

## Bull riding

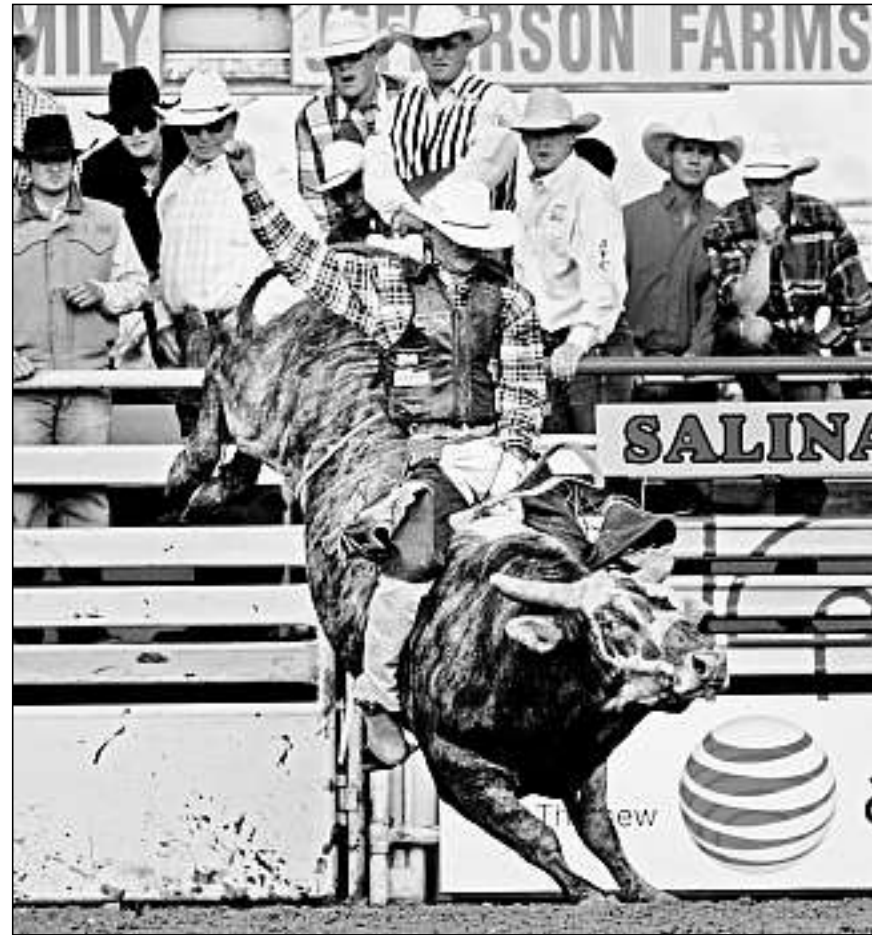


PHOTO BY RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

In a time when action-packed, adrenaline-filled extreme sports are the latest craze, it only seems natural that bull riding would become rodeo's most popular event. The risks are obvious. Serious injury is always a possibility for those fearless or foolish enough to sit astride an animal that weighs a ton and is usually equipped with dangerous horns. But cowboys do it, and fans love it.

Bull riding is dangerous and predictably exciting, demanding intense physical prowess and supreme mental toughness.

Like bareback and saddle bronc riders, the bull rider may use only one hand to stay aboard during the eight-second ride. If he touches the bull or himself with his free hand, he receives no score.

But unlike the other roughstock events, bull riders are not required to mark out their animals. While spurring a bull can add to the cowboy's score, riders are commonly judged on their ability to stay aboard the twisting, bucking ton of muscle

and rage.

Balance, flexibility, coordination, quick reflexes and a good mental attitude are the stuff of which good bull riders are made.

To stay aboard the bull, a rider uses a flat-braided rope, which is wrapped around the barrel of the bull's chest just behind the front legs and over its withers.

One end of the bull rope, called the tail, is threaded through a loop on the other end and tightened around the bull. The rider then wraps the tail around his hand, sometimes weaving it through his fingers to further secure his grip. Then he nods his head, the chute gate swings open, and he and the bull explode into the arena.

Every bull is unique in its bucking style. A bull may dart to the left, then to the right, then rear back. Some spin, or continuously circle in one spot in the arena. Others add jumps or kicks to their spins, while others might jump and kick in a straight line, or move side to side while bucking.

## Bullfighting



PHOTO BY SCOTT MACDONALD/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

They were clowns in the beginning, almost literally. Their job was to entertain, to provide comic relief. Protecting cowboys was almost secondary.

Today, they still dress like clowns, but they are bullfighters first and most importantly. And they are often the difference between life and death.

Bullfighters are the first line of defense for the bull rider. The bullfighter is responsible for distracting the bull while the cowboy regains his sense of direction and escapes to safety after a fall or dismount.

Today's bullfighter, far from being a clown, is so serious about his job, he routinely places his own life in danger in an effort to protect the cowboy.

The modern bullfighter is also an

accomplished athlete, a master of timing and agility.

In a freestyle bullfight, the bullfighter goes one-on-one against the bull for 70 seconds. The bullfighter is judged on his willingness to expose himself to risk and on his aggressiveness. His objective is to stay as close as he can to the bull throughout the fight.

Bullfighters have elevated the sport by employing spectacular maneuvers, such as jumping over a charging bull. Like the riders, the bullfighters score higher when the bull is more aggressive.

Bullfight bulls are bred to be smaller, quicker and more agile than those used in bull riding. They can compete for years and like their human counterparts, learn from their mistakes and improve with experience.

## Tie-down roping



PHOTO BY RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

More than any other event in professional rodeo, calf roping has roots dating back to the working ranches of the Old West.

When calves were sick or injured, cowboys had to rope and immobilize them quickly for veterinary treatment. Ranch hands prided themselves on how quickly they could rope and tie calves, and they soon turned their work into informal contests.

As the sport matured, being a good horseman and a fast sprinter became as important to the competitive calf roper as being quick and accurate with a lasso.

In today's modern rodeo, the mounted cowboy starts from a box, a three-sided, fenced area adjacent to the chute holding the calf. The fourth side of the box opens into the arena. The calf gets a head start determined by the length of the arena. One end of a breakaway rope barrier is looped

around the calf's neck and stretched across the open end of the box.

When the calf reaches its advantage point, the barrier is released. If the roper breaks the barrier before the calf reaches its head start, the cowboy is assessed a 10-second penalty.

When the cowboy throws his loop and catches the calf, the horse is trained to come to a stop. After roping the calf, the cowboy dismounts, sprints to his catch and throws it by hand, a maneuver called flanking. If the calf is not standing when the cowboy reaches it, he must allow the calf to get back on its feet, then flank it. After the calf is flanked, the roper ties any three legs together with a pigging string — a short, looped rope he carries in his teeth during the run.

While the contestant is accomplishing all that, his horse must pull back hard enough to eliminate any slack in the rope, but not so hard to drag the calf.

## Steer wrestling



PHOTO BY RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Speed is the name of the game in steer wrestling. With its modern world record sitting at 2.4 seconds, steer wrestling is the quickest event in rodeo.

The cowboy's objective is to use strength and technique to wrestle a steer to the ground as quickly as possible.

That sounds simple enough.

But anything that sounds that easy has to have a catch to it, and that catch here is the steer generally weighs more than twice as much as the cowboy trying to throw it.

The need for speed and precision make steer wrestling, or bulldogging as it is commonly known, one of rodeo's most challenging events.

As with calf ropers and team ropers, the bulldogger starts on horseback in a box. A breakaway rope barrier is attached to the steer, then stretched across the open end of the box. The steer gets a head start that is determined by the size of the arena. When the steer reaches the advantage point, the barrier is released and the bulldogger takes off in pursuit. If the bulldogger breaks

the barrier before the steer reaches its head start, a 10-second penalty is assessed.

In addition to strength, timing and balance are skills cultivated by the successful steer wrestler.

When the cowboy reaches the steer, he slides down the right side of his galloping horse, hooks his right arm around the steer's right horn, grasps the left horn with his left hand and, using strength and leverage, wrestles the animal to the ground. His work isn't complete until all four of the animal's feet face upward.

In order to catch up to the running steer, the cowboy uses a hazer, another mounted cowboy who gallops his horse along the right side of the steer, keeping it from veering away from the bulldogger.

The hazer can make or break a steer wrestler's run, so his role is as important as the skills the bulldogger hones.