

# Rodeo roots stretch back to Spain

By Jim Cornelius  
Editor in Chief

Like Bluegrass or jazz music, the sport of rodeo has roots that stretch far back in time, blending a variety of cultural influences to create something uniquely all-American.

The very name “rodeo” speaks of Spanish roots. Late-medieval Spain was one of the premier equestrian cultures in history; indeed, it was the Spanish who brought the modern horse to the Americas, as Western singer Ian Tyson recounts in his magnificent anthem, “La Primera”:

*I am a drinker of the wind  
I am the one who never tires  
I love my freedom more than all these things  
The Conquistador,  
Comanche and the Cowboy  
I carried them to glory  
I am La Primera —  
Spanish mustang  
Hear my story*



PUBLIC DOMAIN  
Bill Pickett invented the sport of bulldogging (steer wrestling).

The Spanish tradition found its fullest expression on the massive ranchos of California, where vaqueros rode among the live oak and swung long, rawhide reatas.

In the 19th Century, the Spanish tradition met and mingled with an ancient Anglo-Celtic drover culture that pushed north and west out of the American South, especially Texas. The Texans had already absorbed other Spanish/Mexican influences in the border brush, and they brought them north with massive herds of cattle in the post-Civil War years.

Cowboys were made part of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show & Congress of Rough Riders of the World, setting the stage for the exhibition of cowboy skills as a performance. But, as the Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame notes, “The cowboys in these shows were paid performers and it wasn’t a contest like modern rodeos.”

You could get yourself into a scrap arguing over who gets the claim to fame as the first real rodeo in America. Prescott, Arizona, may have the best claim, which is reinforced by The Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame:

“It is very hard to trace the first rodeo in America. Many places make this claim including: Sante Fe, New Mexico in 1847, Deer Trail, Colorado in 1869, and Pecos, Texas in 1883. All early rodeos varied greatly by events and most were free to the public. Prescott, Arizona held their first rodeo on July 4, 1888. Much of what we know today in the sport of rodeo grew from the Prescott Rodeo. The committee established the following that still hold true today: prizes awarded, rules for competition, admission charged, cowboys invited to compete and a committee to organize. The events included bronco riding, steer roping and cow pony races. In 1889, the first steer riding competition was held, later this event evolved into



IMAGE COURTESY LEN BABB

Rodeo’s origins lie in practical skills of trail drivers and ranch hands who needed to be able to rope and ride with wild stock in rough terrain.

modern bull riding. By 1917, calf roping was added to the list of events at Prescott.”

Rodeo events grew out of ranching skills — roping; bucking out a rank horse. But some of them were stunts. Riding a steer or a bull has no practical ranching application, but it’s not hard to imagine how that got started. Hall-of-Famer Bill Pickett is credited with the creation of the event that would be known as bulldogging and now is called steer wrestling.

“Legend has it that Pickett resorted to biting the lip of a recalcitrant steer to wrestle it to the dirt to get it into the corral,” the Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame recounts. “Pickett moved from ranch work into the show arena in the 1890s, when he and his brother began the Pickett Brothers Bronco Busters and Rough Riders Show that toured fairs and rodeos. In 1907, Pickett was hired as a cowhand on the 101 Ranch in Oklahoma and participated in the Miller Brothers’ 101 Ranch Wild West Show. He worked on the ranch when he was not traveling with the Miller Brothers for more than 25 years. He died April 2, 1932, after being kicked in the head while breaking a colt at the ranch. He was later honored by the U.S. Postal Service, who featured Pickett on a stamp as part of its Legends of the West series.”

Rodeo has produced many legends and stars, including World Champion Casey Tibbs, who won the world

in 1949 the age of 19. He was profiled in the 2017 award-winning documentary “Floating Horses.”

Larry Mahan, born in Salem, Oregon, was a six-time world champion in the 1960s and ’70s, and he was among the first modern stars of the sport, parlaying his fame as a roughstock rider into a boot collection and clothing line.

Hall of Fame barrel racer Charmayne James took Rookie of the Year honors in 1984 at the onset of a long and astoundingly successful career. Her trail led through the Sisters Rodeo season after season.

Other legends have competed here, from champion roper Joe Beaver to champion bull riders like Ty Murray and Lane Frost.

Frost contributed a moment that will live forever in Sisters Rodeo folklore when he rode the previously unriden bull Red Rock in a seven-rodeo “Challenge of the Champions” exhibition in 1988.

As the Professional Bull Riders Association (PBR) recounts:

“Frost and Red Rock battled each other back-to-back June 11-12. The first event

in Livermore, Calif. went to Frost. On June 12 (after both cowboy and bull had traveled all night to Oregon), the fight continued in Sisters, where Red Rock was originally from. It was the last ride of the night, and the adrenaline and anticipation was thick by the time Frost nodded. The crowd cheered them both on.

“It was an atypical left-hand delivery for Red Rock, but Frost hung on and fought the bull all the way to the whistle. The cowboy described it as one of the best rides of his life. ‘I’ve made a couple of 91 point rides in my life,’ said Frost at the time, ‘and this one felt a good three or four points higher.’

Frost, just 25, was killed a year later at the venerable Cheyenne Frontier Days rodeo, when the bull Takin’ Care of Business plowed into his back, breaking several ribs, which punctured the cowboy’s heart and lungs as he fell to the arena dirt.

At 80 years old, Sisters Rodeo is part of a long and historic tradition — not only of sport, but of a way of life that grew out of the working of livestock in a rugged landscape, where grit and determination are the keys to survival and success.

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