

## Race:

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Some call it North America's original extreme sport.

For Pendleton Round-Up attendees, the Indian Relay Race has become one of the most popular and exhilarating events during the week-long rodeo. For the competitors, the race symbolizes many things: a pure adrenaline rush; a way to connect with family and their culture; a way to bond with the horses that almost all of them grew up riding.

"We're thankful for the horse," said Dallas Dubray, from Browning, Montana, of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. "It's a powerful animal. It's sacred. It took care of us for generations."

Dubray competes with Carlson Relay, one of the many teams that traveled from far and wide to make this year's races the most competitive yet. Several former champions were part of the lineup, including Johnathan Abrahamson, who estimated he's won the Round-Up more than a dozen times.

"Us Natives hold our horses because of competition and culture," said Chazz Racine, of Carlson Relay, the 2019 Round-Up relay champion.

But walking through the small lot where teams camp between races, it isn't immediately obvious these teams are some of the fastest in the circuit.

The racers lounge on foldable chairs near their trailers. Some smoke and chew tobacco. They feed and tend to their horses while listening to a mixture of Native songs and AC/DC. Tents line the roads and small dogs scamper about. A few of them stuff sage into their boots and say prayers for safety and "to be connected with the earth," said Slew Costel of Carlson Relay.

"Lots of us, we grew up doing it, riding horses," said Casey Nissen, the leader of Cayuse Express. "It kept us out of mischief."

Nissen is from Omak, Washington, on the Colville



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

**Andrew Whiteman of Nespelem, Washington, rides Thunder around the track Thursday, Sept. 16, 2021, in the final leg of the Indian Relay Race at the Pendleton Round-Up.**

Reservation. He is a thin muscular man with the massive hands of one who has tussled with many large animals. For 40 years, he was a bullfighter and also competed in saddle bronc. At 62, he has seven children, and hopes to start bullfighting again soon, perhaps when he retires from racing.

Nissen works as a contractor on the reservation and, in his spare time, runs a nonprofit program where he brings young people, people who struggle with substance abuse and incarcerated people out to train wild horses.

"They know this horse has hardly been handled, and the reward they get for achieving each step along the way is amazing," Nissen said. "Our program is so badass. We establish communication, open the soul of a person. It's crazy, all it can do, because we have the soul of that horse that's helping us."

Nissen, like many of the other competitors, sees his horses as much more than just a way to race. So when he trains wild horses with students, he does so using a method involving what he calls a "magic wand."

Instead of running the horse into the ground and fatiguing them, like others



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

**Casey Nissen, of Omak, Washington, wraps the ankles of his horse Dusty Dan in advance of the Indian Relay Race Thursday, Sept. 16, 2021, at the Pendleton Round-Up**

do, they wave a stick with a noisy gadget on the end in front of the horse to direct them. It's a method requiring great patience, he said, and it's meant to convince the horse they are a good leader. It's also meant to teach people self-esteem, confidence and long-term gratification, something Nissen finds essential in today's digital age.

"We've had over 1,000 students now without one ambulance run, and it's all because this is so successful," he said. "They think,

'Man, you're a badass leader. You're smarter than me. You're more athletic.' Then, when you take off walking they come with you. You stop, they stop. You run, they run. Just like they do with their leader in the herd. It's unbelievable."

Dubray, from the Blackfeet Reservation, said his horses are strong because they do much more than just race. From their home at the foothills of Glacier National Park's towering peaks, they ride for miles, herding cattle and buffalo and hunting

moose, elk and deer.

"It takes their mind off racing," said Dubray. "They have more than one job."

Each of the riders said riding horses from a young age was how they got into racing.

"It's in our blood," Nissen said.

To them, racing provides an opportunity to bond with their horse and their families. And as the sport is growing larger and more competitive, they expect events like the Round-Up relays to follow suit.

## Shortage:

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During much of the rest of that year, and continuing into 2021, the number of customers at Baker County's various restaurants was limited due to the county's COVID-19 risk level.

Those restrictions meant it wasn't feasible to reopen Sumpter Junction, Tyler Brown said.

Risk levels and restaurant limits ended June 30, but Brown said it remains a struggle to keep a sufficient workforce to operate Barley Brown's Brew Pub and Tap House, separate establishments, both owned by the family's Windmill Enterprises LLC, on Main Street in downtown Baker City.

In fact, Brown said the situation has worsened in the past month or so since the governor required people to wear masks in most public indoor settings, including restaurants.

Brown said he has lost a couple employees who simply refuse to continue working while required to wear a mask throughout their shift.

"I know it's frustrating for everyone," he said.

Wearing masks isn't the only thing that discourages workers, Brown said.

It's also stressful for employees to enforce the mandate with customers, some of whom refuse to comply.

"It definitely wears on (employees)," Brown said.

In addition, Brown said he recently had four employees, all of whom are fully vaccinated, test positive for COVID-19.

Although none had severe symptoms, they had to miss work for 10 days, which forced a reduction in his restaurants' hours.

The surge in COVID-19 cases driven by the more

contagious delta variant has affected other restaurants in Baker City.

Dairy Queen, for instance, posted a sign on its window stating that the restaurant would be closed for two weeks, starting Sept. 3, due to staffing shortages resulting from COVID-19. Dairy Queen is slated to reopen, with regular hours, on Sept. 18.

Some employers have attributed the workforce shortage to expanded federal unemployment payments.

But even though those benefits ended in early September, Brown said he's not optimistic that this will result in an influx of potential workers.

The scarcity of workers has had an obvious effect on the restaurant sector, with many businesses, in Baker City and elsewhere, reducing hours, and in many cases closing altogether on some days.

### Hungry for workers

Among Eastern Oregon counties, Baker County saw the largest percentage decrease of workers employed in the leisure and hospitality industry, dropping nearly 17%, or 120 workers, between July 2019 and July 2021. Harney County saw an increase of 3%, or 10 workers during the same time period, and Umatilla County saw the largest total decrease of employment in the sector, losing 180 jobs from July 2019 to July 2021.

Across all industries in Eastern Oregon, leisure and hospitality saw the biggest decrease in employment from July 2019 to July 2021, dropping 8.2% from its 2019 levels for a total loss of 570 jobs. The second hardest hit industry was manufacturing, which saw a 6.6% decrease along the same time period for a total loss of 570 jobs as well. Compared to the rest of the state in regards to



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

**A "closed" sign reflects in the mirror on Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2021, at the Sumpter Junction restaurant in Baker City. The restaurant has been closed for 18 months due to the pandemic and inability to find workers.**

employment, however, the leisure and hospitality industries were in far less dire straits in Eastern Oregon — Oregon overall saw nearly a 20% decrease in employment within the sector; far above any other industry with regards to job losses.

Other Eastern Oregon counties didn't fare much better. Union registered a 10.3% drop in leisure and hospitality workers since July 2019. Malheur County, which borders Idaho and remained open for much of the pandemic, saw a 9.75% decrease in the sector, while Umatilla County saw a 6.8% drop, beating out the regional average. Surprisingly, Wallowa County saw only a marginal decrease from its July 2019 numbers; it lost just 10 jobs.

Unsurprisingly, the manufacturing jobs lost aren't affected by seasonal employment changes normally seen in the leisure and hospitality industries. Still, manufacturing in Eastern Oregon lost 200 jobs from the start of the pandemic in March 2020.

Morrow County saw an 8.4% decrease in workers in the manufacturing industry since July 2019; a drop of 160 workers. Not to be outdone, Umatilla County registered a neat 10% decrease

of workers within the same sector, within the same time period, numbering 340 lost jobs. Baker and Union counties saw a 5% decrease in the sector during the same period, corresponding to 30 and 70 workers lost, respectively.

At Behlen Mfg. Co.'s plant in Baker City, where 110 employees weld and otherwise assemble gates, panels, troughs and other livestock equipment, maintaining a full workforce during the pandemic has been "challenging," said Stacy Delong, the plant's human resources manager.

Only 30 jobs were lost in the Baker County manufacturing industry from July 2019 to July 2021, representing a 5% decrease.

However, Delong said Behlen, a Nebraska company that opened its Baker City factory in 1996, has been "fairly successful recruiting new applicants the last couple of months."

Among the company's techniques was setting up an electronic reader board on Campbell Street, Baker City's busiest thoroughfare, advertising a job fair at the factory on Aug. 18.

"We found that to be successful," Delong said.

She said she hopes that the

end of the federal unemployment payments will persuade more people to apply for jobs at the Baker City plant.

Behlen's goal is to add about 40 workers, to a total of 150, by the end of 2021.

"Our approach has been to broaden community outreach through communication and to best utilize our current advertising resources and simply engaging current employees to encourage friends and family to apply," Delong said. "Fortunately, Behlen Country offers excellent benefits and competitive wages. This does give us slight edge over other employers not able to offer such benefits. We are not there yet, there is a lot of work to do."

Delong said demand for the company's products has continued to increase, "and we don't foresee any kind of decline anytime in the future."

### Out of woodwork

Another of Baker City's larger manufacturing employers is Marvin Wood Products.

The company, which employs about 170 workers at its factory, would like to hire about 30 more employees, plant manager Sandi Fuller said in June of this year.

To entice people to apply for jobs, Marvin Wood Products earlier this year boosted its entry level wage to \$17.73 per hour, plus a 50-cent bonus for people who accept rotating shifts, and other incentives including signing bonuses of \$500 and up to \$1,500 to help people move to Baker City.

Shelly Cutler, executive director of the Baker County Chamber of Commerce, said she recently heard "positive feedback" from some businesses that have struggled to retain their workforce, although she said she doesn't know of any local restaurants that are fully staffed.

## Vendors:

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John Gilsdorf, a church volunteer, said Athena Christian Church is the second oldest vendor on the Round-Up Grounds. They've long sold ice cream to fund their Young Disciples youth program, with the proceeds of Round-Up usually paying for the program's entire annual budget. Gilsdorf said he was initially concerned that COVID-19 might affect sales, but business at the ice cream booth has been brisk.

"I think people are ready to get back to normal," he said. "And who doesn't love ice cream?"

When the Round-Up Association decided to cancel last year's rodeo due to the virus, the rodeo association quickly pivoted to a new initiative: Let'er Buck Cares. The charity initiative raised nearly \$1 million for organizations, groups and businesses affected by the rodeo's cancellation, with a special focus on the community vendors within the Round-Up Grounds.

Many of the vendors said the Let'er Buck Cares grant they received was an important lifeline for them in 2020. But with the rodeo back, not every group was rebounding as strongly.

Every year during Round-Up week, the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 922 takes over Stillman Park to cook up the Cowboy Breakfast, an event to offer locals and visitors some pancakes, ham and coffee before the day's events. It is the VFW's only fundraiser, and although the Cowboy Breakfast is back this year, Commander Clifford Smith said attendance was running below average the first half of the week.

Smith said one reason the Cowboy Breakfast might be getting less than the 900 to 1,000 people it sees per day is there were no exchange students visiting from Minamisoma, Japan, this year. He also was concerned about how forecasted rain might affect attendance Sept. 18. While it has the benefit of a picnic shelter, the event is otherwise all outdoors.

"It's a gamble every year because of the weather," Smith said.

With Round-Up attendance typically peaking Sept. 17 and 18, Smith is hoping business will increase the second half of the week.

Cutler cautioned that she believes the county is in the "very early stages of recovery."

She is optimistic the cessation of federal jobless benefits, combined with higher wages and incentives some businesses are offering, will entice people to reenter the workforce.

Cutler also said she has been sending an increasing number of relocation packets to people who might be interested in moving to Baker County — including younger people who would need a job.

Anna Johnson, a senior economic analyst at Oregon Employment Department, wrote that difficult-to-fill positions were largely unrelated to the pandemic.

"The phrase 'no one wants to work anymore' was already a common reason given for why vacancies were difficult to fill," Johnson wrote. "Now, with lack of applicants and lack of qualified candidates still being a major factor in hiring difficulties, the reason has expanded to become 'no one wants to work anymore ... because of high unemployment insurance benefits.'"

Johnson reported that between April and June, only 14% of difficult-to-fill vacancies had relatively high jobless benefits reported as the primary reason employers had trouble filling job openings.

Johnson also noted leisure and hospitality was the top industry for the pandemic-related, difficult-to-fill vacancies. Among the hardest to fill jobs were restaurant cooks.

Reasons for the vacancies vary — among those offered up include lack of child care, high unemployment benefit pay and low wages at leisure and hospitality jobs. According to the report, the number of employers citing low wages as the reason for the vacancies grew to 15% in spring 2021.