

Clowning around: He also protects bull riders

Rodeo clown keeps crowd entertained, riders safe

By **BILL BRADSHAW**
Wallowa County Chieftain

JOSEPH — A rodeo clown is not there just to entertain the crowd. He's also a vital part of the crew there to protect the contestants from the roughstock once they're thrown.

Battling bulls

"When it comes to bull riding, I go from rodeo clown to barrel man," said John Harrison, who has worked as clown and barrel man for the past three Chief Joseph Days Rodeos. "The barrel is an island of safety for the cowboy. It's an aluminum can that's got padding on the outside for the bull and padding on the inside for me. My job is to distract the bull if a bull rider gets bucked off toward the middle of the arena and he can't make a run for the fence, he runs to me.

"I will swat the side of the barrel to get the bull's attention to get the bull to come to the barrel. When he goes and hits the barrel, the bull rider will take off running and that lets him get away from the situation."

Harrison recognizes the difficulties bull riders face and does his best to assist. Unlike with saddle broncs or bareback broncs, there's no pickup man.

"With a bull, you've got one option and that's getting bucked off," he said. "You might let go, but you're still getting bucked off. ... You don't step off gently. You just hope that you tuck and roll good enough that



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

John Harrison, rodeo clown and barrel man, pretends he doesn't know what to do during his trick-riding exhibition Saturday, July 30, 2022, during the final night of the 76th Chief Joseph Days Rodeo in Joseph.

you don't get hurt."

Of course, Harrison's not alone helping the bull riders. He works closely with bullfighters Chuck Swisher and Nathan Harp, who have worked the CJD for several years.

"For the most part, especially with the bullfighters we have here, they are awesome," he said.

Still an entertainer

The clown/barrel man also is an entertainer, though he's not quite a stand-up comic.

"The difference is with a stand-up comic, he gets on the stage and gets to go for an hour and not get interrupted," Harrison said. "But as a barrel man, you might have a cowboy nod his head and now you've got to run for the contestant. Getting in

that rhythm is tough. ... But the main part of my job is to entertain and to have fun with the crowd and fun with the announcer. Me and him will banter back and forth. The entertainment side is what the clown is for."

One of his major shticks is his trick riding. He has Gus, a 26-year-old paint he's had for 24 years.

"I got him when he was 2," Harrison said. "His first show was when he was 3 and he bucked me off in the grand entry. They say God gives you one good dog, one good horse and one good woman and I'm waiting on my dog."

One of the acts he does with Gus involves banter with the announcer, who will announce a world-famous trick rider who doesn't show up.

"The announcer's like, 'John, did you go get him? I was supposed to go to the airport and I screwed up' ... so they have me fill in for him. ... Then I do everything you're not supposed to do on a horse — I hang upside down, run beside him and at the end, I do what they call split the neck."

He also does vaults like they did in the days of the Pony Express, shoulder stands and Roman riding — standing up on two horses at a gallop.

He's not sure how much longer he'll continue the trick riding.

"I joke that at 19, trick riding was easy," he said. "Now at 43, it's getting a bit more difficult."

Family friendly

Harrison makes sure his



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Rodeo clown John Harrison saddles Gus before the Wednesday, July 27, 2022, family night of the 76th Chief Joseph Days Rodeo. In addition to his clowning, Harrison entertains the crowd with trick riding.

clown costume is not the spooky stuff of Hollywood and social media. He doesn't cover his entire face with makeup or use a fright wig.

"On social media, people think it's fun to dress up as clowns and scare people," he said. "That's something I try to avoid because I want to be friendly for kids."

Indeed, he has a family-friendly act largely because he takes his own family on the road with him during the summer months. His wife, Carla, is one of his biggest supporters.

"My wife was my best coach, she'd say, 'You've got to slow down,' (to be more audible)," he said. "I'm from Southeast Oklahoma and I've got a fat tongue and my redneck ways, the words all get running together. But she's my best coach and she'll get me to slow down on my acts a little bit — my one-liners, I'll try to hit the punch line there and try to slow them down. Also, a good high-end microphone is important."

They have three kids: daughter Addy, 14; son Caz, 12; and daughter Charlee, 6.

He said none of the three seems inclined to follow

Dad's footsteps as a clown/barrel man.

"I've always joked that we've traveled enough that they're going to want a job where they can walk to work," he said.

But Addy is embarking on a line of entertainment of her own. She interviews rodeo contestants from a kid's perspective rather than about the actual competition.

"I ask them things like, 'What's your favorite place to go?' or 'What's your favorite candy?' or something — the fun questions," she said.

Caz said he hopes to one day ride saddle broncs.

"It's safer than bull riding and bareback riding and easier on your body and I want to do something with the roughstock," he said.

Coming to Joseph is always a big treat for the Harrisons.

"We love this community. There are great people," John said. "It's the salt-of-the-Earth-type folks here. Farmers and ranchers and people like that, the common-sense-type folks.

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Bull rider doubted he'd recover enough to ride

By **BILL BRADSHAW**
Wallowa County Chieftain

JOSEPH — When it comes to getting astride 1,500 pounds of violent, angry bull and hoping to stay there for eight seconds, Derek Kolbaba has just one thing to say:

"You've got to love bull riding," he said during a telephone interview Wednesday, July 27.

Kolbaba, a three-time winner of the bull riding at the Chief Joseph Days Rodeo going into this year's competition and a many-time participant, was driving home from a competition in Cheyenne, Wyoming. It was that competition — and his recovery from it — that determined whether he actually would be up to competing during Saturday's bull riding in Joseph.



Kolbaba

"It all depends on how my arm's feeling. I got stepped on, so I'm on the fence at the moment to see how I feel," he said Wednesday. "There are a lot of factors that come into play."

He said that during the Cheyenne ride, "A bull stepped on the back of my arm, so my arm's all swelled up and pretty black and blue. That makes it a little tough to move it at the moment."

It turned out well for Kolbaba, as he ended up the only bull rider to hang on for the full eight seconds Saturday and won the buckle for the event.

Personal history for CJD

Although he resides in Walla Walla, Washington, Kolbaba considers Joseph his hometown.

"There's quite a bit of history at that rodeo," he said. "Joseph is probably always going to be my hometown."

His parents once lived here and his grandmother, Darlene Turner, still does. In fact, that makes Kolbaba the great-grandson of CJD founder and original roughstock contractor Harley Tucker. The first CJD was held in 1946 on the East

Moraine above Wallowa Lake, where participants and viewers alike rode horses to see the action.

Of course, now it's held at the Harley Tucker Memorial Arena just off of Joseph's Main Street.

Tucker died in 1960, so the 26-year-old Kolbaba never got to meet him.

"I'm not sure my mom (Sandi Rowe) ever got to meet him, either," he said.

It's his job

Kolbaba said he's glad to be able to make a living at doing what he loves.

"It's my full-time job, if you can call it a job," he said. "I've been pretty fortunate to make a living at what I love at such a young age and to pay my bills and create a life for myself and my family. Pretty much everything I have and I own is from bull riding."

His family consists of wife Aymie and a baby girl they have on the way.

Although he doesn't expect their daughter will want to take after Dad, Aymie is accepting of the inherent risks in bull riding.

"It's one of those things," Kolbaba said. "She probably thinks the same as my mom thought about it. But for me, this is what I've loved and wanted to do since I was a

kid. It's pretty much all I've ever known and all I've ever worked for. ... At the end of the day, she enjoys getting to watch me do what I love."

A dangerous job

Kolbaba acknowledges the risks involved and has had his share of injuries, even though he tries to brush it off.

"I've been pretty fortunate, for the most part," he said. "I've had a few broken bones, I broke my leg when I was younger and had quite a few surgeries on that; broke my jaw, tore up my knee pretty good, collapsed lung. Other than that, I've been pretty lucky. You've got to pick your battles."

But he knows not all injured bull riders are able to come back.

"Unfortunately. It's a very dangerous sport. You've got to accept that before you do it," he said. "You've got friends who've been injured enough where they couldn't ever ride bulls again or to the point where they don't ever get to go home. You feel pretty lucky when you do."

Still, Kolbaba was looking forward to Saturday night when the bulls were turned loose.

"I hope so," he said. "I'm just playing it day by day to see if I'm going to Joseph or not."

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