

Protection goes only so far against a 2,000-pound bull

Roughstock riders wear shock-absorbent vests but most still shun helmets

By **GEORGE WATKINS**
The Salinas Californian

Bullet-proof, shock-absorbent vests. Modified hockey helmets with titanium face masks. Thick leather gloves. Breathable mouthpieces. Flashy chaps. All to help riders face a 2,000-pound Brahma bull.

Despite all that safety equipment available to bull and bronc riders, injuries are as much a part of the sport as pickup trucks and cowboy hats.

"There are some things that can't prevent (damage from) a hoof or horn," said Rick Foster of the Justin Sportsmedicine team.

The team organized in 1981 to treat injured riders and ropers on the Pro Rodeo Cowboys Association circuit.

Foster said the Justin team attends about 125 rodeos each year.

"We're there for the treatment of injuries," he said. "But we're also there for prevention and education."

Safety equipment is optional in the roughstock events of bull, bareback and saddle bronc riding.

Nearly every bull rider and an occasional bronc rider wears a protective vest, but helmets are still rare.

"We're a lot like hockey was 20 years ago, when they first started wearing helmets," Foster said. "Now you see nearly all hockey players wear helmets. We're recommending wearing them at a young age, so you're going to see more and more riders wear them."

According to the Justin team, bull riders receive 48 percent of all rodeo injuries. That's nearly twice as many as bareback riders (23 percent), the event with the second highest number of injuries.

"After you ride a horse, it doesn't come back and attack you," Foster said. "The bull will come back at the rider. It's a contact sport with a lot of strains and contusions."

Most rodeo injuries damage the head, face, knee and shoulder.

The California Rodeo Salinas will have at least one doctor and two emergency room nurses on duty at all times during the five-day event.

While the Justin team of trainers and physical therapists help riders get back on their feet, the team of doctors and



SCOTT MACDONALD/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN FILE PHOTO

Dave Samsel of Dublin, Texas, gets chased down by the bull Katy Did after getting thrown during last year's Professional Bull Riding event at the Salinas Sports Complex. Samsel wears a protective helmet and vest.

nurses will keep cowboys off their feet, if necessary.

"If there's a loss of consciousness or any kind of threat to the cerebral spine, my job is to not let them get up," said Dr. Bert Tardieu of the California Rodeo Salinas medical committee.

In a room behind the chutes of the Salinas Sports Complex, Tardieu and his staff of nurses also stitch up injured cowboys and treat minor injuries such as finger and shoulder dislocations. That's if they can get the patient to sit still.

In the rough-and-tumble world of cowboys, being seen with a doctor isn't exactly good for the image.

"They don't want a white coat near them," Tardieu said. "To them, it's a sign of defeat."

Still, even at a rodeo as big as Salinas's, major injuries are rare.

"I've been here 10 years and we've had only one serious injury," he said.

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