The position and prestige of the rodeo clown was not the only thing that was changing. Today, Radical Ryan Rodriquez is a celebrity in his own right who performs during breaks in the action using props such as trampolines and fire works to keep the crowd from getting restless. Rodeo clowns are a combination between a stand up comedian and a bodyguard for the bull riders. They must be out protecting the cowboys because horses in the arena would just become a target for the bulls.

The contests were also changing as rodeo evolved. The standards of the cowboy contest were not well established or standardized at this time, and there was always room for improvement and innovation on the part of anyone. In 1900, that innovation came in the form of a cowboy named Bill Picket at the Arkansas Valley Fair in Rocky Ford, Colorado. Bill Picket was a Black cowboy, the first who would be inducted into the cowboy hall of fame,²⁴ who took a life-threatening event in the ring and turned it into a brand new event. "The Bull tossed Picket overhead, but the cowboy held onto the horns. In effect it was a fall for the bull...he grabbed the animal's horns again and twisted his neck until the big bull was compelled to fall. This brought cheer from the crowd."²⁵ Bulldogging, also

²⁴ "Black Wranglers Parade Through Five Points" *Rocky Mountain News* 9 September 1990

²⁵ Ralph Taylor "Colorful Colorado 1900s Saw Expansion of Rodeos" *Pueblo Star Journal Sunday Chieftain*, 26 October 1969.

known as steer wrestling, was born. This is the event that truly pits man against beast, where man must be strong, fast and fearless. During the 1960s, Denver Bronco football player John Hatley of Uvale, Texas, used to bulldog during the off-season,²⁶ making the size of his fellow players seem not so bad by comparison. When one wrestles a steer weighing upwards of 1500 pounds, a linebacker of 250 pounds becomes a small nuisance comparatively speaking.

As Colorado moved further into the twentieth century, more and more rodeos began to establish themselves. Some of these rodeos would become annual events that would attract competitors from all over the country. In 1937, the first Will Roger's Rodeo was held near Colorado Springs in what was known as Will Roger's Stadium. This arena held 10,000 fans and was located across the street from the famous Broadmoor Hotel. Eventually, both the venue and name of this rodeo would change, but it lives as a successful and popular rodeo that is still with us today. It has become The Pike's Peak Rodeo, and now it is one of the top twenty rodeos sanctioned by the Professional Rodeo Cowboy's Association. This means that the top cowboys from all over the country come to Colorado Springs to compete, earn points, and to increase their standings. This rodeo also featured horse races, including a wild horse race where contestants had to catch a horse with two "Muggers," or partners who helped to control the horse. The riders would then have to halter and saddle the horse. Next they would race the

²⁶ "Football Player Star of National Western," *Greeley Tribune*, 14 January 1961.

beleaguered animal to the far end of the arena and back. Once that was accomplished the horse had to be unsaddled and the saddle carried across the finish line.²⁷

The Pike's Peak Rodeo is not the only big rodeo with deep roots in Colorado. In 1922 an event known only as the Greeley Spud Days got its start. This local celebration featured the Spud Rodeo and Races with the livestock being provided by local farmers, the pies for the pie-eating contest being provided by the local ladies of Greeley, and the entertainment provided by everyone, from the cowboys to the competitors in the Two-Mile Ford Free-for-All. In this event, Ford automobiles would drive four laps on a half-mile track. After the first lap, they would change a tire, after the second, they would change a spark plug, and after the third lap, they would have to add a quart of oil.²⁸ From this first Spud Days, an impressive and important rodeo for the state of Colorado would emerge.

By 1925, the livestock used in the rodeo in Greeley was the same they used at Cheyenne Frontier Days, and eventually the citizens of Greeley were able to witness the antics of horses such as Midnight and Five Minutes to Midnight, two of the most impressive horses the rodeo world has seen to date. Of course, rodeos would first have to survive the threat of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. In 1928, the WTCU almost managed to cancel the rodeo due to the "noise

²⁷ Pike's Peak or Bust Rodeo Program 1955

²⁸ Rita Carey Greeley Independence Stampede Celebrating 25 Years of Tradition 1996

of the happy celebrants.”²⁹ The women did not approve of the cowboy lifestyle and were willing to protest to end the party even if they were unsuccessful. By 1955, the Spud Rodeo had changed its name to Go West Greeley and was holding chariot races and adding barrel races for the women. By 1971, the name was changed again to the Greeley Independence Stampede, which would remain its name until 2004 when the Rocky Mountain Stampede was born. Regardless of its name, this annual Fourth of July rodeo is still a major stop for those looking to compete in the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas.

Sadly, not all rodeos were to be successful during the early twentieth century, and many have come and gone. Some of these rodeos were developed due to the popularity of a neighboring rodeo. The Durango Spanish Trails Fiesta was created in 1919 due to the success of the Ski Hi Stampede, which was founded in Monte Vista that same year. The Spanish Trails Fiesta in Durango, Colorado was originally held annually starting in 1935, and according to publicity for the rodeo it “was to be staged not alone for entertainment value, but to retain for its posterity the colorfulness of the lives and businesses of the pioneers and ranchers of the picturesque San Juan Basin Rodeo Association.”³⁰ During World War Two, many rodeos were put on hold, including the Spanish Trails. This event

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Spanish Trails Fiesta Pamphlet Published by San Juan Basin Rodeo Association 1946.

was reborn as an annual event again in 1946 with the Durango High School Band as its official musical accompaniment.

By 1946, it was a Rodeo Cowboys Association sponsored event, and it was also a great cultural experience for those who attended. Other entertainments at the rodeo included Native American Dances and horse races. The first photographed horserace finishes were at the Fiesta. Those who traveled to Durango could also experience some of the natural wonders from Mesa Verde to Aztec National Park advertised in the official program with the motto "Stay and Play."³¹ Advertising tourist attractions was such a good idea that it was copied by the Pike's Peak or Bust Rodeo in Colorado Springs in 1955, which also had a program full of photos of sites ranging from the Garden of the God's to ironically enough Pike's Peak.³² This rodeo would eventually meet its demise in 1966, as the rodeo was "No longer self supporting,"³³ according to an editorial in the *Durango Herald*. The paper then went on to cite public apathy and the fact that the hotels and shops were no longer interested in the rodeo as more reason why the rodeo should not go on, and thus the Spanish Trails Fiesta ended its run.

³¹ Spanish Trails Fiesta Program Published by San Juan Basin Rodeo Association 1941.

³² Pike's Peak or Bust Rodeo Program 1955

³³ Editorial *The Durango Herald* 14 March 1966

In 1923, the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic men's group, was to hold the United States Championship Rodeo. This event met with much difficulty as the Humane Society opposed the cruelty to animals, while the Ku Klux Klan opposed the Catholics. This was the period in Denver's history when the Klan ran the show, and many prominent citizens, including Major Stapleton, were members of the group. Their opposition insured that the rodeo was a bust and would never be held again. The problems with the Humane Society would be addressed in the 1930s by the Rodeo Cowboys Association. They would draw up a list of rules to protect the animals involved with the sport of rodeo.³⁴ The Pro Rodeo Cowboy's Association currently has sixty rules and regulations in place for the welfare of the animals. A short list includes the following.

- No locked rowels, or rowels that will lock on spurs may be used on bareback horses or saddle broncs. Spurs must be dulled.
- Animals for all events shall be inspected before the draw. No sore, lame, or sick animals, or animals with defective eyesight, shall be permitted in the draw at any time.
- A rodeo committee shall insure that a veterinarian is present for every performance and section of slack.
- If a member abuses an animal by any unnecessary, non-competitive or competitive action, he may be disqualified for the remainder of the rodeo and fined \$250 for the first offense, with that fine progressively doubling with each offense thereafter. Any member guilty of mistreatment of livestock anywhere on the rodeo grounds shall be fined \$250 for the first offense, with that fine progressively doubling with any offense thereafter.

³⁴ Taylor

- No stock shall be confined or transported in vehicles for a period beyond 24 hours without being properly fed, watered and unloaded.³⁵

Despite these rules for the sake of the animals, it would take a few years before successful rodeo would be held in Denver at the National Western Stock Show, and despite these rules the rodeo profession is still given a hard time by animal rights groups today. The Humane Society still protests many rodeos, but the most vocal protesters are an organization known as PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Today PETA is working on its “Buck the Rodeo” campaign claiming on its Website that the sport of rodeo is “an abusive spectacle that has no place in a civilized society.”³⁶ Rodeo has long been at odds with groups like this, and it doesn’t appear that the tensions will ease any time soon.

As for the big city in Colorado, Denver, it remained behind the curve when it came to annual rodeos. With many failed attempts at an annual rodeo, it would take until the 1930s, and a silver anniversary, for the city to actually hold a proper rodeo that would be a success from year to year. The National Western Stock Show that began meeting on an annual basis in 1906 to show and sell animals to other buyers throughout the west decided to add a rodeo to its festivities in celebration of their 25th year in 1931. *The Denver Post* publicized the event by noting, “With the idea of providing something different for the Silver Jubilee

³⁵ “Pro Rodeo Cowboy Association Online”
<http://www.prorodeo.com/Sport/Animals/3.welfareRules.html> accessed February 4, 2003.

³⁶ Buck the Rodeo (<http://www.bucktherodeo.com/>) Accessed 12 February 2004

show the committee has gone to great expense in introducing a rodeo in connection with the horse show.”³⁷ The rodeo would be a success due in part to its biggest star a bucking bronc named Midnight, a champion bucking horse that according to the January 15th edition of the *Post* “has thrown some so hard they could not get up,”³⁸ The stage had been set for what would become a record-breaking year for the Stock Show, and the inaugural year for the “Big indoor rodeo.”³⁹

The Stock Show of 1931 officially opened on January 19th, and the horses and their riders played to a crowd of Shriners and high society, with the first event of the year being the cowboy’s championship bareback riding.⁴⁰ The bareback riding was to be interspersed in with the traditional horse show that had been the standard fare of the Stock Show in the past. The rodeo experiment was a hit from its conception as shown by the article in the January 17th edition of *The Denver Post*.

While it must not be forgotten that the cultured high hatting dress suit horses from steam heated stables are to have their inning all the broadcasting Saturday was about the untamed brutes from the sticks...Lead

³⁷ “Denver Greets Early Stock Show Guests,” *Denver Post*, 15 January 1931.

³⁸ “King of Bucking Horses will be at Stock Show,” *Denver Post*, 9 January 1931.

³⁹ Advertisement, *Omaha Journal*, 7 January 1931.

⁴⁰ Charles E Lounsbury, “East and West Meet Today in Big Horse Show and Rodeo,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 17 January 1931.

by the most unmannered crude loud snorting brute named Midnight, this great gang of horse heathens busted through the gates of the stadium.⁴¹

The rodeo was off to a strong start, and the local newspapers could not gush enough about the wonders of the rodeo. Comments in the press ranged from, "Wild horses and cowboys set Silver Jubilee off with a bang,"⁴² to "If the first day was a success the second was a WOW! 'Let her Buck' and 'Ride 'em Cowboy' were heard above the applauding thousands"⁴³ and finally this high praise from *Denver Post* writer Edith Eudora Kohl saying "If you have seen a thousand rodeos or if you've never seen one, this one will make every drop of red blood run faster."⁴⁴

Cowboys and bucking animals were to replace respectable young women. Well-behaved horses were to be replaced by the meanest, nastiest horses that could be found in the world. No longer would the challenge be to look good on the horse, instead the challenge was to become how long you could stay on the horse. Riding a horse was a life and death struggle. Kohl went on to rhapsodize about the contestants, "Cowboys, these world famous riders and ropers...who

⁴¹Horace V Stewart "Huge Crowd Attends Stock Show Opening," *Denver Post*, 17 January 1931.

⁴² "Rodeo Opens Denver Stock Show," *Denver Post*, 18 January 1931.

⁴³ Horace V Stewart "Thorobreds and Broncs Share Arena," *Denver Post*, 19 January 1931.

⁴⁴ Edith Eudora Kohl "Modern Meets Primitive in Denver's Big Stock Show," *Denver Post*, 19 January 1931.

fearlessly take their lives into their hands every time they step foot in the stirrup of the lawless vicious horses they ride.”⁴⁵

With its spills and thrills, rodeo is an uncertain sport for those who participate, the cowboys are not always victorious; many were rushed to medical facilities for various injuries during the 1931 show. Bob Wright dislocated his hip while attempting to ride a wild Brahma Steer; he was rushed to Denver General Hospital, as was a 21-year-old Francis Brussear.⁴⁶ Owen Crosby, a 22-year-old from Miles City, Montana was gored by a steer and was operated on at St. Luke’s Hospital for his injuries.⁴⁷ Sadly, the most press a losing cowboy could get was if he was seriously injured during the competition. Otherwise, it was the winners and the horses that made headlines at this horse show and rodeo, especially the horse Midnight who had more press than any of the luckless cowboys who were unfortunate enough to draw this impossible-to-ride horse.

The real star of the show was this horse named Midnight. He garnished headlines and photo opportunities that were all but denied to the cowboys who attempted to ride him. During the 1931 rodeo, he was the champ. Of the 19 men who drew his name for the Bronc Riding competition, not a single one of them

⁴⁵ Kohl

⁴⁶ “Two Wild Steer Riders taken to Denver General,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 24 January 1931.

⁴⁷ “Denver Rodeo Rider in Serious Condition,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 25 January 1931.

managed to ride this horse,⁴⁸ an impressive record for an impressive horse. The man that did win the Bronc Riding competition, Pete Knight,⁴⁹ was lucky enough that he never once drew Midnight.

The birth of the National Western Rodeo coincided nicely with the goals of the rodeo cowboys in the 1930s. Rodeo had many starts and fits throughout its history. One of the goals of Rodeo was to gain respect as a sport in the 1930s. In the early days, rodeo was fairly informal with promoters promising prize money without always delivering. Yet cowboys as a group were determined to change the system. Their goals were to keep rodeos fair and impartial, to have competent judges at all competitions, and to have a system to determine the champion cowboys with a points system based on money earned in the rodeo circuit.

This point system is what made the National Western Stock Show Rodeo so popular from its conception in 1931. Not only is it the first big rodeo of the year, following the National Finals Rodeo, but the purse is such that is also worth a cowboy's time to show up and compete. By 1932, the second year of the National Western Stock Show Rodeo, the total prize money was \$50,000.⁵⁰ By 1982, 50 years later, the prize money was up to \$300,000.⁵¹ The National Western Stock

⁴⁸ "Midnight a Grand Champion," *Denver Post*, 24 January 1931.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ L. A. Chapin, "Stock Show Rodeo Will Open Saturday," *Denver Post*, 10 January 1932.

⁵¹ "Denver Rodeo Upgraded" *Grand Junction Sentinel*, November 27 1981.

Show Rodeo gives cowboys an opportunity to start the year with a bang and big bucks. However ten years after the first rodeo was held it would be overshadowed by a much larger conflict, the Second World War. Rodeo experienced many challenges during this period, the first being gas rationing and its effects on travel. The government was allowing sporting events to take place during the war, but getting from point to point was causing problems.⁵² This forced cowboys to save gas coupons and carpool to make it to events scattered throughout the county. Another problem facing the cowboys who stayed home was the perception that they were able-bodied men who should have been fighting for their country. In reality, many cowboys did go to war. In fact, Fritz Truan, the World Champion saddle bronc rider of 1939, died in service to his country at Iwo Jima.

Yet Uncle Sam was reluctant to take all comers. Many of the cowboys who remained at home were disabled in ways that prevented them from serving their country in an obvious fashion, and the government didn't want to gamble with old rodeo injuries flaring up while they were on duty.⁵³ Instead, they stayed on the home front and kept the spirits of American up during the war. They simply did what they did best, rodeo, while their organizations were busy pushing the sale

⁵² Dave Stout, "History of the U.S. Rodeo" Archives of Pro Rodeo Museum and Hall of Fame. 1978 Colorado Springs, CO. p. 13.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 14

of war bonds to show the patriotism of rodeo cowboys. Cowboys were also looking at changes in the sport. The 1940s would see the end of two hands being used in rough stock events. For bareback riding, a suitcase rigging would be developed so that cowboys could hang on a bit better than clutching the horse's mane.

In the era following World War II, rodeos in Colorado began to boom. College and high schools began to form teams, and many counties and towns throughout the state start their own rodeos and horse shows. One example of this is the Arapaho County Fair, which was first held in 1947.⁵⁴ This event featured typical rodeo events such as bronc riding and steer wrestling. It also featured a series of free-for-all races with a chariot race. Today, the Arapaho County Fair is an annual event held in Deer Trail, Colorado, the site of the first rodeo in the world. Rodeo has come full circle, and today it is a link to a past that is quickly disappearing in the modern world.

⁵⁴ Arapaho County Fair Souvenir Program 1947

Chapter Two

The Business of Rodeo

During the nineteenth century, as American expanded its boundaries and its people further and further west, they brought with them many different types of livestock. Oxen, horses, mules, and cows were driven into the prairies of modern day Kansas and Colorado. This pushed the native tribes and the buffaloes out as the cow gained a foothold in an environment that was almost ideally suited to its well-being. Soon, the cattle industry was born. As any successful cattleman knows, with cattle comes responsibility. Someone must keep a lookout over the valuable product and insure its safety. Thus, the cowboy was born. A typical day on the range had cowboys roping cattle, branding cattle, and herding cattle. Today, we as Americans have moved further and further from our agricultural roots and cowboys have redirected their energies from the range to the modern rodeo. Rodeo is also a big business that has gone through many fits and starts as it worked its way from small time wagers to a multi-million dollar industry.

After the Civil War, the American West was bursting with cattle. Entrepreneurs began to herd the cattle and drive them to markets where they would be well compensated. However, manpower was needed to get the cattle from the range to the railroads, and many entrepreneurs took a leaf from the book of our neighbors to the south. From the Vaqueros, the ideas and practices of the cowboys

were developed and perfected. These men lived on the range tending to their herds. They often found themselves with time on their hands. These bored cowboys began to make friendly wagers on their skills against their colleagues on the range. Who could rope a cow the fastest; who could ride an un-ride able horse the longest? Eventually these contests became a spectator sport for those of the West, and by the late 1890s, many towns were holding cowboys contests in an attempt to outdo one another.⁵⁵

One of the best examples of this would be the rivalry that sprung up between Denver and Cheyenne over who should be the real host of the famous Frontier Days, which was first held in 1897 in Wyoming. This rivalry was mentioned in the August 20, 1912 Wyoming Tribune noting that “Now comes the annual suggestion from residents of the larger city that, inasmuch as Frontier days is so successful, the celebration should be appropriated by Cheyenne’s big neighbor, Denver, and their made a fete of greater magnitude.”⁵⁶ Denver had made a few unsuccessful attempts to steal the show, but it had failed. Instead, it would have to console itself with a few sporadic rodeos and Wild West Shows to drive its local economy, and to help the city to remember its rural heritage, which was quickly fading into the not so distant past.

⁵⁵ Clifford P. Westermeier *Man Beast and Dust; the Story of Rodeo* p 36

⁵⁶ Westermeier p 37

By the 1910s, rodeo had established itself as an important part of the culture of the West, but it had many starts and fits throughout its history. One of the first goals of rodeo was to gain respect as a sport outside the traditional rodeo community. In the early days, rodeo was fairly informal with promoters promising prize money without always delivering. This was a problem for the cowboys who would have to pay their way to any contest plus entry fees; if the prize money was not delivered, they were often stuck with no reward to show for their travel, time, and skill, plus they would have to pay their way home. Quite often, public sympathy was not with the cowboys, who had earned quite the reputation. Cowboys were notorious for not showing up for events, and for getting drunk and causing trouble in the various towns hosting rodeos, which did not endear themselves to the locals.⁵⁷

In the 1920s, cowboys were competing just as hard as they had around the turn of the century; yet, they were not the most organized group.⁵⁸ As the end of the Roaring Twenties neared, many cowboys throughout the country began to push for the formation of a cohesive group, this was a slow and arduous task. One of the first groups to form was the Rodeo Association of American (RAA), founded in 1929, which was working to standardize rules and the procedure of choosing a

⁵⁷Westermeier. p. 99

⁵⁸ Stout. p. 3

champion. The RAA was met with lots of resistance by those they were attempting to help, the cowboys.⁵⁹ They did achieve some of their goals, such as standardizing a point system to determine rank based on one and a half point for every dollar earned for riding events, while timed events only earned one point per dollar. The RAA found it difficult to keep track of the money earned by cowboys throughout the country, and in 1934, it is believed that the all around champion never once left California to compete in a rodeo.⁶⁰ Making it a stretch to call him a World Champion.

Problems still persisted for the working cowboy, especially when it came to money, but it was the money that was to be the key in the development of the profession of rodeo. In some cases, the purse would be smaller than the total of the entry fees of the contestants, which was a definite sore point for the riders who felt that the entry fees should be added to the purse as a matter of principle.⁶¹ Cowboys were also angry at the system used to judge an event. Often times the judges showed a tendency to give their good acquaintances a better score than the unknown cowboys who were also competing in the same events. Many complaints were heard from cowboys throughout the country over this issue.⁶² Another

⁵⁹ Stout p. 3

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 3

⁶¹ Westermeier p 98

⁶² Westermeier p. 98

criticism directed at the judges was their ignorance of the events they were judging. They may have been impartial, but they did not understand the subtleties of the sport, which made it difficult for them to give an accurate score. Changes were desperately needed if rodeo was going to become a respectable sport.

By 1936, the cowboys who were being taken advantage of had hit their limits. They demanded that the purses be doubled at the Boston Rodeo in Massachusetts by adding in the entry fees paid by every contestant into the original purse prize. As the purse stood, not even the overall winners would have made traveling expenses at this rodeo. The cowboys threatened a strike and had even procured their tickets home ahead of time to prove that they were serious in their demands. If they did not get what they wanted they would simply leave town. When the show opened, the cowboys refused to ride⁶³ despite the threats of the promoter to throw their horses in the river. The cowboys responded to these threats by moving their animals to another stable.⁶⁴ These events lead rodeo cowboys everywhere to stop working and in a show of solidarity the cowboys refused as a group to fill in as scabs. The audience at Madison Square Gardens was treated to a display of mediocrity. This was unacceptable to the spectators. The promoters

⁶³ Kristine Fredrickson, *American Rodeo From Buffalo Bill to Big Business*. Texas A&M University Press College Station 1983 p 39.

⁶⁴ Stout p. 6

were then forced to raise the purses to a reasonable level and the real cowboys agreed to compete.

The rodeo riders learned from this experience; they learned that if they stuck together, they could accomplish things instead of remaining at the mercy of the rodeo promoters. This was quite a shift from the solitary loner on the range who is self-sufficient and dependent upon no one, or as one anthropologist Elizabeth Atwood put it, "The archetypal Lone Cowboy."⁶⁵ The idea of the cowboy union was beginning to be accepted by the cowboys in an era when unionization was popular-the Great Depression. This group was known as the Cowboys Turtle Association, or the Turtles for short. The reason behind this odd name has a couple of different explanations. One version states that the turtleneck sweaters worn by the group was the reason behind the clever moniker. Others claim that the name reflected the slow movement of the group, especially at the beginning of the process, which was similar to the slow movement of turtles. In the end, they finally stuck their necks out to accomplish something together. Despite the confusion over the name, the goals of this group were very simple: to keep Rodeos fair and impartial and to have competent judges at all competitions. Thankfully, the scoring system for rodeo developed by the RAA was already in place. This would be one less thing for the Turtles to worry about.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, *Rodeo An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame*. University of Chicago Press Chicago 1982 p 95.

Membership into the Turtles was fairly straightforward; all it took was a \$5 fee and you were a member. The group's rules were published in the December 1936 edition of *Hoofs and Horns Magazine*. It required that any cowboy or cowgirl caught competing in a rodeo in which a strike had been called would have to pay \$500; otherwise, they would be blacklisted and prevented from participating in CTA sanctioned rodeos. That money would then be placed in a trust where it would be used by the Turtles for further strike efforts as needed. Strikes had to be called by all members of the Association. Fine money could also be collected for disgraceful conduct. The Turtles also refused to mediate conflicts that occurred between cowboys, but the groups did reserve the right to call for new judges during a competition as needed.⁶⁶

By 1937 new concerns had arisen. This was reflected in the rules that were passed by the CTA in their second year. The new rules stated that all entry fees had to be added to the purse of a rodeo, and that a prize list must be circulated 30 days before the event began. Rodeo judging panels must have two acting cowboy contestants, and cowboys who made four rodeos in a year were no longer considered amateurs and must register with the CTA. The designation of amateur versus professional also raged throughout the rodeo world in the 1940s with many disagreements over the status of cowboys as professionals. The issue was

⁶⁶ Westermeier. P. 101

eventually solved in 1957 with the invention of the permit system.⁶⁷ This allowed non-members to compete in sanctioned rodeos, and has become an important tool in developing the young cowboys of today into the world champions of tomorrow.

Lastly added to the new rules the CTA would pay any bill left by a member; however, that member would become blacklisted if he failed to pay them back.⁶⁸ This last rule was passed to try to change the reckless image of the rodeo cowboy into something respectable. This would be a slow process hindered by the CTA themselves. The July 9, 1939 *Saturday Evening Post* published “No Turtles Need Apply,” which detailed the struggles of the Turtles to achieve their goals with rodeo promoters at the Pendleton Roundup, which feed into the public’s stereotypes of the reckless cowboy.⁶⁹

In 1945, the Cowboy’s Turtle Association would become the Rodeo Cowboys Association (RCA). Rodeo groups were becoming more organized and cohesive. The biggest challenge facing this group in the first years of its existence would be the question of how to determine the world champions of each event and the best cowboy overall. At first this was determined by their points as calculated by a system developed by the RAA. This was problematic as many rodeos did not report money earned to the Association. Also, cowboys could make up large

⁶⁷ Stout p. 19

⁶⁸ Westermeier. p. 115

⁶⁹ Ibid p. 119

amounts of points in the larger rodeos, which gave them an unfair advantage over cowboys who only competed in the smaller rodeos.⁷⁰ What was needed was a true world championship rodeo, and the process of planning and setting up such an event began in 1958 at the annual RCA meeting in Denver under the direction of Lex Connolly who was the only full time member of the RCA Board, and during his tenure he would be responsible for providing insurance for cowboys, promoting national television coverage, and most importantly developing the World Champion Rodeo. This was a task that involved cowboys, promoters, sponsors, and stock contractors.⁷¹ The first National Finals Rodeo would premier in 1959 in Dallas, Texas. It was later moved to Los Angeles in 1962, to Oklahoma City by 1965, and today is the culminating event in the rodeo season held annually in Las Vegas since 1985.

As the sport of rodeo moved into the second half of the twentieth century, it had become a much more organized group. It had made its headquarters in Denver, Colorado in offices located near 17th Street and Champa.⁷² Along with this move into stability came an insurance policy for rodeo cowboys who were injured during the course of competition. The RCA managed to find an insurance company that was willing to cover its cowboys-The Republic National Insurance

⁷¹ Stout p. 20

⁷² Stout p. 18

Company of Dallas Texas.⁷³ This company agreed to do this in exchange for either a portion of the membership dues or the money paid for claims depending upon which amount was larger. Today, cowboys on the Professional Bull Riding Circuit (PBR), a group that is separate from the PRCA, are insured by Health South, a group that donates its health services to injured cowboys. While Justin Medicineo looks after the cowboys of the rival PRCA.⁷⁴ After all, if any group needs health insurance, it would have to be those who compete against animals weighing 10 times what they do.

The rates of injury are not helped by the fact that the animals used in rodeo are being bred bigger and stronger. Stock contractors have been trying to create the ultimate in bucking stock for as long as it has been profitable. With today's advances in DNA technology, breeders are able to isolate the traits they want to increase in animals that are becoming more and more difficult to ride, or as the cowboys put it "rank." One of the biggest and most famous of the stock contractors is a man named Mike Cervi. Cervi began his career as a rodeo clown, and today he owns two of the largest stock contracting companies in the world: The Beutler Bros. and Cervi Rodeo Company and Cervi Championship Rodeo Co.

⁷³ Stout p. 18

⁷⁴ Kevin Simpson "A World of Hurt" *Denver Post* 12/7/2003

Two brothers named Jake and Lynn Beutler originally ran the Beutler Bros. Company out of Elk City Oklahoma, and Cervi purchased it in 1967. Cervi then went on in 1975 to buy the Billy Minick Rodeo Co., which was once owned by Gene Autry, renaming both companies after himself.⁷⁵ Today, the Circle I brand is one of the most prestigious in rodeo. It is also the second oldest brand in the state, with the motto, "Do or Die for the Circle I."⁷⁶ Cervi has a simple goal for his businesses, "to produce a fast and exciting rodeo with the best bucking stock available."⁷⁷ Cervi has met this goal on numerous occasions. In 1983 and 2001, Cervi was awarded stock contractor of the year by the Pro Rodeo Cowboy Association. He was also inducted into the Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame as a stock contractor in 2003.

Today's best cowboys can earn millions of dollars, competing against livestock that continues to improve. While competing in the arena is the traditional way that cowboy earn their money, the successful modern cowboys also has a few endorsements up his sleeve (and on his sleeve). The same could be said about the traditional rodeo, where advertising and sponsorships are as important as the rodeo action. Half a century ago, the Rodeo Cowboys Association was trying to ban

⁷⁵ Cervi Championship Rodeo Company (<http://cervirodeo.com/Founder.html>) Accessed 1 March 2004

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Cervi Championship Rodeo Company (<http://cervirodeo.com/Founder.html>) Accessed 1 March 2004

product placements by both rodeos and cowboys. They felt that it was too much.⁷⁸

Today, ads dominate arenas, and cowboys have their names on everything from beer to colognes. Charmayne James, a World Champion Barrel Rider, has her own brand of ladies cologne. Other big sponsors of rodeos include American truck companies, tobacco companies, and rodeo equipment companies.

Beer and trucks are obvious rodeo sponsors. After all who can imagine a cowboys driving a BMW and sipping from a bottle of Evian? Cowboys typically drive trucks because they live a lifestyle that requires a truck to haul gear from place to place, and they often enjoy drinking a beer-American beer. Coors is one of the major sponsors of the Pro Rodeo Cowboys Association; they were the first with a multi million-dollar contract with the PRCA, and today they have what is known as the first right of refusal. They get first shot at sponsorship of the top rodeos the rodeo world has to offer (i.e. the PRCA sanctioned events). If they refuse the PRCA can then begin talking to other beer sponsors. Coors is also the sponsor of "The Man in the Can" program, which was started in 1983. This is a clever marketing strategy that features bull fighters, who are better known as rodeo clowns, throughout the country. Forty-five barrel men compete each year for the top spot at the National Finals Rodeo where they would receive a bronze belt buckle plus \$10,000 cash. They are also honored at the Cowboy Hall of Fame in

⁷⁸ Stout. p. 19

Colorado Springs. These men are also compensated each time they roll out their Coors barrel to protect the riders.

Sponsorships aside, the real action is in the arena, and in the case of cowboys, points are money-literally. To make it to the National Rodeo Finals-the goal of any cowboy worth his salt, a cowboy has to be in the top 15 in their event to qualify.⁷⁹ This makes the largest rodeos the most desirable because they have the biggest prizes. The *Denver Post* reported in 2004 that a few years ago, cowboys would have to compete in 100 rodeos. Today, if a cowboy makes it to the big rodeos, it cuts that number down to 60.⁸⁰ This also means the bigger rodeos attract a lot of cowboys competing for those cash prizes. That is why Denver's National Western Rodeo, with its \$520,000 in prize money in 2004,⁸¹ is such an important event that has grown so big that "slack competitions" must be used. This first occurred in 1979, and has been a tradition ever since. A slack event is when cowboys have a set of preliminary events without cash prizes to determine who gets to compete for the money in front of an audience based on the average of their times of scores at the slack events.

⁷⁹ J. Sebastian Sinisi Stock Show Begins Long Trail for Top Rodeo Riders, Ropers *Denver Post*, January 2004

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Over the last century, the audience has changed as well as the cowboys. The first rodeos took place during the day in the great outdoors. Those who were watching tended to be locals from nearby towns and ranches. From these humble beginnings, rodeo began to move indoors under the lights and appeal to a larger audience who would have traveled from further than the next town over. Today, rodeo has gone high tech and can be found playing on cable television at all hours of the day. Television coverage of the finals rodeo at the National Western Stock Show first occurred in 1954. It was broadcast on KBTB Channel 9 at 8 p.m.⁸² By 1974, CBS paid \$7,000 to televise the event, which caused quite the controversy.⁸³ CBS wanted to make sure that the televised rodeo featured the cream of the crop of champion cowboys, and the Rodeo Cowboy Association agreed. However, many of the champions had already gone home and would have to make a return trip. National Western officials had to add \$2,000 to the pot, while the RCA added \$500, to entice the cowboys to return and compete for the cameras.⁸⁴

While the transition to television has been somewhat reluctant on the part of rodeo promoters on occasion, in the digital age rodeo has been thriving on the airwaves. Today, the rodeo aficionado can get his fix on cable channels such as

⁸² Earl Wennergren "Looking in Denver Stock show rodeo to be televised for first time" Denver News 14 January 1954

⁸³ Al Nakkula Cowboys Wrangle Over TV Split *Rocky Mountain News* January 1974

⁸⁴ Ibid.

ESPN and Outdoor Life Network, all of which have opened the sport up to a much wider and more diverse audience via the remote control. Traditional rodeo is not the only thing on the tube. The average channel surfer will find that today the bull riders are getting a lot of TV time, especially since there are two competing tours of bull riders. In fact, a rivalry of sorts has developed between the PRCA which has its featured Xtreme Bulls tour along with the traditional array of rodeo events and the Professional Bull Riders, who only ride bulls. The PBR, formed in 1992 after a split from the PRCA, has many televised contests. This has translated that into more expensive tickets for live events that sell out regularly.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, the PRCA is fighting back with its Xtreme Bulls Tour. Bull riding has become one of the most popular aspects of rodeo as it is often viewed as an extreme sport by generation X, and it is leading the charge in attracting a younger demographic to rodeo. A younger demographic translates into higher advertising revenues, at it also allows for rodeo culture to be passed on to people who may have never ridden a horse before, let alone a bull.

This surge in rodeo popularity has been good for many businesses that directly relate to the sport. One of these is the Lancaster Rock n' Roll Rodeo School, established in 1971 in Arvada, Colorado. The school offers classes in both bull riding and bull fighting for the greenhorn who wants to experience first hand

⁸⁵ Paul Willis "Top Names in Rodeo Converge on Mile High City" *Rocky Mountain News* 9 January 2004

the adrenaline rush. They also are very involved in the rodeo equipment business for both bull riding and other rodeo events. Features products such as chaps, which are priced starting at \$300, the disconcerting cowboy can also add extras such as extra-long fringe or words at \$5 per letter.⁸⁶ A wide variety of protective vests are also available. They also sell items such as helmets and face masks, which are very slowly becoming more popular with bull riders who wish to avoid concussions. These are required gear for anyone wishing to ride a bull at the school.

Helmets aside, no cowboy is complete without a proper hat, and some of the best hats in the country come from the Southwest corner of Colorado where the O'Farrell Hat Makers of Durango are located. The hats created are not cheap, but they are well worth the price, especially when one considers the incredible quality of these world-famous hats. Consumers can choose from custom-made hats, which are fitted to an individual's unique head shape using a conformation to precisely map the shape of the head. Customers can also choose to go with a pre-fabricated hat in a standard size. Forbes Magazine named these hats in its May 2001 issue as "America's Finest Hat."⁸⁷

Another important piece of equipment for a cowboy or a cowgirl is a saddle. There are different types of saddles for different events. Saddle Bronc

⁸⁶ Rock-n-Roll Rodeo Gear Brochure

⁸⁷ O'Farrell Hatmakers of Durango (<http://www.ofarrellhats.com/>) Accessed 9 March 2004

riders must have what is known as an Association saddle, according to the PRCA that translates into “A saddle used in bronc riding built to definite PRCA specifications.”⁸⁸ That means that it has been approved by the Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association for this event, as has all of the rest of the equipment used, down to the type of fleece protecting the horse. These saddles have been standardized in the 20th century so that no one has an advantage over another rider, which used to be a bit of a problem with some of the older saddles that would vary from cowboy to cowboy. Today, these saddles usually lack a pommel, while roping event saddles tend to have a rubberized pommel, which allows them to easily tie the rope to their horse that is trained to keep the line taught while the cowboy quickly finishes his task.

Some of the best saddle making companies are located in Colorado. One of these is the Colorado Saddlery Company located in lower downtown Denver. This company was founded in 1940 and makes its saddles the old fashioned way with no synthetic materials.⁸⁹ These saddles are of exceedingly high quality and have developed a loyal following. John Wayne, the western film star, purchased his saddles through the Colorado Saddlery Co. as does Paul Hogan and many other celebrities. Another famous saddle company is the Old Pueblo Saddle Company located in Pueblo, Colorado. This company won a best saddle award at the

⁸⁸PRCA Definitions Handout

⁸⁹Barbra Gibson *The Lower Downtown Historic District* Historic Denver Inc Denver Co 1995. p 30

Colorado State Fair in 1997 and has made saddles for men such as basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.⁹⁰ They also make their saddles the way they were made in the old west-with no man made materials. In fact saddle maker Allan Byrne is constantly researching the techniques that were used in the old west to create more authentic saddles. Both of these companies also produce other types of equipment, but it is their saddles that get most of the attention.

As saddles differ, so do horses. These valuable, well-trained animals are an important part of a rodeo team. A barrel racing horse must be able to run the course quickly, yet be controlled enough to not knock over the barrels. This horse must also be able to travel in a horse trailer all over the country. These animals have been known to cost \$50,000, which constitutes a definite investment in one's event.⁹¹ Those who wrestle steer for a living need a hazer, the guy who attempts to guide the steer on a rather fearless horse, while the wrestler himself must be on a fast horse that doesn't mind his rider leaping off of him in the middle of a run. These horses must be in good health in order to compete in these events, and the care of a horse can be a costly, time-consuming endeavor, but these horses are an important part of a rodeo contestant's livelihood. In fact, they are just like part of the family in some cases. In all, rodeo is a big and complex business that

⁹⁰ Old Pueblo Saddle Company (<http://oldpueblosaddle.com/saddlemaker.html>) Accessed 10 March 2004.

⁹¹ The Sport of Cowboys: An Inside Look into the World of the Professional Rodeo. PRCA Pamphlet

encompasses equipment, the stock, and the prize money. It seems almost logical that a sport that evolved from a profession would today have such an elaborate economic influence on the world around it.

Chapter Three

Rodeos for the Young'uns

Rodeo is a family affair; one only has to look at the numerous families that travel around the country going from one rodeo to the next. In order to pass on the traditions to the next generation, rodeo families have to get their children involved early, and the only way for young children, or anyone for that matter, to develop the skills needed in rodeo is to teach them at an early age, and then practice practice, practice. This is true of all sports, there are little league baseball teams, soccer teams for 3-year-olds, and pee-wee football teams, and all of these groups are dedicated to developing young athletes to train them and help them to become the stars of tomorrow in their sport of choice. Rodeo has similar programs to get these young boys and girls ready for the pros, and these programs allow cowboys of all ages to perfect their skills and to win prizes so they can move on to the next level where they will continue to work on developing as champions. Four-year-olds can go from mutton busters, where they will get their first opportunity to experience the thrill of the sport, to steer riding to bull riding within a short period of time, allowing for the culture of rodeo to be passed on to the next generation. Those involved in the timed events also go through a progression of events starting with goat tying and advancing into steer roping and team roping.

One of the earliest events open to beginning cowboys and cowgirls is mutton busting. This is an event that is an adorable favorite at many rodeos; it is only open to the young and usually there is a maximum weight for the little competitors. Contestants are placed on a sheep, usually protected by a padded vest and a hockey-like mask and helmet similar to those just starting to be worn by bull riders. The young mutton buster is then asked to hold on for dear life as the sheep makes a run for the other end of the arena trying to buck off its young rider. The winner is the one that holds on the longest. Some of these young rough-riders are so good that they have to be forcibly pried off their sheep at the other end of the arena. This is only the first of the many levels of competition open to the children of rodeo; eventually if these children stick with the sport, they will eventually be participating in the same events as their rodeo heroes, perhaps at places like the National Finals Rodeo.

To that end, many different rodeos have been developed for the younger generations of cowboys and cowgirls. Here in Colorado there are many rodeo choices for kids to compete at, the most famous being the Little Britches Rodeo. This event was first held here in Littleton, Colorado at the Arapaho County Fair Grounds in 1952 before it went on to become a nationwide phenomenon.⁹² By

⁹² "They May be Little but they are tough." *Rocky Mountain News*. 19 August 1993

1958, this rodeo had become the largest amateur junior rodeo in the nation.⁹³ It boasted 676 competitors, with 283 competing in senior boys brahma bull riding, and 296 senior boys bareback riding contestants.⁹⁴ The ages of the competitors ranged from 8-years-old to 18, and these athletes came from all over North America from cities as far away as New Iberia, Louisiana and Alberta, Canada. Events included the standard rodeo faire as well as some more unusual events such as wild cow milking. Here, five young men would work together “to tangle with a viscous plunging kicking rearing wild cow.”⁹⁵ Four members of the team would work to control the cow while the fifth would attempt to milk the cow into a soda pop bottle.

This rodeo would become the training grounds for young cowboys who would someday become world champion cowboys. After all, the Little Britches slogan is “where legends begin.”⁹⁶ Men such as Ty Murray, the King of the Cowboys, got their start in the Little Britches Rodeo. This would be the start of an illustrious and legendary career in the sport, as Murray retired in 2002 with a lifetime earning of more than \$3 million, having been named all-around cowboy

⁹³ Little Britches Rodeo Program 1958

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ National Little Britches Rodeo Association” (<http://www.nlbra.org/>) Accessed 20 January 2004

champion seven times, and many other honors, prizes and titles throughout his 14 year career.⁹⁷

The rodeo continued on at the Arapahoe County Fair Grounds for a number of years until 1961 when the Little Britches Organization held a national convention in Denver. It was decided that the Little Britches would go national, and Denver would be its headquarters. Eventually, this rodeo, named after a book of the same name written by local author Ralph Moody, would outgrow its Denver location and move to its present headquarters in Colorado Springs in 1982. Today, this is where their finals rodeo is held every year. Participants from around the country gather to prove once and for all who the best cowboys and cowgirls are. Today, this “little” rodeo association holds rodeos in thirty different states, with over 1,700 young athletes participating in this program.⁹⁸ This popular rodeo has been covered by local television stations, and has been filmed by Walt Disney film crews. In short, it is the one of the premier youth rodeos in the country.

The idea of the Little Britches rodeo would soon become national; with Little Britches Rodeos being held all over the country to determine the best young cowboy and cowgirl in America. However, the Little Britches of Colorado was the

⁹⁷ Ty Murray King of the Cowboy. (<http://www.tymurray.com/>) accessed 22 September 2003

⁹⁸ Ibid.

first, and “The Grandbaby of them all,”⁹⁹ established to provide youngsters with their very own rodeo. The Little Britches program is not just designed to create rodeo stars; good sportsmanship is also an important area of emphasis for these young cowboys and cowgirls. The mission of the Little Britches is “a non-profit venture to build sound, healthy minds and bodies—to develop character, self-reliance and good sportsmanship through competition in the great sport of rodeo.”¹⁰⁰

This rodeo is divided up by age category. The youngest participants range in age from 5 to 7-years-old; this coed group is known as the Little Wranglers. These children compete in four events: barrel racing, pole bending, flag racing, and goat tail untying. The next age group is divided up by sex into the Junior Girls and Junior Boys. Their ages range from 8 to 13-years-old. The girl’s events at this level are breakaway roping, barrel racing, goat tying, trail course, and pole bending. The boys compete in bareback riding, steer riding, bull riding, breakaway roping, goat tying and flag racing. One coed event exists at this level, dally ribbon roping, which is also known as team roping. The oldest groups are the Senior Girls and Senior Boys, and they compete from age 14 until age 18, the boys compete in steer wrestling, saddle bronc riding, bareback riding, bull riding, tie-down roping, while the girls compete in breakaway roping, barrel racing, goat tying, trail course

⁹⁹ “They May be Little but they are tough.” *Rocky Mountain News*. 19 August 1993

¹⁰⁰ National Little Britches Rodeo Association” (<http://www.nlbra.org/>) Accessed 20 January 2004

and pole bending. The senior boys and girls compete together in team roping competition. These young contestants must adhere to strict guidelines. Participants could be disqualified for any of the following: abuse of stock, officials, or other contestants. Also, the winners are never awarded money as the Little Britches is an amateur competition. Instead the winners receive various prizes ranging from saddles and belt buckles to scholarships for college.

Today, the National Little Britches Finals Rodeo is held in Penrose Stadium in Colorado Springs, Colorado. This event is estimated to bring \$8.5 million into the Springs as 600 youngsters compete to see who the best of the best is and who will be winning the \$30,000 in scholarship money.¹⁰¹ In order to get to this point, the athletes must qualify in one of the many Little Britches Rodeo sanctioned events. These events are held throughout the country, and any rodeo can become a franchise of the Little Britches Rodeo simply by filling out an application and becoming approved. As of 2003, 180 Little Britches Franchised Rodeos were in existence.

Another Colorado group dedicated to seeing young men and women successful on horseback is the Westernaires. While it is not a rodeo club this group is dedicated to promoting the knowledge of horsemanship to a group that is not usually associated with the rural lifestyle. They were founded in 1949 with the

¹⁰¹ National Little Britches Rodeo Association" (<http://www.nlbra.org/>) Accessed 22 February 2004

goal of getting 9 to 19-year-olds who live in Jefferson County back to their rural roots of the not so distant past.¹⁰² This group maintains its headquarters, Fort Westernaire, adjacent to the Jefferson County Fair Grounds in Golden, Colorado with two indoor arenas and one outdoor arena, classrooms, and stables for its multitude of horses. As a youngster progresses through the program from Tenderfoots, who are the rookies, they can perfect their skills and eventually join many elite performance groups such as the Precisionettes or the Red Cavalry. The Westernaires are dedicated not only to the precision of their drill team, but also to the standards of its members. The group does not allow drug, alcohol or tobacco use of any kind by participants; instead it emphasizes teamwork and the shared Western heritage of Colorado, and caring for animals. In fact, Westernaires are all provided with rule book that outlines everything from the procedure to rent horses to the dress codes which are very detailed for both the boys and girls and are based on what level you have achieved in the group.¹⁰³

This is a very hard-working bunch of students that holds many events throughout the year to keep its members in top shape, always preparing for the next events and raising money. The Westernaires are a non-profit group that maintains a rather large number of horses for its members, many of whom do not

¹⁰² The Westernaires (<http://www.westernaires.org/index.html>) Accessed 1 March 2004

¹⁰³ Ibid.

have the resources to own their own horse.¹⁰⁴ The feeding of these animals requires a lot of money, and members pay only a small fee each year. Therefore, the organization holds many fundraising event that members must work either as performers or as the behind-the-scenes help.¹⁰⁵ The money raised by this group goes a long way. They have been competing at the National Western Stock Show since the early 1950s; in 2004, they performed the tricks of the Russian Cossacks as the audience watched these young men jumping from horse to horse with bated breath. In 1997, they were given an opportunity to perform for the leaders of the world including former President Clinton when The Summit of the Eight was held in Denver.

School aged children were not the only ones who needed to perfect their skills in the ring, so the idea of the college rodeos was born. College rodeo officially began in 1948 when representatives from twelve colleges met in Texas to form a governing board for their sport, the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association (NIRA). Their first official meeting of the NIRA would be held in Denver from April 14-15, 1949, where the constitution for collegiate rodeo would be approved.¹⁰⁶ The constitution dealt with issues ranging from the rodeo structure to the academic eligibility requirements for the athletes who were to be students

¹⁰⁴ The Westernaires

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association. (<http://www.collegerodeo.com/history.shtml>) Accessed 22 September 2003

first. Colleges from Colorado, Texas, Wyoming and three other states would create 13 teams that would then compete against other teams within a set region, allowing for these cowboys and cowgirls to develop their skills for the professional rodeo circuit while ideally working on a degree at the same time.¹⁰⁷ At the end of the first season, a national championship event was held to see who the top college rodeo cowboys were.

College rodeo wouldn't really begin to hit its stride until the 1960s. In 1962, ABC's Wide World of Sports featured the National College Rodeo Finals, and by 1967, 97 schools were members of the NIRA, many of those schools were two-year junior colleges, not just four year universities.¹⁰⁸ The 1970s saw a quite a few changes as rodeo moved into the modern world. Computers were being used to determine rankings. College rodeo also saw the advent of corporate sponsorship for their amateur competitions. College rodeo is still very popular today, and many colleges offer rodeo scholarships which include stipends for boarding your horse along with providing fees and tuition for the student athlete. Today, the NIRA puts on over 100 rodeos a year within its various regions, and the program has seen many famous athletes pass through its competitions such as Ty Murray

¹⁰⁷ Elliot

¹⁰⁸ National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association. (<http://www.collegerodeo.com/history.shtml>) Accessed 20 January 2004

who worked his way up from the Little Britches to College Champion to World Champion.

Here in Colorado the first intercollegiate rodeo was held in Boulder at the University of Colorado in April of 1961.¹⁰⁹ Participants came from 15 different universities to hone their skills and compete for the honor of their respective schools. These college rodeos would not just be limited to the four year universities either. In 1972, Arapaho Community College, which was a member of the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association, started their own invitational rodeo named after a local cowboy, Red Fenwick, who at the time was writing a column in *The Denver Post*. The Fenwick Stampede would take place annually in April, with 19 colleges from the central Rocky Mountain region competing, including rodeo powerhouses Colorado State University and Casper Wyoming College.¹¹⁰ Unfortunately, college rodeos are waning in the 21st century. In 2003, the Northeastern Junior College in Sterling, Colorado was forced to disband due to higher education budget cuts at the state level.¹¹¹ The program could not continue without enough money to support itself.

Colleges were not the only schools that were promoting rodeo as extracurricular activities. High Schools in Colorado also were forming rodeo

¹⁰⁹ "First Intercollegiate Rodeo at University of Colorado" *Denver Post*. 16 April 1961.

¹¹⁰ Red Fenwick. "Well It Happened- A Fenwick Stampede." *Denver Post* 23 April 1972

¹¹¹ Stanton Gartin, Northeastern Junior College Rodeo Advisor. Email February 10 2004

teams. In fact, there exists both a National High School Rodeo Association and a Colorado High School Rodeo Association. High school Rodeo got its start in 1947 in Hallettsville, Texas with 100 students competing that year. The mission of High School Rodeo, according to the NHSRA web site, is “to encourage youth to stay in school and to promote the highest type of conduct and sportsmanship.”¹¹² These are noble goals to say the least, and goals that are echoed by many of the rodeo club sponsors and rodeo parents today.

In 1951, the group became a multi-state non-profit organization, by 1957 the sport was receiving write-ups in Teen Magazine, and today nationally the sport boasts 12,000 members from 39 states and also members from Canada and Australia.¹¹³ In Colorado, the sport of rodeo just keeps on growing. More and more clubs continue to join the Colorado High School Rodeo Association, the one of the latest being the Valley Rodeo Club which was founded in 1997. Today high school students compete in events ranging from bull riding (with a signed release form from parents, of course) to pole bending and goat tying for the ladies.

The Colorado High School Rodeo Association is an uncomfortable position when it comes to liability versus personal responsibility. The CHSRA is a mostly volunteer organization and they lack the power and the inclination to tell

¹¹² National High School Rodeo Association. (<http://www.nhsra.org/fameset.html>) Accessed 22 February 2004

¹¹³ Ibid.

parents that an injured student cannot compete, except in the cases of injuries that are too big and visible to ignore.¹¹⁴ Injury and rodeo go hand in hand; however, many cowboys refuse to listen to a well-meaning medical professional when it comes to things like taking time off to recover properly. The CHSRA also have not made safety gear such as helmets mandatory; they are waiting for the entire culture to change, and this is gradually happening. In the meantime, high school students from all over the state continue to compete.

Jay Sear, age 15, from Arvada, Colorado has been riding since she was 8 months old. Today, she is a member of the Lazy Lopers 4-H Club and participates in events from pole bending to calf roping. She even rode a bull once-just for fun and just for two seconds. She has gained a lot from her experiences in the CHSRA. She enjoys the traveling even though it can be difficult to balance school and rodeo. She often ends up doing homework in between events to keep her grades up. Not all rodeo clubs have eligibility requirements, but for Jay's mother to allow her to compete her grades have to meet certain standards. This is a sport that requires discipline both in and out of the arena. Jay is also responsible for the care of her seven horses. She goes from school to the boarding stables to groom the

¹¹⁴ Kevin Simpson "Spurred by a Dream" *Denver Post* 8 December 2003

horses that she rides in her competitions. In short, she is always on the move, which personifies the sport.¹¹⁵

Here in Colorado, teams from various schools and areas, twenty-one in all, meet and compete at high school events. These students are also working to hone their skills for the professional rodeos. Teams such as the Bear Creek Rodeo Club and the Ute Mountain High School Rodeo Club, along with quite a few independents¹¹⁶ are at these events looking for college scholarships to propel them to the next level. Like their college rodeo counterparts, at the end of the year a champion must be chosen, and like professional rodeo, is determined by points. Events take place all over the state throughout the school year, with the ultimate goal being the National High School Rodeo Finals. A complex system uses an athlete's top 10 rodeo performances, plus the first state finals round, plus the second state finals round, plus the championship round, plus the average points of an individuals top ten rodeos.¹¹⁷ The top four finishers compete in a national competition held each year, while finishers five through ten qualify for the Silver State rodeo.

However, it is much simpler to qualify for the state finals in Colorado. According to Valley Club Rodeo sponsor, Tom Bashline, all a student has to do in

¹¹⁵ Jay Sear Interview by author, 8 March 2004. Denver Colorado.

¹¹⁶ Colorado State High School Rodeo Association. (http://www.cshsra.org/cshsra_mainpage.htm) Accessed 24 September, 2003.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

order to participate in the state finals is compete in two rodeos throughout the course of a season. This is easier than it sounds as every day counts as a rodeo. As long a student competes both days at a weekend rodeo in the same event, they are eligible for the finals. The CHSRA season runs from August until July of the following year when the High School National Finals Rodeo is held. They have four weekends in the fall. Then they do not compete in the wintertime. Instead they take a break for the weather and holidays and resume their season in the early spring. In the spring, there are 10 weekend events plus the state finals.¹¹⁸ Many high school riders throughout the state will also go to some of the smaller local events during the off-season to try to make some money on the side, and the power of that money can be very seductive to these young men of the rodeo world.¹¹⁹

When riders turn 18 they qualify for the Pro Rodeo Association of America (PRCA). This leaves a few of the best cowboys with a big decision to make. They can decide to go on to a college rodeo team, especially if they have a scholarship offer. This route would allow them to get an education-something to live off of once their rodeo careers are over. Or they can go directly to the big money and uncertainty of the pros. It is a trade-off one way or another, and only the individual can decided which choice is right for them. There are no guarantees

¹¹⁸ Tom Bashline Valley Rodeo Club Sponsor. Interview by author 22, February 2004. Denver Colorado

¹¹⁹ Kevin Simpson "Spurred by a Dream" *Denver Post* 8 December 2003

in the rodeo world, save one. You will get hurt; the only questions are when, where, and how badly.

One Chance Tate, of Cortez Colorado, a high school rodeo participant, was quoted in the December 8, 2003 *Denver Post* as saying "I rode with a broken pelvis before...a concussion ain't going to hurt much. I plan on making pro. I can't sissy out now."¹²⁰ This young man personifies the toughness of the cowboy. He was injured on a Saturday, attended a dance that night, and was riding again on Sunday.¹²¹ High school club sponsor Tom Bashline has seen quite a few of his students move on to college rodeo clubs, and into the pro rodeo circuit. He has even sent a student into the Professional Armed Forces Rodeo Association, which is the rodeo for those fighting for our country.

Another relative newcomer to the rodeo circuit for young competitors is the Colorado Junior Rodeo Association, which was founded in 1994. The stated goal of this group is "to provide a quality event allowing youth to advance their rodeo talent in the spirit of fair competition and the appreciation of good sportsmanship."¹²² This group allows 1,000 youth ages 5 to 18 a chance to compete in mostly timed events. This group also has a chance for the whole family

¹²⁰ Simpson

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Colorado Junior Rodeo Association. (<http://www.coloradojrrodeo.com/Aboutus.htm>) Accessed 22 February 2004

to participate in the Junior Senior team-roping event. Here, mom or dad can join their children in the arena to show off their roping skills. This organization also has its own finals rodeo in Salilda, Colorado, where those top 15 contestants who won the most money at CJRA sanctioned events are allowed to compete for the \$90,000 in prize money in the CJRA Finals.¹²³ The money is nice, but in the end, these events are about family-passing the tradition of rodeo from grandparents to parents to children.

Many current rodeo sponsors are veterans of the Colorado High School Rodeo Association or the Little Britches. Basin Rodeo Club sponsor Brenda Cundiff notes that she sees many of the people she competed against when she was a contestant in the CHSRA now driving their children to these weekend events.¹²⁴ She also feels that this is a great way to spend time with her children. With all of these various levels of rodeo, it is possible for a rider to spend most of his life running from one rodeo to another. In many cases, rodeo is a family affair, keeping everyone one the move for most of the summer and a lot of the rest of the year as well. Bruce Ford, one of the rodeo's more influential cowboys has fond memories of watching his father compete at the National Western Rodeo and Cheyenne Frontier Days. "I remember sitting there, watching the guys ride, and loving the

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Brenda Cundiff, Basin Rodeo Club Sponsor Interview by author, 19 February 2004. Denver Colorado

roar of the crowd. I knew that one day that was where I would be.”¹²⁵ This shows that rodeo is in the blood in more ways than one, and that rodeo can cycle through the generations. Today Ford’s children also compete in rodeo, and have actually become champion riders just like their father. In fact, Royce Ford is a champion in his own right having earned \$148,584 in 2003 and finishing second at the National Finals Rodeo.¹²⁶ Rodeo is a family affair where traditions are passed on keeping the sport alive and well.

¹²⁵ Melanie Daye, “Bruce Ford, A Living Legend” Colorado Country Life, January 2002.

¹²⁶ James B. Meadow “Cowboy Built Ford-Tough” *Rocky Mountain News* 10 January 2004

Chapter Four

Alternative Cowboys and Cowgirls

Rodeo is a sport that has traditionally been seen as the domain of white male athletes. However, the reality is quite different, and the perceptions of rodeo are not always in sync with reality. While it is true that many of the most famous participants in the sport have been white men, there have also been many contributions by many other groups such as Hispanics, Blacks, and women. In fact, the sport of rodeo owes a great debt to all three of these groups for many of its events, such as steer wrestling, and its traditions. Without the influence of these three groups the events and culture of rodeo would be very different from the rodeo we know today. Unfortunately, it would take until the second half of the twentieth century for the sport to embrace these overlooked but crucial groups and return rodeo to its ethnic roots in Colorado.

Traditionally, rodeo is as a sport with few minorities; however this tradition has been changing as more and more cowboys of color reclaim their rodeo heritage. The myth of the white West is inaccurate, as many cowboys in the Old West were not white. This is a belief that is perpetuated by the Hollywood western. Instead, many of the cowboys in the Old West were freed slaves who had

left their former owners and homes for the wide-open space and for opportunities that could not be found in the segregated post Civil War South that was ruled by Jim Crow Laws and full of antipathy towards the newly freed. Even more cowboys were of Spanish decent, a culture where the art of the cowboy had begun, long before it was adopted by whites looking to become rich off of the cattle that lived wild in the West. Yet both African Americans and Hispanics, with the notable exception of the Picket brothers and a few others, would spend the early part of the Twentieth century estranged from the sport they had helped to create. It would take until the 1970s for rodeo to re-embrace its ethnic roots. Jack Weston writes the following in his book *The American Cowboy*:

Much of the rodeo tradition goes back to Sixteenth century Spain, rodeo culture than traveled to the Americas by way of the migration of many Spanish to the New World who were in the business of raising cattle.

Mexico was at too early a stage of capitalism in the late (eighteen) sixties to develop a cattle industry. And because the Mexicans collected cattle by trapping them in pens around a few watering places or in the brush by tying them to stalking oxen, and because the drove no herd regularly to distant markets, they did not provide al the range and trail methods and skills that Texans were later required to invent.¹²⁷

These early Spanish settlers created the vaquero, the Hispanic version of the cowboy. Early vaqueros would often participate in contests of skill at fiestas,

¹²⁷ Jack Weston, *The Real American Cowboy*. Schocken Books New York 1985 p. 3.

which was usually held at the end of a cattle drive.¹²⁸ However, these contests were usually only a minor portion of the party, the most important part of the fiesta was the music, dancing, and feasting. Other times the vaqueros would use these contests to entertain one another on the weekends during long cattle drives.¹²⁹ It would take a long time for these early contests to reach a white rodeo audience in Colorado. In fact, many of the events of the sport come from these old Hispanic contests and skills that were used by the Vaqueros in their daily lives on the trail. In his thesis, *Man Beast and Dust*, Clifford P. Westermeier states, “for many years in the cattle industry the best ropers were Mexican Vaqueros who moved northward from the Rio Grande and had joined the large cattle outfits.”¹³⁰ The cattle industry was a natural progression from Hispanic to Anglo culture driven by supply and demand in the post-Civil War era, and the sport of rodeo was also a natural progression between the two cultures, one that still permeates rodeo today.

In 1972, a Mexican style rodeo known as a Charreada was held in Denver, in conjunction with the formation of the Denver Charro Association. This was a chance for “Mexican-American men to compete in a Latin flavored rodeo,”¹³¹ According to a *Rocky Mountain News* article that year. The Charreada would

¹²⁸ Clifford P. Westermeier *Man Beast and Dust; The Story of Rodeo*. p. 32

¹²⁹ Ellen Sweets “Keeping Tradition Alive in the Historic Mexican Charreada” *Denver Post* 8 January 2004

¹³⁰ Westermeier p. 31

¹³¹ “Mexican Charreada a Delightful Event.” *Rocky Mountain News* 27 November 1972

include many roping events lacking in traditional Anglo rodeos. Events such as Piales en al Lienzo, or roping the hind legs of a horse causing him to trip, and the Manganas a Caballo, the art of tripping one horse with a rope while on horseback yourself. Most of the events at this competition were judged on skill, instead of using the clock to determine the winner, and almost half of the events were Floreando, or rope art, a marked difference from the Americanized rodeo events such as steer wrestling, where strength is more important than precision. Of course, like all aspects of rodeo, the animal rights activists did not care for the treatment of the animals by the Charros, or cowboys, showing them the same respect they show rodeos.

The Charro is also filled with events that require strength and skill. The best example of this is the Paso de la Muerte, the death jump. This is the most dangerous of the Charro disciplines. Here a Charro jumps from the back of a trained horse onto the back of a wild horse that has never been ridden before. The jumper is aided by his fellow Charros, who attempt to guide the wild horse. However, in the end, the Charro who is jumping is on his own at the crucial moment, it is only his skill and a little bit of luck that will get him on the back of that second untrained horse. This is a skill that would be used to catch and tame wild horses in the West a hundred years ago. Today, it is a thrilling spectacle for those of us sitting on the edges of our seats, and another reminder of a past that should not be forgotten or left behind.

The Charro is a proud symbol of the past. The clothing worn by Charros is a military uniform, going back to the Mexican Revolution, so Charros do not remove their hats during the singing of national anthems, unlike cowboys who do. Charros are also involved in rough stock events such as bareback riding and bull riding; however even these events differ from their Anglo counterparts. In American rodeo, participants ride until the buzzer sounds after a set number of seconds have passed, depending upon the event. Anglo cowboys only use one hand to hold on to a bucking animal. Charro riders use two hands in the rough stock events. Charros ride until they are either thrown, or the horse or bull stops bucking. This can be for a rather long time in the case of some animals making life difficult for the poor Charro that draws a horse with lots of stamina.

By 1976, the popularity of the Charreada would continue to spread into cities such as Pueblo, where the First International Charro Competition would be held from August 25-29, 1976.¹³² Here rope art, or Floreando, would make up half of the events. Today, Charreada can be found at many popular events such as the Colorado State Fair. The National Western Stock Show has also joined in the Latin traditions by adding a Mexican Rodeo Extravaganza in 1995. The Extravaganza was the dream of Jerry Diaz, also known as Charro de Corazon, Charro of the Heart. The show began as a small portion of the National Western Stock Show and has only gotten bigger as it has developed. Today, this show is

¹³² Kit Flannery "Charros Head for Pueblo" *Denver Post* 22 August 1972

one of the biggest draws at the National Western Stock Show and one of the more unusual shows, but it is one with a rich cultural tradition that educates many about rodeo's cultural history.

This annual show has featured acts such as Los Zapatistas, a female precision sidesaddle riding team, which is also part of the cultural heritage of Mexico. These women and their horses perform incredible feats making elaborate patterns and passes that seem to be almost impossible without some accident occurring. Yet these athletes are so well trained that while the horses may come within fractions of inches of one another, no collisions occur. Other acts at the Extravaganza include Gerardo "Jerry" Diaz, the founder, who is still in charge of his dream project today. Diaz has a number of well-trained horses that perform amazing feats. His act includes anything from horses dancing in time to the music to horses that allow Diaz to take a brief nap on their belly while the horse is also laying down for his nap. It becomes apparent in this event to the biggest city slicker that these horses are something special. Diaz also is a skilled roper who makes his rope made of the same cactus that is used in making tequila, dance. He can twirl his rope while standing on the back of a galloping horse which becomes even more impressive when one realized that he is also twirling the rope around

the two of them as they move.¹³³ The Mexican Rodeo Extravaganza is evidence that rodeo in Colorado had come full circle.

The Extravaganza returns to the original cultural roots of the rodeo with the influence of Mexico and South America. The whole show is set to the sounds of a mariachi band, in fact Charros thrive on the noise of the band and the crowd and ask for applause and encouragement. This is different from a regular rodeo where silence is the norm while the cowboys ply their trade. The announcing at the Mexican Extravaganza is in both English and Spanish, and the show appeals to a wider demographic than the traditional rodeo would.¹³⁴ Coverage for the Mexican rodeo appears in English newspapers such as *The Rocky Mountain News* and *The Denver Post*. This rodeo is also covered in *La Voz*, a Spanish publication located in Denver. By 2003, the Mexican Rodeo Extravaganza was one of the more popular shows at the Stock Show and was one of the fastest selling events.¹³⁵ It is also a reminder that rodeo is a diverse sport that is derived from many cultures and colors.

The Hispanic influence is not the only one overlooked when one thinks of the sport or rodeo. Another overlooked group that has been very important to the

¹³³ Hector Gutierrez, "Stock Show Will Have a Taste of Latino Talent," *Rocky Mountain News*, 2 January 1995.

¹³⁴ Steve Lipher, "Mexican Rodeo Rousing Success," *Denver Post*, 11 January 1995.

¹³⁵ Jim Kehl, "Stock Show Ticket Sales Sizzle," *Denver Post*, 10 January 2003.

development to rodeo is the African American cowboy. In many rodeos, this was a figure that was all but missing in the stands or in the arena. However, in the 1970s, rodeo also saw the reemergence of the black cowboy, an often-overlooked figure in the Old West of popular culture, but one that had a rather large presence in the reality of the Old West. One of the scouts of the Lewis and Clark Expedition was black, starting a trend that would be overlooked for years. Later in the Nineteenth century, many freed slaves would head west after the Civil War to tend to the herds of cattle who were freely roaming the plains. Even before that time many slaves were already working the range and breaking horses for their masters. They were becoming highly competent cowboys. In 1887, a cowboy tournament would be held that would pit white cowboys against black cowboys. Famous cattleman Charles Goodnight was known to trust his black cowhands with the payrolls.¹³⁶ In one case Bose Ikard was once given \$20,000 in cash, and he never once lost a dime.

However, many of the blacks on the cattle drives were relegated to cooking duties. It would take until the early 1900s for the Pickett brothers, who were black, to bring the idea of the non-white cowboy back to life in a rodeo arena, if only for a brief moment. William Pickett was a revolutionary rider who invented bull dogging, he would be one of many black cowboys to grace a rodeo arena. Bill

¹³⁶ Bill Bwaltny *Footsteps: African American History* Cobblestone Publications March/ April 1999

Pickett would also be the first who would be inducted into the cowboy hall of fame in 1971.¹³⁷ He was the most famous of the black cowboys. A film was produced by the Norman Film Manufacturing Company of Jacksonville, Florida called *The Bull Dogger*, starring Pickett. Teddy Roosevelt once said, "Pickett's name will go down in Western history as being one of the best trained ropers and riders the West has produced."¹³⁸

Bill Pickett is considered by most to be the inventor of bulldogging, also known as steer wrestling. In 1900 at the Arkansas Valley Fair in Rocky Ford, Colorado, Pickett took a life-threatening action in the ring and turned it into a brand new event. Ralph Taylor, a local historian from the 1960s, recounts the encounter in a 1969 edition of the *Pueblo Chieftain* by saying "The Bull tossed Pickett overhead, but the cowboy held onto the horns. In effect it was a fall for the bull...he grabbed the animal's horns again and twisted his neck until the big bull was compelled to fall. This brought cheer from the crowd."¹³⁹ Bulldogging was born. There are many different theories as to why this event is called bulldogging. The most colorful involves Pickett himself. It was believed that Bill Pickett would actually bite the cattle on the lips and ears, similar to the methods used by dogs to

¹³⁷ "Black Wranglers Parade Through Five Points" *Rocky Mountain News* 9 September 1990

¹³⁸ Bill Pickett Display Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame

¹³⁹ Ralph Taylor "Colorful Colorado 1900s Saw Expansion of Rodeos" *Pueblo Star Journal Sunday Chieftain*, 26 October 1969.

herd the cattle, hence the name bulldogging.¹⁴⁰ Pickett was also known for hoolihaning. This is when a cowboy plants the horns of the steer into the ground. This is considered to be very dangerous for the steer, and today it is against the rules to plant the animal's horns. Either way, steer wrestling is not an event for the faint of heart. This is the event that truly pits man against beast, where all competitors must be strong, fast, and fearless to overcome a rather large animal that is usually quite uncooperative.

Since Bill Pickett, "bulldogging" has become an accepted rodeo practice both in competition and for fun and entertainment. One more unusual bulldogging incident also took place in the old movie towns of Colorado. Around the turn of the century, many westerns were produced in the state featuring cowboys turned actors and stuntmen. One of the actors, Mr. Tom Mix, was spending his free time bulldogging steers from an automobile in 1911, as opposed to the traditional horse seen in rodeo competition.¹⁴¹ The incident was recorded in the Canyon City Record, and it directly refers to "bulldogging" showing both the spread of the event, and the influence of Pickett as the term had spread that far in a mere eleven years.

¹⁴⁰ "Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo A Salute to the Black Cowboys; Rodeo Soul" Souvenir Program 1994

¹⁴¹ Emirich p. 39

As for the rest of the black cowboys, there would be few chances to compete during the first half of the Twentieth Century. In 1947, the Negro Cowboys Rodeo Association would be formed. This group would organize some weekend rodeos to be held for black cowboys. One of the most famous black cowboys from Colorado, Alonzo Pettie, was instrumental in these rodeos. Pettie, born in 1910, began his career on wild bulls and broncs where he suffered a series of injuries. At an event in 1929, he injured his shoulder while on a bronco and then continued on to ride a bull, with his arm in a sling.¹⁴² He won. In those days, blacks were not allowed to participate in most rodeos. However, they were permitted to entertain the crowd by riding the rough stock animals and being tossed into the dirt. These black cowboys were paid per animal they would ride. Pettie remembers "If you were a good rider well you would go ahead and ride...and if you would get bucked off you would get your \$2 to \$3 or whatever...you could make \$10 or \$12 a day like that"¹⁴³ After a couple of years in the army during World War II, Pettie started the all-black rodeos. These were mostly weekend affairs where black cowboys would compete against one another for small amounts of money. Unfortunately for Pettie, he would be so severely injured at one of these competitions that his rodeo career would be ended forever.

¹⁴² Douglas Martin "Alonzo Pettie A Creator of Black Rodeo; 93" New York Times New Service

¹⁴³ Ibid.

He would go on to work for the Sears Roebuck Co, and in 1996, he would become a Levi's Jeans model in their Red Tab Heritage Campaign.

Those weekend rodeos were just the first step in legitimizing blacks in the sport of rodeo. In 1968 the Black Cowboy Association would be formed, and in 1971, a black cowboy, Bill Pickett, would be inducted into the cowboy hall of fame.¹⁴⁴ There would be a smattering of successful black cowboys in the rodeo business during this time, ranging from Charlie Sampson, world champion bull-rider and Timex spokesman (which makes sense when you realize that bull-riders also take a licking and keep on ticking) to Leon Coffee the famous rodeo clown. However, there was no real rodeo emphasis in the black community. That all changed in Denver in 1984 when the late Bill Pickett was honored with an all-black rodeo named after him. The Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo began its life at the Adams County Fair Grounds that year. It was founded by Lu Vason, a concert promoter who turned rodeo buff when he attended Cheyenne Frontier Days in 1977. Here, Vason noticed that everyone was having a good time, himself included. However there were no black faces in the crowd or on the horses in the ring.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Borderlands an El Paso Community College Local History Project (http://www.epcc.edu/ftp/Homes/monicaw/borderlands/21_black_cowboys.htm) Accessed 26 September 2003.

¹⁴⁵ Lu Vason, Founder of Bill Pickett Rodeo, Interview by author 13 January 2004, Denver Colorado.

Thus an idea was born, that of an all black rodeo with a mission of educating the world about black cowboys who had been left out of the history books, cowboys such as Bill Pickett. Vason faced some challenges going from concerts to rodeo, and learned quite a bit about the intricacies of the sport. Two of the biggest problems he faced were finding a venue for the event, and finding stock contractors to ensure that there were animals for the event. The first rodeo was a learning process, but it has been a successful one that has opened many doors for black cowboys. Today, many successful black cowboys can claim to have gotten their start at the Bill Pickett Rodeo, and some have even gone on to become world champions, such as Fred Whitfield.

The Bill Pickett Rodeo was first held in 1984, and it would be the first blacks' only rodeo since the 1940s in Colorado.¹⁴⁶ Today, The Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo is America's only touring Black rodeo, making stops in cities from Denver to Oakland to Philadelphia. Its events range from Bulldogging to Ladies Steer Undecorating where women on horseback must chase down a steer and pull the ribbon off of the shoulder. Part of the profits go to the Bill Pickett Memorial Scholarship Fund,¹⁴⁷ which supports young black athletes who are interested in pursuing careers in rodeo. It has also succeeded in getting blacks

¹⁴⁶ "Black Wranglers Parade Through Five Points" *Rocky Mountain News* 9 August 1990.

¹⁴⁷ Bill Pickett Rodeo Star (<http://www.coax.net/people/lwf/pickett.htm>) Accessed 26 September 2003.

involved in the sport of rodeo and recreating a more accurate picture of the old west, an old west that was made up of men and women of all colors.

One of the myths of the old West is that of the cowboys and Indians fighting with each other. This may in fact have some basis, though many of today's cowboys are Native Americans. The Indians have come full circle, ironically to preserve their heritage. The introduction of the horse into the culture of the tribes of the west was a momentous event. These horses had been introduced by the Spanish Conquistadors; some had escaped to breed in the wild. Later these wild horses were captured by many of the tribes who tended to name the exotic creatures as dogs. The Blackfoot Tribe called horses Elk Dogs, while the Lakota referred to horses as Holy Dogs.¹⁴⁸ The tribes believed that horses were gifts from the Great Spirit, a belief that was reinforced by the absence of white men at this time. A common belief expressed in Peter Iverson's book *Riders of the West; Portraits from Indian Rodeo*. "With the right horse anything was possible,"¹⁴⁹ and with the horse the nomadic groups flourished, as hunting became easier with the tribes able to move more quickly.

Eventually, the tribes were conquered by the pioneers, and the passage of the Dawes Act confined the tribes to reservations. Despite the troubles, an outlet for the old ways was being developed in rodeo. Many Indians were able to take

¹⁴⁸ Peter Iverson, *Riders of the West; Portraits from Indian Rodeo* (Greystone Books, University of Washington Press; Seattle 1999) . p 1

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. p 2

their skills on horseback and channel them into the developing sport. Problems did exist. For instance, many Indians felt that the judges were biased against them, so many who competed stuck with the timed events instead of the rough stock events. There was less likelihood of the clock being biased. Indians also faced problems in leaving the reservations, and finding the money for travel and entry fees. Despite this many Indians did make it in early rodeo. One of the most famous of these was Will Rogers, a part Cherokee, who incidentally was a hazer for Bill Pickett. Other famous Indians cowboys were Jackson Sundown of the Nez Perce tribe, and Tom Three Persons of the Blood Indian tribe.¹⁵⁰ By 1957, the All Indian Rodeo Cowboy Association was founded. It later became the All Indian Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association (AIPRCA). This group founded schools for both judges and riders; it also worked to promote cultural events, such as Pow Wows, to accompany the rodeo contests. "Being a cowboy seemed to be a good way to remain an Indian."¹⁵¹ By 1976, the first National Finals Rodeo was held by the AIPRCA at the Salt Palace in Salt Lake City, Utah. Today, the organization has five different regions in Canada and nine different regions in the United States.

Minority groups were not the only ones embracing rodeo. Women also wanted to get in on the action. As America moved into the 1940s rodeo gained more and more popularity in Colorado. It went from being an almost exclusively

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. p 11

¹⁵¹ Ibid. p 20

male sport to including some female participation. The '46 show at the National Western Stock Show seemed to have been a precursor to women competing in timed events, and competing for prize money and points along side their male counter parts. Not only were women competing, they were also winning the admiration of the crowd. The *Rocky Mountain News* reported "The crowd had more applause for Miss Sawyer who rose from the tanbark where Belen had thrown her, dusted the dirt from her white riding habit and returned to the saddle to give a masterful exhibition of horse handling."¹⁵²

Three years later, in August of 1949, the first all girls rodeo was held in Denver. Some of the events were the typical events that could be found at male rodeos, events such as steer riding, calf roping and bronco riding. The women also had a few events that were uniquely their own, such as wild cow milking, western pleasure riding, western trail horse riding, and the cloverleaf race.¹⁵³ Today, the cloverleaf race is better known as barrel racing, a sport in which only the ladies compete.

The first all-girls rodeo had moments that were full of excitement, such as when Miss Shirley Chafin was taken to Denver General with the broken ribs she had garnered in her cloverleaf race. Other events were not nearly as exciting; not a

¹⁵² James Cadwell, "Big Rodeo Crowd Thrilled by Prima Donna Mounts," *Denver Post*, 14 January 1946.

¹⁵³ "First All Girls Rodeo is a Thumping Success." *Rocky Mountain News*. 8 August 1949

single calf was roped. Sunny Webschall of Golden was overheard saying "Hey, call time. We can't run that steer to death."¹⁵⁴ Other girl's rodeos were a bit more action packed, although not always in good ways. The first all-girls rodeo held in Colorado Springs had more than its fair share of mishaps. Out of 45 entrants, Frances Wees of Big Springs, Texas was knocked unconscious, while Eddie Moore of Long Beach, California was almost totally thrown from her horse, as reported by the Colorado Springs Gazette.¹⁵⁵ Only her boot managed somehow to stay in the stirrup. In all, two accidents out of 45 is fairly good odds, and these all girls rodeos were a start of what would eventually become the Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA).

Women were also able to show their skills in the 1952 National Western Stock Show, which was to be the biggest in National Western history. Some spectators came to see the new Denver Coliseum, while others came for the entertainment and the spectacle of the horse show and rodeo just as they had always done. With the new Coliseum came new thrills as well. Two famous female trick riders who had preformed in Hollywood, Shirley and Sharron Lucas, were scheduled to perform that year. These two women were famous for their death-defying stunts performed while on the back of a horse. These stunts included the colorfully named "suicide drags," where the women would be

¹⁵⁴ "First All Girls Rodeo is a Thumping Success."

¹⁵⁵ "Thrill Packed Girls Rodeo Marked by two Accidents" Colorado Springs Gazette 24, June 1951

dragged behind the horses, “split to the neck” and the “hippodrome stand,”¹⁵⁶ both of which defy description. All of these stunts were guaranteed to wow audiences, and to showcase the talents of women riders in an era where many women stayed at home.

The girls of the rodeo would start slow, and work their way towards equality. One of the ways they did this was through developing their natural talent and skills on horseback. In 1963, an 11-year-old girl competed in the barrel racing competition at the National Western Stock Show Rodeo. Candice Merritt, the talented barrel racer, was competing in her first year as a working member of the Girls Rodeo Association.¹⁵⁷ This group was founded in 1948 with 74 original members and has since morphed into the WPRA with over 2,000 members.¹⁵⁸ Of course, rodeo was still considered a man’s world, and women have been trying to catch up ever since, even if it meant not competing.

The 1985 National Western Stock Show would be the year when the women would take a stand. This was the year they protested their status compared to the men. The barrel racers refused to race citing unequal pay as compared to their male counter parts. The National Western was offering the women \$10,000

¹⁵⁶ “World Famous Stars at National Western,” Denver Monitor, 21 December 1951.

¹⁵⁷ “Young Barrel Racer Thrills Rodeo Crowd,” Denver News, 16 January 1963.

¹⁵⁸ Women’s Professional Rodeo Association (<http://www.wpra.com/rodeohistory.htm>) Accessed 23 January 2004.

up from \$7,500 the previous year. The women were demanding \$17,000.¹⁵⁹ The women argued that barrel racing was one of the most expensive sports in rodeo because of the costs of their animals, which are crucial to the event, and the cost of the rest of their equipment. They wanted a more equal share of the prize money to make up for this, and they ended up boycotting the rodeo that year. They would return the next year, in 1986, after the National Western met their demands and allowed for the \$17,000 in prize money.

The National Western was actually behind the curve when it came to treating women as equals. The Coors Brewing Company of Golden, Colorado, which had been sponsoring the Chute Out series of rodeos throughout the country, was the first to pay a bonus stipend to the female barrel racers. This extra cash would put the women's prize money on par with what the men were earning. Coors has sponsored female as well as male rodeo stars. The most famous barrel racer, Charmayne James, with a lifetime earnings of \$1.9 million dollars and eleven world championships, was one of Coors many endorsers until she retired from the world of rodeo to become a mother. Today, barrel racing is the most obvious rodeo event for women to compete in, however, within the WPRA, women can compete in many of the events that men do. There are also the rodeo queens, ambassadors of the sport of rodeo.

¹⁵⁹ "Western Rodeo Lacks Events For Women Only," Grand Junction Sentinel, 9 January 1985.

The rodeo queen programs throughout the country are another way that women participate in rodeo. In Colorado, the rodeo queen Miss Rodeo Colorado is chosen at the Fourth of July Rodeo in Greeley, formally known as the Greeley Stampede. She then represents the state at events such as the PRCA National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas as well as making many appearances throughout Colorado, such as at the National Western Stock Show.¹⁶⁰ Many rodeo queens get their starts at smaller rodeos, such as the Colorado State High School Rodeo Queen, and work their way up to the big time with the ultimate goal to become Miss Rodeo America. Besides the title and prestige, the winner of this contest also receives a \$10,000 scholarship to help pay for college.

Rodeo Queens have a unique role in rodeo culture. They have clothes that denote their status as Rodeo Queens, which can be bought at specialty stores. They also have clinics and camps to help them train to become Rodeo Queens. According to the Rodeo Queen Website queens are judged in three areas. The first is their appearance; here an aspiring rodeo queen must look the part of a western girl. Pants and western-style shirts are the norm. Secondly, contestants are judged on their personality. This is where contestants show off their knowledge of the rodeo world and current events. Last, but certainly not least, is horsemanship. This is the most crucial part of the formula. Rodeo Queens make many appearances on

¹⁶⁰ Miss Rodeo Colorado (<http://www.missrodeocolorado.org/queen.htm>) Accessed 6 February 2004

horseback in parades and escort the winners of the various rodeo events around the arena for a victory lap. The ability to ride is important for any good rodeo queen, and potential queens will draw unknown horses, just like the men in rough stock events do.¹⁶¹ Stock contractors provide these horses, and the women will then have the opportunity to display their skill for the judges on their unfamiliar horse. Finally, rodeo queens must meet the following two requirements. They must have never been married and they must be under the age of 24-years-old.

All of these groups have come a long way to take their place in the sport of rodeo, yet all three of these groups bring a unique touch to this sport which is seen as the domain of white males. Time, however, marches on, and nothing remains the same. Those old traditions are changing allowing for rodeo to reach new groups of people, from city slicker to minorities to girls. After all, the sport of rodeo is an important part of our history, and it is important to acknowledge the contributions of all groups.

¹⁶¹ Miss Rodeo America (<http://www.missrodeo.com/compete.html>) Accessed 6 February 2004

Chapter Five

Modern Day Cows and Cowpokes

Red Fenwick once said, "I can't decide which way I like rodeo better-the old time, bare-knuckle, hell bent for pay day competition it used to be, or the more sophisticated, and records keeping sport that it has become." The man had a point, as rodeo has changed with the times. It has come along way from Deer Trail, Colorado and that early cowboy contest, or even before that momentous occasion when men rode the range betting on each others skills to kill time. Yet from its simple origins on the trail, rodeo has evolved into a modern form of entertainment for a modern audience. It has gone from daylight competitions in the great outdoors of the West to indoor laser light shows complete with a techno remix of the Bonanza theme song and pyrotechnics, which illustrate just how far the sport has come. Today, rock-and-roll music is as likely to play as classic country music; in fact the rock-and-roll seems to be the preference these days.

Cowboys have also experienced a revolution right along with their sport. The image of the lone drifter of the plains who might let off some steam when he hits the end of the trail at various unsavory establishments has been gradually replaced by families driving from rodeo to rodeo with equipment and horses in tow. These men and women take their sport very seriously, as well they should. They work just as hard as those toiling away on the gridiron or the basketball

court. They take their sport just as seriously as other athletes, and they have started to train for their competitions as any other athlete might do, although this has been a slower change than the promoters might like to admit. They also take their safety seriously as more and more bull riders are wearing protective helmets and vests, which were developed in 1993. "Tuff" Hedemen, a former bull-rider-turned-rodeo-promoter ponders how bull riders survive. "What surprises me is that more people don't die"¹⁶² When one is up against an animal that is 10 times the size of the average cowboy, some safety gear seems to make a lot of sense, although it has been slow going. For bull-riders, the vests were the easier equipment to convert into the cowboy culture, as they look and fit like a western style vest. The vests can be worn while the bull riders keep their image as tough athletes who fear nothing, which can't be far from the truth. They also incur fewer injuries with the vests, which would logically allow for more performances and more money. A vest is a good investment; however, the vests can only do so much. They help protect organs in the chest cavity from the inevitable stomping of a one-ton bull, but every so often the bulls do get in a lucky shot. When one leaves the chute, it is just the rider against the bull, "And the bulls do not care."¹⁶³

The Professional Bull Riders, competing against the PRCA's Xtreme Bulls Tour, market themselves as the world's first extreme sport with a \$1 million top

¹⁶² Kevin Simpson "A World of Hurt" *Denver Post* 7 December 2003

¹⁶³ Ibid.

prize at their national championships. When those in-the-know refer to bull-riding they say it's "The most dangerous eight second in sports,"¹⁶⁴ and they have a point. According to a series of articles that appeared in the *Denver Post* in December 2003, "The percentage of 'exposures' resulting in injury for rough stock events...is five times greater than football, more than six times greater than wrestling, and more than 12 times greater than ice hockey."¹⁶⁵ In short, the sport is dangerous, which is part of the appeal. Despite these statistics, it has been harder to convince these same cowboys who wear vests that helmets are also an important piece of safety equipment, although you do see more and more cowboys giving up their hats in favor of preventing concussions. Wiley Peterson, one of the top riders on the PBR, wears one. "You can hang on to tradition and lose your teeth, or lose some tradition and keep your teeth...this is an extreme sport, and it's moving away from the cowboy feel to it."¹⁶⁶

Despite this gradual shift, the greatest obstacle to safety gear would have to be the culture of the cowboy. Bull riders of the past wore cowboys hats, and the cowboys of the present seem slow to embrace the change to helmets, despite the fact that 12 percent of all bull riding injuries are concussions.¹⁶⁷ One of the first

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

steps towards helmets began with World Champion Charlie Sampson, who after being seriously injured in a command performance for the president, was forced to wear a lacrosse helmet with mask to prevent further injury and death. Today, that particular helmet can be viewed at the Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame. Unfortunately wearing a helmet is a rare occurrence, even today. Many cowboys feel that wearing a helmet slows down their reaction times and makes them more vulnerable to injury due to the false confidence this equipment provides. This is complicated by the fact that these early helmets are just modified hockey helmets, which are lighter than the original. These helmets do help with some head trauma, but not all serious head injuries in bull-riding are going to be prevented with a mere helmet. That is just a fact of life for bull-riders.

In 1981, the Justin Boots Company sponsored a study to track rodeo injuries. Today, they have compiled a database from the last 20 plus years that allow for better treatment of injuries which lets cowboys to get back in the arena quicker.¹⁶⁸ Another group of researchers at the West Texas A&M University have found that those who compete in rodeo have a 89 percent chance of being injured over the course of a season; in comparison, college football players only have a 47 percent chance of injury.¹⁶⁹ For the cowboy, getting in and out of physical therapy quickly is imperative to have a successful and lucrative career. These statistics are

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

all well and good, but what of the stoic culture of the cowboy? One can assume that not all injuries are reported; in fact, it is highly likely that many of the lesser injuries are ignored by many series competitors. A typical cowboy attitude according to one orthopedic surgeon is, "I had two six-packs and it still hurts. What do I do?"¹⁷⁰ Cowboys will often compete injured because they can. Royce Ford once competed with a broken foot; he simply went out and bought a boot that would fit after his injury caused the foot to swell three sizes. He may have been forced to use crutches to get around, but one doesn't need to be able to walk to ride a bronc.¹⁷¹ If the cowboys don't compete, they can't win, and without winning they couldn't make any money. Although the attitude of cowboys towards the medical profession is changing, it is going to be slow-going as part of the appeal of the sport is its inherent danger. Part of the challenges facing health-care professionals that help the cowboys are the cowboys themselves.

It is that danger and adrenaline rush that has given way to an unusual phenomenon, the bull-riding school. Larry Lancaster operates the Rock and Roll Rodeo School out of Arvada, Colorado that also instructs students in bull-fighting if that is their dream. Lancaster caters mostly to men aged 15 to 25, with a few women signing on, but not many. The school allows the rookies to ride smaller bulls, usually weighing between 200 to 700 pounds less than the bulls used in

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ James B. Meadows "Cowboy Built Ford Tough" *Rocky Mountain News* 10 January 2004.

competition. These bulls also tend to buck less than those used by professional bull-riders.¹⁷² While the bulls are smaller, the thrill remains the same, although safety regulations at the school are much tougher than those of the PRCA. The school provides all protective gear such as vests, helmets, and protective braces for the neck and back. The school focuses on proper techniques to help keep their clientele safe and coming back for more. They also train students in the art of bull fighting. Bull-fighters are an integral part of keeping the riders safe once they are off the bull, the “First line of defense”¹⁷³ according to official PRCA documents. They are responsible for distracting the bull from the often disoriented rider. These men must be very athletic as they are constantly leaping out of harms way and the bull’s reach.

These amateur cowboys are merely weekend warriors when compared to real working cowboys who also just happen to compete in their own rodeos. The Working Ranch Cowboy Association is a group that is “Preserving the heritage and life-style of the Working Ranch Cowboy (WRCA).”¹⁷⁴ This group was founded in 1995 to promote the rodeo skills of real life ranch hands in the modern world. While these men and women may not be competing in the PRCA, they are

¹⁷² Dahlia Jean Weinstien “Bell Sounding at Rodeo School? Hold On.” *Rocky Mountain News* January 2004

¹⁷³ The Sport of Cowboys: An Inside Look into the World of Professional Rodeo PRCA Pamphlet p.2

¹⁷⁴ Working Ranch Cowboy Association (<http://www.wrca.org/>) Accessed 9 March 2004

athletes in their own right. These are the men and women still living the lifestyle that gave birth to rodeo. In fact, to join, they must be either ranch owners or employed on a working ranch; on occasion, exceptions will be made based on unemployment caused by range conditions.¹⁷⁵ The members pay dues based on their status at the ranch, with cowboys paying less in dues than an owner would. The WRCA has its own sanctioned rodeos in both Hugo, Colorado and Colorado Springs, Colorado, and it also has its own World Championship Rodeo. The WRCA differs from the PRCA in that its events are tailored to the skills needed by a working cowboy,

In the Ranch Horse Show, one of the events at a WRCA event, a contestant and his horse must complete a set of skills within a five-minute time limit, ranging from boxing in a cow to roping a cow to how quickly the horse can perform certain key maneuvers. On occasion a rerun will be given, but according to the official rule book, this is “only given if the cow is blind, crippled, insane, or leaves the arena working floor.” In other words, this is a rather rare occurrence. Contestants are both scored and timed, and only the most competent cowboys and cowgirls can win. Other contests include chasing and saddling wild horses, the mock branding of calves, and the milking of wild horses.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ “Ranchers Rodeo” Colorado Country Life June 2003

Another type of rodeo that is often overlooked is the Weekend Rodeo. These rodeos are held for tourists in mountain towns throughout the state, such as Steamboat Springs and Winter Park. These are not a recent development as they have been around almost as long as rodeo itself, when locals would compete for a quick 20 bucks. “Those were the days when some guys, not your typical cowboys but people from the ski area, would maybe have a beer or two and bet on a bull on a dare,”¹⁷⁷ reminisces J.C. Trujillo of Steamboat, who was an elite bareback rider before he retired. Weekend rodeos are a great way to introduce a new audience to an already growing sport, but a sport that has some of the most well mannered athletes in the world.

Rodeo riders look out for each other. The WRCA is dedicated to its Cowboy Crisis Fund, which helps cowboys and their families in times of need. This can happen quite a bit on the rodeo circuit. There are many other groups that also exist to help cowboy. Health South, a physical therapy group, donates its resources to aid injured cowboys, while others will hire cowboys for less dangerous and less thrilling work that will look much better on an application for health insurance than bronc buster. Cowboys have a short career in which to find their fortune, and many will turn to agents to arrange endorsement deals which can also pull a cowboy family through a tight spot after an injury. The PBR also has

¹⁷⁷ Melinda Mawdsley “The Cowboy Life” Steamboat Pilot 21 June 2003

set aside money from its television revenues to help its injured bull riders and their families while they get back on their feet and back on the bulls.

Cowboys only get paid if they enter and win. No guarantees exist in rodeo, and helping one another out is one of the basic tenets of the cowboy out of necessity more than anything else. Cowboys who have enough to make it to a particular rodeo may lack the resources to pay for a hotel room. Cowboy Bruce Ford recalls, "There were times I in a sleeping bag in a horse stall at rodeos because I couldn't afford a room, and then there have been some of the most glamorous stays one old country boy can imagine." The fortunes of cowboys on the rodeo circuit are always in flux from glamour to starving and back again, so they do what they can for their colleagues.

During World War I and World War II, the cowboys who could not volunteer were dedicated to the war efforts through the promotion of war bonds and conservation of resources. Today this spirit can still be seen at rodeos among competitors. Even though cowboys themselves may be competing in the same event does not mean that they are only looking out for themselves. In fact, cowboys are always sharing, be it equipment, information about a particular bucking horse or nasty bull, or simply a ride to the next big event, cowboys are the shining example of good sportsmanship. Unlike stars of other sports, cowboys are genuinely approachable. They love to talk to the fans and sign autographs. They tend to be natural ambassadors for their sport. This was not always the case. After

all, the reputation of the cowboy was not always so sparkling clean, but today good behavior and even better manners are the norm.

This good behavior and kindness is also demonstrated by the treatment of animals in the sport. Any cowboy in a rough stock event knows that half of the score comes from the animal and half from the cowboy. If an animal athlete does not perform to its highest capabilities, neither can the cowboy. Riders who draw a less than spectacular mount will then have the option of a re-ride; however, that can be a daunting choice fraught with danger. Riders involved in timed events are even more dependent upon their animals for prizes. If a horse is not up to snuff, a cowboy's options are limited; it is hard to compete with an uncooperative animal under you. Therefore, it is logical to assume that riders will take better care of the animals than they do of themselves. This is true both during an animal's days of competition and after they have been retired to pasture. Harry Vold, one of the stock contractors in Colorado, keeps his retired bucking broncs in a nice pasture in Avondale. "We like to keep our horses around forever. It's like an old folk's home, and it can get costly, but they've earned their keep."¹⁷⁸

To this end, the PRCA has developed a set of guidelines for the treatment of livestock. This is a set of rules that actually go back to the 1930s. Today, the PRCA consults with the American Veterinary Medicine Association (AVMA) and

¹⁷⁸ Animal Welfare; The Care and Treatment of Professional Rodeo Livestock PRCA Brochure. P 4

accepts their recommendations for the care of rodeo animals. Spectators at PRCA events should be aware that all animals in the arena are treated in the most humane manner, as any card carrying PRCA member is obligated to follow all of the 60 rules dealing with livestock treatment. PRCA rodeos also have a veterinarian on the site at all times in case of an injury. When an injury does occur, procedures are in place to take care of the animal. When an animal goes down, the first thing that happens is a set of screens are brought out to help block out the audience from the horse or cattle's vision. The animal injured animal is than moved by a stretcher that is attached to a trailer from the ring. The animal is than placed under the care of a professional veterinarian who will determine the best course of action for the animals well-being and health. On occasion, an animal unfortunately has to be put down, but this is an exceedingly rare occurrence.

Smaller rodeos may have a different set of rules, but the PRCA holds many conferences for smaller rodeo groups to educate them about the proper treatment of rodeo animals. As for those who break the rules within the PRCA, they are disqualified and fined.¹⁷⁹ The PRCA is dedicated to insuring the safety and well being of its livestock. The responsibility for evaluating the livestock falls on the judges who are trained not only to judge the performance of cowboys, but also to notice any problems with the animals themselves during the competition. "If a guy

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. p 5

uses unnecessary roughness when flanking his calf, he's automatically fined and disqualified"¹⁸⁰ according to the PRCA rules. These judges are put through rigorous training to be able to judge and to determine how the animals are being treated both in, and in some cases, outside of the ring. They are then required to go in for more training throughout the course of their careers.

One could argue that the animals are treated better than the cowboys who ride them. The injury rate for animals in the 67 PRCA sanction rodeos held throughout the year is very low. "Of the 85,638 animal exposures, 25 were injured...that translates into a rate of less than three-hundredths of one percent."¹⁸¹ Some critics will point to the flank straps used on bucking stock as an example of cruelty to animals, but those who have spent time researching what makes an animal buck, i.e. stock contractors, will tell you that a majority of animals will not buck. Breeders are looking for traits such as muscular hindquarters.¹⁸² In other words, they have to be bred to buck. A flank strap tied too tightly to the animal will usually cause the animal not to buck, an undesirable occurrence. The purpose of the strap is to cause the horse or bull to want to rid itself of the object by bucking, not to prevent that action. A horse has 18 ribs to protect its kidney and the flank strap is placed so that these organs are in no danger. Despite popular

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. p 5

¹⁸¹ Ibid. p. 6

¹⁸² Ibid . p 4

misconception, the strap is not placed near the animal's genital area. Flank straps also do not have any foreign objects protruding from the strap into the animal to cause pain, as this is against PRCA rules. Flank straps must also be lined with sheepskin or neoprene to prevent injury or discomfort to the animal.¹⁸³ Most cowboys respect the bucking animals, and usually they are the ones who pay the price with their own bodies for having quality animals in the arena.

As for calves and steers, they must meet certain requirements. Calves used in roping events must be in good health and weigh between 220-280 pounds.¹⁸⁴ These animals grow so fast that they will only appear in a few rodeos before they are too large to compete. Steers used in team roping must weigh less than 650 pounds, while the steers used in the bull dogging events must meet a minimum weight requirement of 450 pounds, which is a lot heavier than the guy attempting to catch and control the steer. If anyone is going to be hurt in steer wrestling, it will most likely be the cowboy. While the horns of the animal are covered to protect man and best injuries still occur. In steer wrestling the rate of injury for the cowboy is 8.7 percent according to the *Denver Post* in 2003.¹⁸⁵ This is quite a bit better than the bull-riders who also get up close and personal with a bovine.

¹⁸³ Ibid. p 8

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. p 7

¹⁸⁵ Simpson.

Another complaint of those who oppose rodeo is the use of cattle prods, which are powered by flashlight batteries, and the use of spurs in competition.¹⁸⁶ The PRCA rules state that the prod should be used as little as possible, and only used on the shoulder or hip area. Dr. Jeff Hall, who has spent many years working with cattle, does not feel a prod is harmful. "I personally have been shocked with the type of device on several occasions. This type of shock was annoying but produced no lasting or harmful effects."¹⁸⁷ Spurs, which are worn by cowboys on the heels of their boots, are dulled to avoid injury to the animal. In fact, the PRCA has stated since 1938 that locked rowels may not be used and that spurs must be less than one eighth of an inch thick. Both of these measures prevent the spurs from tearing into the animals, who have skin that is five to seven times thicker than human skin.¹⁸⁸ Both timed and rough stock contestants try to improve performance by using spurs, but not to harm the animal.

Rodeo has always had a bit of a problem with animal rights groups, going back to almost the very beginning of the sport. Today, one of the biggest rodeo opponents is People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). This group is dedicated to animal rights, and advocates vegetarianism. PETA is also against the wearing of animal's skins of all types, including leather or especially fur, which

¹⁸⁶Animal Welfare. .p 9

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. p 9

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. p 9

they have been known to splash with gallons of red paint. Currently they are engaged in a "Buck the Rodeo" campaign, which has produced quite a bit of literature on the cruelty perpetrated by rodeo on the animals used for the sport. They are lobbying the governor of Wyoming to remove the rodeo imagery from its license plates through the use of letters such as the following:

I am writing on behalf of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals' more than 600,000 members to ask that you modernize your state's "bucking bronco" license plate to reflect 21st century understanding of the nature of animals...We hope Wyoming will give the "bucking bronco" license plate the boot.¹⁸⁹

This letter goes on to argue the organization's position on rodeo and present their evidence of the cruelty in rodeos. Their Web site also lists 47 incidents involving animal injuries from 1995 to January of 2004. However, quite a few of those injuries were humans who were injured, not animals. This leaves one with the statistics compiled the PRCA, which shows very few animals being injured in the course of rodeo.

PETA has also lobbied the PRCA to curtail the use of flank straps in rodeo, and to eliminate the calf-roping events all together. The following letter to PRCA president Steven Hatchell outlines their concerns:

The rodeo is not a sport, it is a macho bully fest. Please consider that the horses and bulls used during the events buck violently and beyond their normal ability because of the straps and ropes cinched tightly around their abdomen...During calf roping, calves, running at speeds of up to 27

¹⁸⁹ People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (<http://www.bucktherodeo.com/platelet.html>) Accessed 11 March 2004

miles per hour, are jerked off their feet by a rope slung around their necks and then slammed to the ground.¹⁹⁰

What this organization overlooks is that these skills were needed in the old West to protect animals. A calf would have been roped if it needed medical attention. This was the only way to help this animal on the open range. Steer roping would have been performed for similar reasons. They also tend to overlook the injuries incurred by human competitors in rodeo, which are more common and more severe than the few injuries sustained by livestock. PETA is so dedicated to the cause of animal rights in rodeo that they were seen handing out pamphlets at the 2004 National Western Stock Show in Denver, which would have been a tough crowd to convince.

PETA also has a section of their Web site dedicated to encouraging its members to write and email rodeo sponsors from Dodge Trucks to Coors Brewing Company. The goal is to discourage these large corporations from making contributions to the sport. PETA is overlooking the fact that with over 70 stock contractors throughout the country, competition can be fierce for the best and healthiest stock. These are valuable animals, and once the animal is done bucking and his career is over, the animals can still produce profit by breeding, making them unlikely candidates for the slaughterhouse. The science of animal husbandry is very exacting, and a proven buckner can sire many offspring, making quite a bit

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

of money for its owner. Economic considerations aside, PETA is a determined group, but history has shown that rodeo is a tough survivor of many different animal rights protests, and today rodeo is a way of life for many and an exciting event for those who lack the daring to actually try to ride a bull themselves. Rodeo is a sport that is growing and becoming more and more popular due in part to the popularity of television. From its beginnings in the Nineteenth century, rodeo has only seen its numbers go up. In 2001, more fans attended rodeos than in any other year in the history of the sport.¹⁹¹ .

This is a sport that is very accessible to the novice due to the efforts of talented rodeo announcers throughout the country. They must be part entertainer and part educator. Announcers must let the rookie spectators know what is going on and why while simultaneously providing the information needed for those who eat, sleep, and breathe rodeo. They also interact with the rodeo clowns during breaks in the action keeping an audiences attention from wondering. An announcer must have a quick eye and a silver tongue to be successful. Just like any other cowboy, the announcers are also honored at the Hall of Fame, as are bull-fighters, trick riders, and those behind the scenes dealing with the more mundane aspects of the sport such as the record keeping.

¹⁹¹ The Sport of Cowboys: An Inside Look into the World of Professional Rodeo PRCA Pamphlet p.2

Records are rodeo's lifeline. Without someone keeping track of the information, rodeo would be lost. Someone must record the scores and times, someone must handout the checks, and someone must report the results the organization sanctioning the event, be it the Little Britches Rodeo or the PRCA. Secretaries are the heart and soul of any organization and they are often overlooked, as are those behind the chutes taking care of the animals and preparing them for their big moment. Many hours go into producing any rodeo, from the weekend affairs in the mountains to the Colorado State Fair. Rodeo is a lot of work for all involved, but it is also a way of life that has overcome many obstacles to become the major sport it is today. This is a sport that only promises to get bigger as more and more Americans are discovering their pasts in rodeo rings throughout the country.

Conclusion

Rodeo is the only sport that developed from a profession, and it has developed into something very similar yet very different from what it began as in the 1800s. Today, this sport is a huge industry, with professions ranging from life stock contractors to those who manufacture the equipment needed by these cowboys. The question becomes why is this so popular today? The answer is simple. The sport of rodeo reminds us of our past. We as Americans have a sense of nostalgia for our frontier roots, especially those in the West. Americans are identified as cowboys by the rest of the world, sometime in a positive manner, sometimes in a negative manner. Regardless of the connotations there is no evading this cowboy image of our country and our people. We wear cowboy hats at the Olympics, our president meets with world-champion cowboys, and we cannot escape our past, especially if we continue to embrace it with such affection.

Author Louis L'Amour has written many novels on the way the West was. Even if his stories are not quite as accurate as history, they are part of our culture and have become part of our history in their own unique way. With his novels of the Sackett family and with L'Amour's own lifestyle of spending his days in the Strater hotel and the Diamond Belle Saloon in Durango, he has created an image that is hard to ignore. This image is so hard to ignore that it has become accepted as truth in the hearts of many Americans. Today, Hollywood continues

to produce films based on what we believe to be the authentic history of the old West, some of them coming from L'Amour's own novels. The John Wayne film *Hondo* was based on the story *The Gift of Cochise*. These novels and stories may not be historically accurate; however, it is this sense of romance and adventure that keeps us coming back for more. We love the danger; we love the idea of the lone cowboy who saves the day and gets the girl just in time to ride off into the sunset. We love to sit spellbound on the edge of our seats as these men and women risk danger, which explains why rodeo is still going strong as it moves into its third century of existence. "It was fun, but you have to be a little bit wild...It is an exciting life, and I wouldn't trade my rodeo for anything"¹⁹² a former bareback rider relates, which seems to sum up the sport quite nicely. Rodeo is a fun, wild, and exciting lifestyle.

Rodeo is a sport that is driven by adrenaline. Cowboys can go from the top of the world one minute, to lying in the dirt with both their dreams and their bodies crushed beneath the hoof of an indifferent animal. Cowboys go from living the high life in one city to sleeping in the stable with their horse two cities later. Both the sport and the lifestyle are rollercoaster rides that are not for the faint of heart. This is a sport that has been quietly gaining ground for years. These men and women may only work a few minutes a year, but when they do work, they work hard. It is no simple task to rope a calf or to ride a bull. No one could argue the

¹⁹²Melinda Mawdsley "The Cowboy Life" Steamboat Pilot 21 June 2003

fact that rodeo cowboys earn their money the hard way, the same way that the earliest rodeo cowboys earned their money

In the early years, cowboys may not have always been the most respectable folks; in fact, they were infamous for causing trouble when let out in the big cities. But today, they have done an about face. In a 1954 letter to the editor of the Rodeo Sports News, Patty Ols of Knoa Indiana, writes, "I want to go on the record as saying I have never in my life met anyone so kind and considerate as the boys and girls in rodeo."¹⁹³ Today, rodeo is full of some of the nicest professional athletes you will ever meet, and they are professionals, not prima donnas. Anyone accusing these men and women of this obviously knows very little of the sport. Cowboys will help out a fellow cowboy in need, which seems to be good policy based on the simple principal of karma. After all, you never know when you will be the one who needs a helping hand. Cowboys have also learned the art of good sportsmanship. Cowboys frequently carpool, and you never want to be the loser riding with a winner who will not stop gloating. Therefore, cowboys learned long ago you don't rub in the fact that you won, and they pass that tradition on to their children along with the rest of the traditions of the sport.

Rodeo is both a sport and a culture; it is also becoming one of the fastest growing sports in America with many different levels of competition ranging from the 3-year-old mutton buster to the high school student who competes on weekend

¹⁹³ Rodeo Sports News 1 December 1954

to the professional with millions of dollars in endorsements. This is no small feat for something that was considered a job not so long ago; in fact, the rise of rodeo in the United States and in Colorado is a wonderful thing. It allows for the old rodeo families to keep their traditions while allowing those who couldn't tell a bull from a steer to remember where they really came from and to embrace the Wild West past of this great country.

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