

Post Civil War Period Speeds The Birth Of Rodeo Events; Sport Draws Millions In Gate Receipts Today From Spectators

Rodeo, the sport of the cowboys, is becoming a favorite national sport.

Its actual beginnings are dim, lost in the unwritten history of the early frontiers of the American west. Unfortunately there are no records of the date and place of the first cowboy contest.

The originators of rodeo were the lonely, hard-bitten men who worked out their lives on the vast ranges and long trails of Texas after the Civil War. They carved from the wilderness the beginnings of the industry that was to bring prosperity to a half continent.

But those early cowboys weren't conscious of starting either an industry or a great sport. Their lives were hard and when they gathered a few times a year to work together on the roundups or trail drives, their recreation was typically tough. The hands from the different outfits would have a bet on horse races, roping and bucking contests.

The arena was the open plain and the only spectators were the cowboys, the vast herds of longhorns, and an occasional gopher or rattler.

Rodeo Term Originates

As the cattle drives moved north and westward, the sport of the cowboys followed them. By the late 1880's, rodeo had moved into town and started its growth as a spectator sport. They were called cowboy contests. It was not until the first World War that the term rodeo came into general use.

During its first 50 years, rodeo spread across the western half of the continent, from the Mississippi to the Pacific, and from the Canadian Rockies to the southern tip of Texas where it began. By 1930 the sport had established some beachheads in the big eastern cities and at least once in 1924, it

had been watched by the crowned heads of Europe.

But there were still great variations in the rules between contests and the cowboy who sought a living as a rodeo contestant had to scratch hard to make ends meet. Indirectly, it was the economic pressure of the great depression that created the organizing influence that has brought rodeo to the full status of a professional sport it holds today.

During the 30's, rodeo suffered not much more or less than many other American enterprises. But purses were small and distances were great. In those days the contestants' entry fees were not always added to the prize money. In 1936 the rodeo at Boston offered a purse so small the winners couldn't earn enough to cover expenses and the cowboys went on strike.

Cowboys Organize

The purse was increased and the rodeo went on. But more important, the trusting, individualistic rodeo hands had learned the effectiveness of cooperative effort. From this realization grew the Cowboys' Turtle Assn., the sport's first organization of contestants, and the predecessor to the Rodeo Cowboys' Assn., Inc.

Today the RCA is the backbone of professional rodeo. Largely due to its efforts, all entry fees are now added to the purses and the rules have been standardized for all rodeos.

As it has matured with the sport, RCA has done much more than protect the interests of the contestants. It has helped wipe out the unscrupulous promoters who preyed on unwary community leaders in the old days, and it doing its best to rid the sport of the rodeo bum. All members are required to meet their financial obligations and assume their full

responsibilities at local rodeos.

It has set up, for the first time, a fair and accurate way to determine national championships in the sport, and sponsored a group life and accident insurance program.

In the last few years rodeo has become not only a popular sport but big business. It is divided roughly into two groups: "professional" rodeos approved by the RCA, and "amateur" rodeos. No non-member can contest in more than three RCA rodeos a year, and no member can ever work an amateur contest. In effect, this assures the producers of an RCA-approved rodeo of getting the best professional contestants and prevents the experienced professionals from winning the money from less practiced local boys at amateur rodeos.

Rodeo Is Big Business

During 1954, the nearly 600 rodeos approved by the RCA awarded prize money of almost \$2,750,000. An estimated 12½ million saw the sport last year, 1½ million more than three years ago. Total gate receipts are estimated at nearly \$15½ million.

Today, a rodeo cowboy, if he's good, can earn a comfortable living from the sport. Many of them average from \$5,000 to \$10,000 a year, and last year's all-around champion, Buck Rutherford won more than \$40,000.

Bill Linderman, president of the RCA and all-around champion in 1950 and 1953, has won more than \$140,000 in the last five years.

But there is no real security in rodeo. Cowboys have no guarantee of earnings and they must pay their own expenses and entry fees, which range from \$10 to \$100 for every event they enter at every rodeo. They are on the road most of the time and expenses are high. It's not uncommon for a champion to spend more than \$2,000 a year on airline travel alone.

Of course there's always a chance of a serious injury. His insurance will pay part of his medical and hospital expense, but if a cowboy suffers a bad break, his bills will be much more than the insurance can provide for and he'll be unable to earn for several months.

In most communities the rodeo is an annual undertaking of city-wide effort. More than half of the RCA rodeos in 1954 were sponsored by committees of local citizens serving without pay. Another 30 per cent were sponsored by civic or fraternal organizations.

Rodeo, in spite of its tremendous popularity here, has never been taken up abroad. Except for the normal spillage across the border into the western part of Canada, and a variation that has sprung up as a natural outgrowth of the cattle industry of Australia, it is never seen outside the United States.



HOWDY PARDNER—These bearded bad men would have to shave those handsome face pieces this year. No beards are being grown (other than normal growth) for the 1956 Douglas County Rodeo. (Paul Jenkins).

Bul Is Merit Respect

In India, the land of their origin, brahma bulls are considered sacred. They roam unmolested through village streets and market places.

In rodeo the big beasts are treated with great respect, but they are considered more devil than divine.

Actually, the brahmas used in modern rodeo are crossbred and not the pure strain that dwells in docile domestication in the Asian nation. And they are more than thousands of miles away from their ancestors in the difference in their disposition.

Brahmas Murderous

Rodeo brahmas are murderous. In spite of their hulking size, they are terrifically fast and agile. Not satisfied with merely throwing their rider, they will try to run him down, gore him and trample him. They are fast, powerful and crafty buckers.

The bull rider has the least to hold onto of any rodeo rider: a simple rope wrapped around the animal. There can be no knots or hitches in it for the rope must fall off when the ride is completed. He may wrap the rope around his hand but few bull riders wrap it tightly. There is no more terrifying sight in rodeo than that of a bull rider with his hand caught in the rigging being dragged helplessly around the arena.

The ride is for eight seconds and the winners are decided as they are in the bronc riding events. Two cowboy judges, watching from opposite sides of the bull, mark the ride from 1 to 20 points and the animal from 65 to 85 points. The bull rope has a bell fastened

to it that hangs below the animal's belly to help encourage it to buck as well as the flank-strap used in bronc riding that is pulled tight as the bull leaves the chute.

Riders Are Tops

You'll see fewer cowboys make qualified rides on the brahmas than you will on the broncs—proof of the big brutes' versatility in bucking. They spin, twist, pitch and kick. If the rider gets too far forward, they'll hook up at him with their horns. If he gets too far back they'll give a mighty heave with their powerful hind quarters that usually sends him flying.

If the cowboy is knocked off at the chute or if the bull falls with him he is entitled to a re-ride. If the flank strap comes off he gets a re-ride on the same bull. The rider is disqualified if he uses sharp spurs, touches the bull with his free hand or is bucked off.

Bull riders are marked on the overall skill of their ride and how well they are able to spur. But making a qualified ride is only half of the bull rider's problem. After his time is up, he must get off without being gored, kicked or trampled.

No Mounted Pickups

With the big brahmas, there are no mounted pickup men to ride alongside and help the cowboy down—the bulls wouldn't let the horses get close enough. For assistance the cowboy looks to the rodeo clown who moves in to distract the bull till the rider gets off and away. Once on his feet, the contestant usually loses no time in reaching the safety of the fence.

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BAREBACK RIDING can send a contestant galley-west. The event is a regular part of rodeo fare.



TYPICAL—This Douglas County scene is one of many rodeo goers will view as they tend the fairgrounds near Roseburg.

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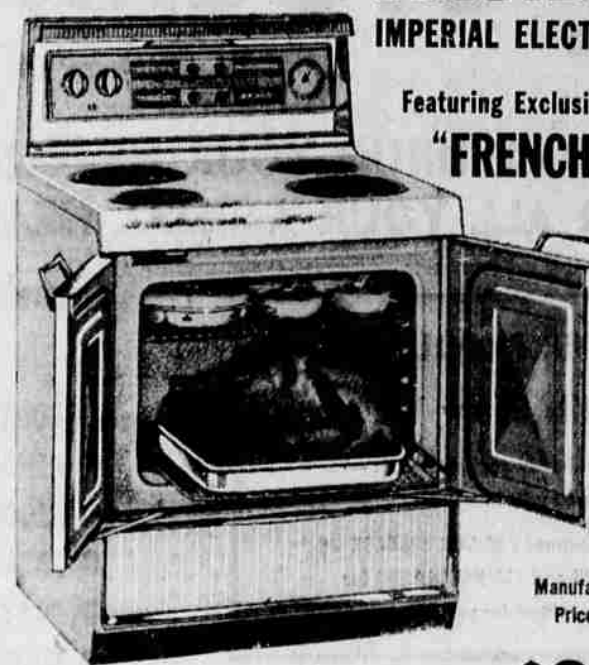
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