

Sisters Rodeo enters the big leagues

By Sue Stafford
Correspondent

The rodeo of 1980 marked the beginning of the modern era in the history of Sisters Rodeo, as they opened their new permanent rodeo grounds, four miles southeast of town off Highway 20. That year there were three rodeo shows, rather than the two of the early days, with an addition of a Friday night performance, which allowed 5,000 more people to experience the excitement of rodeo.

They still had both Friday and Saturday night dances at the elementary school gymnasium as well as the Buckaroo Breakfast on Sunday morning, the wild horse race, and the wild animal scramble. Rabbits and chickens were released in the arena to be captured by the children. They were allowed to keep the animals they captured.

The arena had been purchased three years earlier at cost by Sisters' John Leavitt, long time team and calf roper and proprietor of the then Leavitt's Western Wear store. Leavitt in turn sold the arena equipment to the rodeo association, with his being paid out of revenue generated from the "Biggest Little Show in the World." Leavitt went on to serve as Rodeo Association president in 1990 and '91 and again in 1997 and '98.

The entire spring of 1980, right up to rodeo weekend, work parties were held every Saturday, starting at 8 a.m., in order to finish the construction of the arena fence.

That first rodeo on the permanent grounds set a high bar for all the years to follow. They enjoyed near perfect weather and arena in perfect condition. Record crowds attended each day with standing room only on Saturday and Sunday. Contestants from

all over the United States competed for about \$20,000 in prize money.

From 1980 forward, success seemed to breed success as the rodeo kept growing in prestige and recognition. In the early 1980s, Sisters joined the International Professional Rodeo Association. World champions in the IPRA competed every year in Sisters. By that point, the Sisters Rodeo Association had about 60 members and an experienced group of volunteers.

The year 1988, the first time Glenn Miller served as association president, the association attained the big prize — acceptance of membership in the highly sought-after Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association — where they joined the likes of St. Paul and Pendleton rodeos. This distinction was an indication of the impressive reputation Sisters had built over 50 years of quality rodeo.

Since that time the association has continued to improve the quality of the physical rodeo grounds. The land near the entrance gate to the grounds has been meticulously manicured to provide shaded areas of lawn where contestants are able to camp with their horses and motorhomes.

Not that long ago, the Plaza Level seats were added directly above the chutes providing an eagle's eye view of the contestants and animals. "Miller's Place" provides food and drink on the Plaza.

A fourth rodeo performance on Saturday night was added and about six years ago they added the Wednesday night Extreme Bulls show. The current available seating capacity is in the neighborhood of 7,200 since the construction of the Plaza Level seats.

In 2009, Sisters Rodeo, as a member of the Columbia



PHOTO BY JERRY BALDOCK

Glenn Miller, center, served many years as Sisters Rodeo Association President and has been a guiding force in making the Sisters Rodeo "The Biggest Little Show in the World."

River Circuit of rodeos throughout the Pacific Northwest and Northern California, was recognized as the Rodeo of the Year. It has also been featured in *The New York Times* and on *The Late Show* with David Letterman, as well as numerous local programs.

The quality of the rodeo stock procured, and the size of the purses offered every year by the Sisters Rodeo, attracts the best in the sport. The Rodeo offers the richest purse in the nation for the second weekend in June and the second highest in the nation for the entire month of June. World champions return to our small town year after year.

With nearly 200 dedicated members who support the rodeo in numerous meaningful and necessary ways, the Sisters Rodeo Association from its earliest days forward

has been a valuable member of the community by promoting Sisters and the rodeo, making Sisters a destination that attracts visitors again and again — visitors who eat in our restaurants, stay in our lodging, and shop in our stores.

In addition to the members and volunteers, a great deal of credit for the continued success of the rodeo over the last 80 years is owed to the dedicated leadership of rodeo presidents and board members and their passion for the rodeo. Glenn Miller, local contractor, has faithfully served the rodeo for 40 years, 20 years as the board president from 1999-2019 and two previous years as president in 1988 and '89.

The former association president cited the

opportunity to meet so many interesting people whom he really enjoyed and respected as one of the reasons for his longevity with the association.

"What I did with the rodeo was so far away from my everyday construction business, it was a nice change," he said.

Miller credits the continued success of the rodeo to the continuity of members, volunteers, and leadership, allowing the whole organization to run like a well-oiled machine.

The rodeo's absence from this year's summer calendar will leave a big hole in Sisters, but no one doubts the organization's resilience.

The community will be back for the 80th Sisters Rodeo June 9-13, 2021!



PHOTO BY JERRY BALDOCK

A dedicated all-volunteer association handles every chore, from maintaining the Rodeo grounds to actually managing the big event.

NUGGET FLASHBACK

2 Wednesday, June 18, 1980, *The Nugget*, Sisters, Oregon

EDITORIAL...

1980 Sisters Rodeo Huge Success

Congratulations to all those great volunteers who contributed hundreds of hours of their time and energy toward making the 1980 Sisters Rodeo a huge success.

With near perfect weather and an arena in perfect condition, record crowds attended each day with standing room only on Saturday and Sunday. Participants from all over the United States competed for about \$20,000 in prize money.

Gate receipts after meeting expenses will go toward meeting payments on the recently acquired property, improving the rodeo grounds, and most of all buying new bleachers. These facilities will be made available for other shows, such as display of antique cars, horse shows, 4H events, and other rodeo functions.

Among those who deserve great credit for the success of the 1980 rodeo are Mike Oxman, President, Bob Perkins, Mike Reed, Vern Skaar, Wilt Smith and adding a touch of feminine class Virginia Campbell Grand Marshall and Rodeo Queen Kanoe Durdan. Special mention also should be made of the many EMT's who stood by with the Sisters ambulance to aid casualties and also the Deschutes County Sheriffs Patrol who were ever present to maintain order and provide assistance.

Radio station KICE announced events for all three performances and provided spot announcements and interviews leading up to the "Biggest Little Show in the World".