

Unsung heroes of the rodeo: Bullfighters save downed riders

Not just 'clowns,' they put their lives at risk

By **BILL BRADSHAW**
Wallowa County Chieftain

JOSEPH — Everyone loves the thrill of watching or participating in rodeo, but not everyone realizes the value of the unsung heroes of the most dangerous event — bull riding.

Chuck Swisher and Nathan Harp, both from Oklahoma, are the bullfighters for this year's Chief Joseph Days Rodeo, and they take their job seriously.

"The contestants see themselves as the regular people in the world and they probably see us as the firefighters," Swisher said before opening night Wednesday, July 28. "When they're running from the fire, we're running toward it."

Harp agreed, but hesitantly.

"It's hard to judge our own value, but for me it's just the love of the sport. I enjoy it," he said. "I understand that it can be life or death at times. I enjoy it just as somebody who every day goes to their 9-to-5. I get to do it for 15 minutes a night and if there happens to be an angry bull, it's something I've been very passionate about and thankful I get to do."

This is only the second rodeo the pair have worked together on, but both of the 30-somethings have long experience fighting bulls. Harp started at age 16.

"I didn't grow up in a rodeo family, but at a young age I loved watching the bullfighters and barrel men," he said.

"I started fighting bulls when I was 15 years old," Swisher said. "It's funny, my mom wouldn't let me play football or ride motorcycles because it was too dangerous, but at 15 she let me fight bulls."

Bullfighters vs. barrel men

At one time, they all were rodeo "clowns." Now, there's a strict division. The barrel men are the ones who are usually the more entertaining ones, cracking jokes for the crowd — the traditional rodeo "clowns." But the bullfighters stick to primarily keeping thrown contestants safe. Barrel men are usually older former bullfighters who tell the jokes, get in a padded 50-gallon drum that's the last line of safety for a bull rider.

This year's CJD barrel man was Ronald Burton, of Philadelphia, Mississippi, and a bit older than they are, Swisher said.

He said he used to dislike the term clown for what he does.

"I used to hate it because I don't tell jokes," he said. "But people recognize us as that — we wear the face paint and distract the bull and at times it can look funny, but about 40 years ago, a guy was the



Ronald Bond/Wallowa County Chieftain
Bullfighter Nathan Harp steps in to keep a bull from taking out a tossed bull rider during Chief Joseph Days on Thursday, July 29, 2021, and takes a head to the torso for his efforts.



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain
Bullfighters Chuck Swisher, left, and Nathan Harp await the start of this year's Chief Joseph Days Rodeo on Wednesday, July 28, 2021, near the arena in Joseph. Swisher sports a cast to allow a finger fractured in a previous rodeo to heal.

first to say, 'I'm not telling the jokes ... I'm just going to fight bulls.' And he created this path where rodeo clowns split and they went to be barrel men or bullfighters."

Harp saw that division and chose his path.

"I saw there was a split; one's more funny and entertaining and one's more a thrill and the protection side of it," he said. "I fell in love with the bullfighter side and started going to the practice pen and met the right people and the Lord just opened the right doors for me."

They both recognize that the barrel men are an essential part of the team that keeps riders safe.

"So, if a bull hooks Nathan and I at the same time and the bull and the rider are the only ones left out there, that's when the barrel men come in and the bull rider can run behind the barrel," Swisher said. "Some people like Nathan and I, we're not really that good, so we're not really crowd-pleasers" like the barrel man.

Make bulls chase them

A bullfighter's job is essentially to distract the bull after he's thrown a rider so the rider can get to safety without being gored or trampled. Some of the bulls have been dehorned and others have their horns blunted, but they all have hooves and a tendency to butt with their heads.

"Our job is to go into the storm and distract the large farm animal from tear-

ing somebody up," Swisher said. "It's pretty much our job to get the bull to redirect its attention from the fallen rider toward us, so our objective is to go out there and make the bulls chase us. That means getting our hands on them. Bulls move off of seeing, hearing and feeling. We can get in their face — make sure they see us — we can reach out and grab their head to try to pull them around — obviously we're not going to be able to out-muscle them — and we can holler at them."

Valued by bull riders

The bull riders all value the work bullfighters do.

Jace Catlin, of Toledo, Washington, said bullfighters have saved him "many times" in his 12 years of bull riding.

Ruger Piva, of Challis, Idaho, is now 26 and has been riding professionally for five years, and riding since age 13.

"It's hard to even get on without a bullfighter, especially these (bullfighters) here," Piva said. "There's so much danger in it and they really take 60% of it away. They're there as soon as we hit the dirt and put themselves in danger just to help us out. I think it's a lot easier to ride them than to fight them. ... I just really appreciate their work."

Wyatt Covington, 22, of Omak, Washington, who has been riding since he was a child, agreed.

"I think they save our lives. They're the ones who keep us going down the road," he said. "They take the hit for us so we can get

to the next rodeo. My dad fought bulls, as well, so I've always had a great appreciation for it."

No fear of injuries

Swisher also said a bullfighter can't allow fear to get in the way.

"I've always felt any rodeo event is a game of inches. You could be 1 inch from losing your life or 1 inch from breaking a bone," he said. "It's something that we don't think about it much, because ... when you add fear into the equation into a very dangerous or serious job, then it might deter you or distract you enough so you make the wrong step out of fear instead of making the step to do your job correctly."

Harp agreed.

"This is a dangerous sport. You're going to have your injuries," he said. "I've had knee surgery, I've broken ribs, had hip surgery, fingers, toes. I'd say I'm fortunate to still be doing it as long as I have. God's been looking out for me."

Even now, Swisher is sporting a cast from a previous rodeo injury, but he's not letting it stop him.

"About three weeks ago in Greeley, Colorado, I was reaching out to grab a bull and he jammed my pointer finger hard enough that he broke a bone in my hand," he said. "But it's no big deal."

Harp said he has no current injuries he's recovering from.

Swisher's not so sure. "He's a little off in the head," he joked.

But they wouldn't pick another life style.

"Some people call us crazy, but for Nathan and me, we get to be our own bosses and travel the country," Swisher said. "This is something we love to do. For us, seeing people who go to the office for eight hours a day, that's crazy to us. That's something that we couldn't do. ... We need the adrenaline, the rush, the experience and the adventure of the whole thing."

Sexual assault during home invasion reported

Chieftain staff

ENTERPRISE — An alleged home invasion and sexual assault was reported at a home on Marr Pond Lane in Enterprise on Sunday, Aug. 1, according to a press release from the Wallowa County Sheriff's Office.

The incident was reported to the sheriff's office at 11:37 a.m.

The release described the suspect as a white male, 40-to-50 years old, of heavy build with black

hair and a black-and-gray goatee. He was described as wearing a brown zip-up hoodie and blue jeans.

Deputies from the WCSO responded, as did Oregon State Police and investigators with the OSP Major Crimes Unit.

An area search was conducted with no success.

Sheriff Joel Fish said Monday that the investigation is ongoing and no further information is available. He said Tuesday that he expects the investigation to be lengthy.

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FAIR SCHEDULE
Friday, Aug. 6 9:00am Jr Rodeo begins
Saturday, Aug. 7 9:00am 4-H Dog Show
Jr. Rodeo continues
Sunday, Aug. 8 Noon 4-H Horse Show begins
Monday, Aug. 9 8:00am Open Class NON-PERISHABLE entries delivered to Cloverleaf Hall
9:00am 4-H Exhibits delivered to Cloverleaf Hall Kitchen
Tuesday, Aug. 10 8:00am 4-H Horse Show continues
Open Class Perishables to Cloverleaf
Wednesday, Aug. 11 10:00am Cloverleaf Hall Opens
Noon Livestock Weigh-ins begin
7:00pm **Team Roping Drawpot**
Thursday, Aug. 12 8:30am 4-H/FFA Livestock Show begins
10:00am Cloverleaf Walk Opens
Cloverleaf Hall Opens
Friday, Aug. 13 8:30am 4-H/FFA Livestock Show continues
4:00pm **Bessie Bingo**
7:00pm **Team Roping Drawpot**
Saturday, Aug. 14 10:00am **Peewe Showman's Games on the Grass**
11:00am **FFA Barbecue**
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3:00pm **4-H/FFA Fat Stock Sale**

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