

# Rodeo

## A UNIQUELY AMERICAN SPORT

BY PHYLLIS MCINTOSH

**T**he chute flies open and out lunges a bucking horse, rearing and leaping into the air, trying to throw off the determined rider. With one arm waving in the air, the cowboy holds on with his other hand to a handle on a leather strap around the horse's body. If he hangs on for an interminable eight seconds and the horse continues to buck with all his might, the cowboy might earn a good score. If not, he will pick himself up from the arena floor, dust himself off, and wait for next time.

Welcome to the wild world of rodeo, a uniquely American sport that combines the glamour and big money of 21st century professional athletics with the spirit of the Old West, when cowboys tamed wild horses and herded thousands of head of cattle on the open plains. What started as friendly contests between rival cowhands has grown into a mega-business that attracts 23 million spectators and millions more television viewers every year. The largest rodeos today are week-long extravaganzas featuring a dazzling array of entertainment and thousands of dollars in prize money for winning competitors. Instead of gathering around dusty corrals, fans sit in comfortable modern arenas, watching close-ups of the action on giant screens.



(above) A rodeo clown dressed in colorful protective gear awaits his turn in the ring.

(below) In this photo from 1958, cowboys work hard to keep ahead of a prairie fire during the annual fall roundup of cattle.

(opposite) Riders from the National Western Stock show parade in downtown Denver, Colorado.

## THE HISTORY OF RODEO

Contests pitting man against beast are nothing new. On the isle of Crete, 3,000-year-old pictographs show ancient Minoans performing acrobatics with bulls. The Romans flocked to the Colosseum to watch gladiators battle all manner of exotic animals. What makes rodeo unique is that it originated not as a spectator sport but with the everyday work of cowboys on the western range.

The American cowboy can trace his origins back to the Spaniards who, in the 1500s, introduced both cattle and horses to Mexico and to what would later become the southwestern United States. The earliest cowboys were the *vaqueros*, Spanish servants or Native Americans who rode horses to herd cattle. The word *rodeo* comes from the Spanish *rodear*, meaning to encircle or surround. As they rounded up cattle on the open range, cowboys often rode wild horses and roped calves for branding—activities re-created in today's classic rodeo events.

According to the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA), rodeo was born in 1864 when two groups of cowboys from neighboring ranches met in Deer Trail, Colorado, to settle an argument over who was better at performing these everyday ranching tasks. Formal competitions began in the heyday of American cattle drives in the late 1800s, when western towns began holding events called stampedes, roundups, or fiestas (a Spanish word meaning festival). No one knows for sure which town actually held the first spectator event, but there is general agreement that Prescott, Arizona, in 1888, was the first to charge

admission and award prize money to contestants. It has done so continuously ever since, and today the Prescott Frontier Days Rodeo ranks among the top 25 rodeos in the nation.

Over the next few decades, a number of other western towns launched events that, like Prescott's, are now among the largest and most popular on the rodeo circuit. These include Cheyenne Frontier Days in Wyoming, the largest outdoor rodeo, which since 1919 has billed itself as "the daddy of 'em all"; Pendleton Roundup in Oregon, known for its logo of a cowboy on a bucking horse with the slogan "Let 'er Buck"; and the Calgary Stampede in Alberta, Canada, which draws thousands of American as well as Canadian spectators.

These events were immediately successful because they combined traditional cowboy contests with theatrical embellishments, such as mock Indian attacks, inspired by the Wild West shows popular around the turn of the century. Big rodeos still feature a great deal of showmanship. Almost all have parades and musical entertainment, but the largest also have such attractions as lavish grandstand shows, fireworks, carnival rides, western art shows, and aerial demonstrations by Air Force fighter jets. They may also stage special events for youngsters, beauty pageants, and fun competitions such as chuckwagon races, which recall the days when drivers of the wagons that brought food to cowboys on the range would race each other back to town.





# CLASSIC RODEO EVENTS

Despite the added attractions, the heart of rodeo remains the classic riding and roping events that are a direct legacy of the working cowboy. The seven competitive events sanctioned by the PRCA are divided into roughstock and timed events. The roughstock events, which are scored according to the cowboy's—and the animal's—performance, include:

- **Bareback bronc riding.** Considered the most physically demanding rodeo event, bareback bronc riding requires the cowboy to ride a wild, unsaddled horse for eight seconds while holding on with just one hand to a “rigging,” a handhold similar to a leather suitcase handle. To receive a good score, the rider must spur the horse in time with the animal's bucking action. The horse's performance counts for half the total score. (1)
- **Bull riding.** In this most dangerous of rodeo events, the cowboy must stay on a

wildly bucking 2,000-pound bull for eight seconds. As in the bareback and saddle bronc events, he may use only one hand to hold on, in this case to a rope wrapped around the bull's chest. (2 and 7)

- **Saddle bronc riding.** Recalling the days when cowboys had to tame wild horses by “breaking” them to the saddle, this event also requires the rider to synchronize his spurring action to the animal's bucking movements. Using just one hand to hold onto a thick rein, the cowboy must try to stay firmly in the saddle. (3)

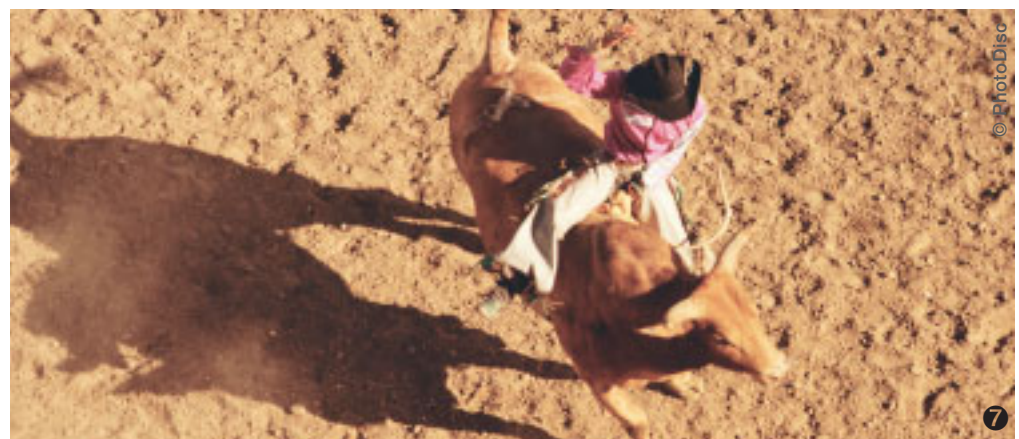
**T**imed events, in which the contestant tries to complete a task in the fastest time, include:

- **Steer wrestling.** With the aid of a “hazer” who keeps the steer running in the right direction, the contestant jumps from a horse running 30 miles per hour, reaches for the steer's horns, slides him to a stop, and wrestles him to the ground. This is an event that requires great speed, strength, and precision. (opposite page)
- **Calf roping.** In this event, another legacy of the working ranch, a cowboy on horseback chases a calf and throws a looped rope over its head. The cowboy then dis-

mounts, lays the calf on its side, and ties any three of its legs together. (4)

- **Team roping.** The only true team event, this requires precise timing of the actions of two people: the header, who ropes a steer around its horns or neck, and the heeler, who rides in and ropes the steer's hind legs. (line illustration ©Duane Reichert)
- **Barrel racing.** In this, the only all-female event in professional rodeo, the goal is to ride a horse as quickly as possible around three barrels arranged in a cloverleaf pattern. (5)

Besides the cowboys and cowgirls who compete, other personnel are crucial to the success and safety of these events. Among the most important are the rodeo clowns and bullfighters who often entertain the audience between events but whose real job is to distract angry bulls and lure them away from cowboys on the ground. (6)







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# THE GROWTH OF PROFESSIONAL RODEO

From its beginnings through the 1920s, rodeo was an unorganized hodgepodge of competitions with conflicting schedules and different sets of rules. Then, in 1929 the more prosperous rodeos formed the Rodeo Association of America to set schedules and uniform rules of competition. Rodeo cowboys themselves did not organize until 1936, when contestants angry about the distribution of prize money formed what they called the Cowboys Turtle Association. They chose the unusual name because they had been slow to join forces but had finally stuck out their necks for their cause. In 1945, the group was renamed the more businesslike Rodeo Cowboys Association, and in 1975 it became the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association.

Today, the PRCA governs what has become a high-stakes sport. It sanctions nearly 700 rodeos, in 47 states and four Canadian provinces, that offer a combined total of more than \$35 million in prize money. The largest rodeos, such as the 20-day Rodeo Houston in Texas, attract up to 400 contestants vying for prizes of \$4,000 to \$5,000 in each event.

During the winter and summer seasons, professional cowboys travel constantly to compete in dozens of rodeos—they call it “going down

the road.” All of them hope to earn enough prize money to advance to championship rounds and eventually qualify for the National Finals Rodeo, an annual 10-day affair that is to rodeo what the World Series is to baseball. At Finals, the top 15 national money-winners in each rodeo event participate in 10 days of competitions, contending for part of the \$5 million in prize money, the title of world champion in their event, and the gold buckles and saddles that are awarded along with the titles.

While the top stars may earn more than \$200,000 a year, only a few make it to the top. Of the 7,000 cowboys who are members of the PRCA, probably only 1,000 or so are able to earn a living at rodeo. The majority of rodeo contestants have other jobs and compete only on weekends. To serve these competitors, the PRCA created the circuit system in 1975. Cowboys compete in one of 12 circuits, determined by geographic regions. Each circuit awards points and maintains standings for competitors. The leading circuit cowboys compete in finals in their region, and winners of those events, along with regular season cowboys, compete in a national showdown, the Dodge National Circuit Finals, held every year in Idaho.

*(opposite page, top)* Wyoming hosted President Theodore Roosevelt, seen in this old photo watching a buffalo ride, at the Cheyenne Frontier Days rodeo in 1910.

*(opposite page, bottom)* A saddle bronc rider is challenged to stay in the saddle as his horse leaves the ground.

*(below)* A rider in a mutton bustin' competition, for 3 to 5-year-olds, hangs on tight.

## THE MAKING OF A RODEO COWBOY

In the past, most rodeo cowboys came from families with ranching or rodeo backgrounds. About a third of modern competitors have no such connections, but there are ways for even a city slicker to learn the sport. Children as young as three can start out as “mutton busters,” holding on as long as they can on the back of a sheep. At age eight, they qualify for National Little Britches Rodeo and as teenagers for Junior Rodeo. Many future rodeo cowboys learn rodeo skills through high school and college rodeo. But most modern competitors get their training at the rodeo schools held throughout the year, often organized by leading professional cowboys.

Beginner or veteran, amateur or pro, spectator or performer, all rodeo aficionados would no doubt agree with the description offered by the National Professional Rodeo Association (NPRA), an organization that sanctions rodeos across the U.S. Midwest. Rodeo, says the NPRA, is “the most intense, bone-jarring two hours in sports – 8 seconds at a time.”



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# RODEO HEROES

As in any sport, there is no shortage of “stars” in rodeo. Three standouts from different eras are described below.

- **Bill Pickett** Born in 1870 to former slaves, Pickett is the most famous black rodeo cowboy and the only individual credited with inventing a classic rodeo event. As a performer in Wild West shows in the early 1900s, Pickett would jump from horseback onto a steer and wrestle the animal to the ground, sometimes using his teeth to grip the steer’s lip as he had seen bulldogs do in the course of their work as cattle dogs. Though officially known now as steer wrestling, Pickett’s invention is still often called bulldogging. Pickett is immortalized in the ProRodeo Hall of Fame and in the Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo, the nation’s only black touring rodeo.
- **Casey Tibbs** Perhaps the most famous professional rodeo athlete of all time, Tibbs was a legendary saddle bronc rider. In 1949, at age 19, he became the youngest-ever national saddle bronc champion. He went on to win a total of six championships

in the event, a record that still holds today. He also won two all-around cowboy championships and one bareback riding championship. Tibbs is immortalized in “The Champ,” a 20-foot bronze statue of him riding the famous bucking horse Necktie, which stands in front of the ProRodeo Hall of Fame in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

- **Ty Murray** One of the greatest stars of modern rodeo, Murray is the only seven-time world champion all-around cowboy in professional rodeo history. Also a champion in bull riding and bareback bronc riding, Murray at age 23 became the youngest rodeo cowboy millionaire. He still holds the record for most money ever won at a rodeo (\$124,821 at the National Finals in 1993) and the highest single-year earnings (\$297,896 in 1993). Known as “The King of the Cowboys,” Murray retired in 2002 at the age of 32, with more than \$3 million in career earnings.

(bottom left) A herd of cattle gathers near a statue of the late world-champion rodeo star Casey Tibbs in Fort Pierre, South Dakota.

(bottom right) Ty Murray (now retired) demonstrates his expert bull riding at the 1994 Cheyenne Frontier Days Rodeo.

(opposite page) A rider shows great concentration during the bareback competition of the 2001 Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo in Phoenix, Arizona.

Professional rodeo also gives credit to the animals that make the cowboys stars. The 182 members of the ProRodeo Hall of Fame include 22 animals, mostly broncs and bulls with names like Hell’s Angel, Bodacious, and Tornado.









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## WEBSITES OF INTEREST

### Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association

<http://www.prorodeo.com>

The PRCA is the premier organization for professional rodeo. Its website has the latest rodeo news, explanations of rodeo events, and information on the ProRodeo Hall of Fame.

### Cowboys and Cowgirls

<http://www.cyberrodeo.com/guysgals>

This website has more than 60 links concerning rodeo, cowboys, and all things western. Especially useful is "Let's Rodeo," which in turn links to rodeo associations and abundant information about the sport.

### Rodeo Attitude

<http://www.rodeoattitude.com>

A newsy site that bills itself as "your premier rodeo website," this site includes stories, in newsletter format, about rodeo events, personnel, and trivia.

### Cheyenne Frontier Days

<http://www.cfdrodeo.com>

The official website of the "World's Largest Rodeo and Western Celebration," this site features history and stories about the event and offers a good overview of a major rodeo.

### Rodeo Houston

<http://hlsr.com>

This website for one of the largest, richest rodeos on the professional circuit contains a wealth of information about rodeo history, events, and terminology. It even has video clips.

## REFERENCES

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(left top) A rider struggles to stay on his horse for the required eight seconds in the bareback competition of the Conejo Valley Days Rodeo in Southern California.

(left center) This unlucky cowboy has lost his grip and is falling over the bull's head in the bull riding event of the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas, Nevada.

(left bottom) A rodeo clown gets pushed by a bull during the bull fighting event of the National Finals Rodeo. Extensive training enables clowns to make this dangerous sport into humorous entertainment for rodeo patrons.

## TALKIN' RODEO

**bronc or bronco** a wild or untamed horse.

**bucker** a horse or bull that rears and kicks in attempts to throw off a rider.

**bulldogging** another name for steer wrestling, a rodeo event in which a cowboy tries to wrestle a steer to the ground.

**chute** a small, enclosed space just outside the main arena that holds animals prior to a rodeo event.

**goin' down the road** traveling to compete in rodeos.

**hazer** an assistant in the steer wrestling event who keeps the steer running in the right direction so the contestant can slide from his horse and grab the steer's horns.

**lasso or lariat** a long rope with a noose that is used to catch horses and cattle.

**pickup man** a cowboy on horseback who helps bareback and saddle bronc riders dismount from their bucking horses at the end of a ride.

**rigging** a leather handhold tied around a horse or bull that the cowboy grasps during bareback bronc and bull riding events.

**roughstock events** the three rodeo events—bareback bronc riding, saddle bronc riding, and bull riding—that are scored according to the rider's style and the animal's bucking action.

**roundup** the herding together of cattle by riding around them and driving them to a certain location.

**spurs** spiked metal wheels attached to the heels of a cowboy's boots that are used to poke a horse and urge it to move.

**stampede** a wild rush of cattle or other animals.

**timed events** the four rodeo events—steer wrestling, calf roping, team roping, and barrel racing—that are scored on speed.

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PHYLLIS MCINTOSH, a freelance writer whose work has appeared in many national magazines and newspapers, is a frequent contributor to State Department publications and websites.

# SADDLE BRONC RIDING

The classic event of Rodeo





## *High-brow Rodeo*

**R**odeo has been a popular subject for movies, television, and country and western music. But it also has found its way into American high art, such as the famous bronc rider sculptures of Frederic Remington (*above*) found in many leading art museums. A love story between a rodeo cowboy and cowgirl is the subject of the ballet *Rodeo*, a collaboration between renowned composer Aaron Copland and choreographer Agnes de Mille. Perhaps to distinguish it from the rough and tumble world of bulls and broncs, the title is pronounced *ro-day-o*, as in Spanish. (PHYLLIS MACINTOSH)