

Mills, Eric. 'Rodeo: American Tragedy or Legalized Cruelty?', published March 1990, *The Animals' Agenda*, reproduced with permission of The Animals and Society Institute.

# Rodeo:

AMERICAN TRAGEDY OR  
LEGALIZED CRUELTY?  
SOME WOULD CALL IT BOTH...

**F**or about half an hour before the ride, the saddle bronc rider tormented the horse, administering backhand slaps to the animal's head again and again as it waited in the wooden chute.

Fear seemed to well in the beast's eyes, but when the chute finally opened the horse stopped dead in its tracks, as if to defy the cowboy, despite a ferocious tug on the leather bucking strap squeezed tightly around its loins.

Finally, after two pokes from an electric prod, the horse lurched forward and began to buck.

It was not a pretty ride. The cowboy, for all his provocation, finished with what at that time was the day's lowest score at the California Rodeo.—San Francisco Chronicle, "Rodeo Critics Call It 'Legalized Cruelty,'" 7/25/81

Touted as "a great American tradition" and "the last real family entertainment" by its legions of fans, rodeo is condemned nonetheless by every major animal protection organization in the U.S. Is it perhaps that cruelty, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder? In 1982 the Humane Society of the United States and the American Humane Association formulated a joint rodeo policy which says, in part: "The HSUS and the AHA contend that rodeos are not an accurate or harmless portrayal of ranching skills; rather, they display and encourage an insensitivity to and acceptance of brutal treatment of animals in the name of sport. Such callous disregard of our moral obligations toward other living creatures has a negative impact on society as a whole and on impressionable children in particular."

Regarding the animals, one hears such callous remarks in the rodeo circuit as, "Aw, they're going to slaughter anyway." True enough, and all the more reason to treat them as humanely as possible before that time. Or, as one vegetarian activist likes to admonish the cowboys, "Don't play with your food!" The anti-cruelty laws of most states would seem to prohibit rodeos, yet it is difficult to find local district attorneys willing to prosecute alleged rodeo abuses.

America's rodeo heritage (from the Spanish "rodear": to round up extends back to the late 1800s, when the activities started as a break from ranchhands' everyday routine. "In those days," says the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, "the primary draw for the cowboys was to gain 'bragging rights' and win a few side bets."

But rodeo, and the times, have changed. These days rodeo is big business. The 10,000-member PRCA, based in Colorado Springs, Colorado, was incorporated in 1975 and now boasts its own commissioner. The PRCA annually sanctions some 700 rodeos, with prize monies totaling nearly \$17 million in 1989, and a broad spectrum

of sponsors: cigarette and jeans companies, auto and truck manufacturers, and beer and soft drink bottlers. And today's rodeo participants are more likely to be professional athletes than ranchhands. Some are drawn to the sport because, as one cowboy put it, they're "too lazy to work, too nervous to steal and too jealous to pimp."

The United States is rodeo's principal stronghold, though the sport is also popular in parts of Canada and Australia. Touring shows periodically play the European circuit. Normally a warm-weather undertaking, the advent of large indoor arenas has allowed rodeo to become a year-round activity, with the National Finals taking place in Las Vegas each December.

Though rodeo may be republican in tone, it is certainly democratic in scope. There are rodeos of every stripe: "Little Britches" rodeos for children, high school and college rodeos, and police, military, and prison rodeos. Curiously, considering their own histories of oppression, there are even black, gay, and all-women rodeos. Nor are high-ranking politicians immune: former U.S. Secretary of Commerce, Malcolm Baldrige, was killed in a rodeo accident in 1987.

## The animals

Rodeo's detractors claim that ordinarily docile farm animals are provoked into their wild behavior via bucking straps, electric prods, raking spurs, pain, and fear. Advocates respond that these are naturally "ornery" animals who like to buck, who would have gone to slaughter but for rodeo. They further claim that a bucking horse or bull is in the arena only about eight minutes a year. But those "eight minutes" do not account for the

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hundreds of hours of unsupervised practice sessions, often on the same animal, where "anything goes."

Stock contractors say that many of their bucking animals perform well into old age, far longer than the average lifespan of these animals. Perhaps. But simple longevity does not justify what the animals are forced to endure in the arena. Nor could the same be said for the calves, steers, cows, sheep, and goats whose life on the rodeo circuit is a relatively short one. Their worth is valued at "cents per pound," and they are treated accordingly.

An added concern is the stress of constant travel on rodeo livestock, often in poorly-ventilated vehicles. Though there are state laws requiring that the animals be unloaded, fed, and watered at specified intervals, enforcement is spotty at best. The animals undoubtedly fare better with the PRCA than on the amateur rodeo circuit, however.

### The events

"The horses and bulls enjoy what they're doing, and if you hurt them, they won't do it any more."—a PRCA stock contractor, in the PRCA's "Humane Facts: The Care and Treatment of Professional Rodeo Livestock" (1989), p. 10.

There are eight standard PRCA events: three bucking events (bareback, saddle bronc, bull riding); three roping events (calf, steer, team); plus steer wrestling and barrel racing. Barrel racing is confined to women only, and women

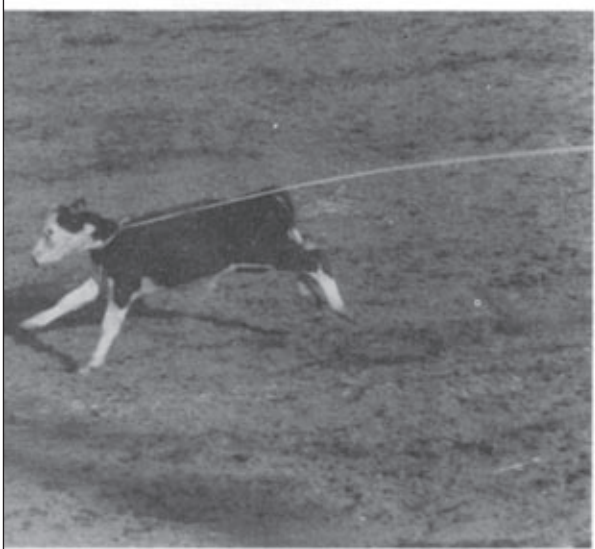
Unlike the horse-riding events, which have their origin in ranch life, bull riding was created for its crowd-pleasing aspects, and is the most dangerous event in all of rodeo for the human participants. Bulls, unlike horses, will often try to gore or trample fallen riders. Rodeo clowns play a critical role in protecting the riders from bulls' hooves and horns by distracting the enraged animals.

As a horse or bull bursts into the arena from the holding chute, a leather flank strap (also called bucking strap) is cinched tightly around the animal's sensitive inguinal region, just behind the rib cage. PRCA rules require that the straps be fleece-lined; still, it is not uncommon to see sores caused by them. Rodeo proponents claim that the flank strap doesn't hurt the animals—that it's only an "irritant" to "tickle" them and make them kick higher. One stock contractor concedes that "85 percent of the animals won't buck without a bucking strap" (*San Francisco Chronicle, op. cit.*), and indeed most horses stop bucking the moment the strap is loosened.

Half a rider's score is based on the performance of the bucking horse or bull. Thus the wilder the ride, the more points for the cowboy, which

translates into more prize money (i.e., big bucks equal Big Bucks).

Calf, steer, and team roping all have their origins in the everyday life of a working ranch. It's a rare cowboy who would intentionally harm livestock, yet the time and money constraints of rodeo competition do not encourage humane treatment. Some ranchers reportedly refuse to hire rodeo



do not compete in the other seven events.

To receive a score in the bucking events, the cowboy must stay on the horse or bull for a minimum of eight seconds, and he receives additional points for his spurring action.



cowboys, claiming they're too rough on the animals.

A 1975 study done for the PRCA concludes that, "with 95 percent confidence, there is no significant amount of roping stress incurred by rodeo calves during rodeo" ("Humane

Facts," *op. cit.*, p. 11). Nevertheless, last year the state of Rhode Island passed a law banning standard calf roping. The following testimony was given in support of the law by Dr. E.J. Finocchio: "As a large animal veterinarian for 20 years...I have witnessed firsthand the instant death of calves after their spinal cords were severed from the abrupt stop at the end of a rope when traveling up to 30 mph. I have also witnessed and tended to calves who became paralyzed...and whose tracheas were totally or partially severed.... Slamming to the ground has caused rupture of several internal organs leading to a slow, agonizing death for some of these calves."

A viable alternative is "breakaway" calf roping, in which the specially-designed rope breaks upon impact, and the running calf is neither stopped abruptly, thrown to the ground, nor tied up. One would hope that the great public concern over the fate of "milk-fed" veal calves would carry over into concern for roping calves, for there are clear parallels. In both cases, infant animals are separated from their mothers and put into highly stressful situations, one for a gourmet item, one for entertainment—both unjustifiable.

Another particularly brutal event, even by rodeo's rough standards, is steer roping. In it, a mounted cowboy lassoes a running steer, then flips the animal into the air, slamming him to the ground. Afterwards, the cowboy dismounts to tie up any three legs of the stunned or unconscious animal. Dr. T.K. Hardy, a Texas veterinarian and sometime steer-roper, commented to *Newsweek* (10/2/72): "I keep 30 head of cattle around for practice, at \$200 a head. You can cripple 3 or 4 in an afternoon. Then your horse costs around \$5,000, so it gets to be a pretty expensive hobby." Steer roping was part of 40 PRCA rodeos in 10 states in 1988: Oregon, Washington, Montana, Wyoming, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and Kansas.

In team roping, each "team" is comprised of two riders. The "header" lassoes the horns of a running steer and the "heeler" ropes the animal's hind legs. The cowboys then stretch the steer out between them. Strained ligaments and tendons can result.



In steer wrestling, the cowboy slips from his horse at full gallop to grab the horns of a running steer and force the animal to the ground by violently twisting his neck. Consider the statement made to the International Society for Animal

Rights by Dr. C.G. Haber, a veterinarian with 30 years experience as a meat inspector for the USDA: "The rodeo folks send their animals to the packing houses where...I have seen cattle so extensively bruised that the only areas in which the skin was attached was the head, neck, legs, and belly. I have seen animals with 6 to 8 ribs broken from the spine and at times puncturing the lungs. I have seen as much as 2 and 3 gallons of free blood accumulated under the detached skin."

Barrel racing is restricted to women only. The cowgirl rides in a cloverleaf pattern through a set of 55-gallon oil drums in the fastest time possible. It is undoubtedly the most innocuous of all PRCA events, but still a matter of concern, especially when unsound horses are used. As Dr. Kerry Levin-Smith (veterinarian and former rodeo competitor) wrote to the California State Fair Board in 1988: "I have seen horses compete successfully in the arena who show marked lameness before or after the event. Pickup riders frequently use lame horses for their job, too...I would like to see veterinary inspection of all rodeo stock and drug testing of winning rodeo entries instituted, as well as a requirement for a veterinarian on premises during all events."

### Charreadas

Unfamiliar to the general public, Mexican-style rodeos known as "charreadas" (from the Spanish "charro"—horseman) are popular in some Western states, with an accent on pageantry and horsemanship. Charreadas do not use flank straps, and the bucking events are not timed. The charro rides until he is thrown or the horse or bull stops bucking. Two events in the charreada are of special concern. In "el coleo" (tailing), a running steer is grabbed by the tail, flipped into the air and slammed to the ground, often stunning the animal or knocking him unconscious. Occasionally the tail is ripped from the body. "Manganas a pie" (roping on foot) involves lassoing a running horse by the front feet, sometimes throwing the horse head over heels. Both these events are extremely dangerous for the animals.



Cesar Chavez, president of the United Farm Workers and an ethical vegetarian, wrote in 1980 to the Los Angeles City Council in opposition to a proposed "bloodless" bullfight. His

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words are as easily applicable to rodeos: "Cruelty, whether it is directed against human beings or against animals, is not the exclusive province of any one culture or community of people. Racism, economic deprivation, dog fighting and bullfighting are cut from the same fabric: violence."

### Other events

In addition to the eight PRCA-sanctioned events, there is an odd mix of "comedic" acts which appear at many rodeos, both professional and amateur. These include "steer dressing," calf and greased pig "scrambles," goat tying, chuckwagon racing, and "wild cow" milking contests. Another crowd-pleaser is an act featuring a small (and probably terrified) monkey dressed in a miniature cowboy suit and tied to the back of a sheepdog herding a flock of ducks.

Few of these events have anything to do with ranch life, and many pose dangers to the animals. Three horses were killed in a calamitous pileup in a chuckwagon race at the Calgary Stampede in 1986. Five others have died since 1983 as a result of injuries in the Omak, Washington "Suicide Race."

Asked his opinion of steer dressing and pig scrambles, one Texas bull rider told an Oakland, Calif., *Tribune* reporter (5/1/88), "I never heard of them events. Stuff like that should be banned from rodeo. It just degrades the professional athletes."

### Rodeo injuries and veterinary care

PRCA rules do not prevent injuries, though they do help to minimize them. Indeed, many rodeo critics think the animals would benefit greatly if all rodeos were PRCA-sanctioned, for the majority of animal injuries occur at amateur rodeos, some 1500 of which take place annually in the U.S. PRCA Rule No. 7.14.5 states: "An official veterinarian *should* [emphasis added] be available at all events." It is not required. An "on-call" vet has repeatedly proved inadequate, for rodeo injuries almost always require immediate attention.

More than 3.5 million spectators attended California rodeos in 1988, spending \$18.5 million on tickets alone. It seems only common decency that a few of those dollars should be spent for veterinary care. Regretably, cowboys are injured, too, but paramedics and ambulances are provided for them.

In the past three years in northern California, there have been documented deaths of at least five animals due to injuries suffered in rodeos, ranging from broken legs and noses to broken backs—all without benefit of immediate veterinary aid. There's a crying need for state legislation in this area, and most veterinary organizations would probably

be supportive of it, even if only for monetary reasons.

### Sexism in the rodeo

"Rodeo is an incredibly heavy male trip. It depends largely on the mystique of the cowboy, the proud, lonely figure who relies only on his own skills, the utter ethical integrity of his fellow cowboys and the luck of the draw. That leads to a lot of old-fashioned machismo. Women are either rodeo queens or groupies, interesting only as sexual rewards and diversions."

—*Newsweek*, 10/2/72

Feminism and the women's movement notwithstanding,

present-day rodeo has changed little since that was written. Women are still relegated to one event only—barrel racing—and are often disparagingly referred to as "bucklebunnies." A highly recommended book for anyone intrigued by the cowboy ethic is Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence's *Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame*. In it, a Wyoming steer-wrestler expresses himself thusly: "Women should not rodeo any more than men can have babies. Women were put on earth to reproduce, and are close to animals. Women's liberation is on an equal to gay liberation—they are both ridiculous."

This deadly attitude is played out in spades in "steer dressing," an event seen at PRCA and amateur rodeos alike. Teams of two or three cowboys throw a frantically struggling steer to the ground and attempt to force women's lace panties (sometimes jeans) over the animal's hind legs, often to the accompaniment of crude commentary

from the rodeo announcer. The not-so-subtle message, of course, is that women are like animals and it's perfectly acceptable to abuse and/or demean both for fun.

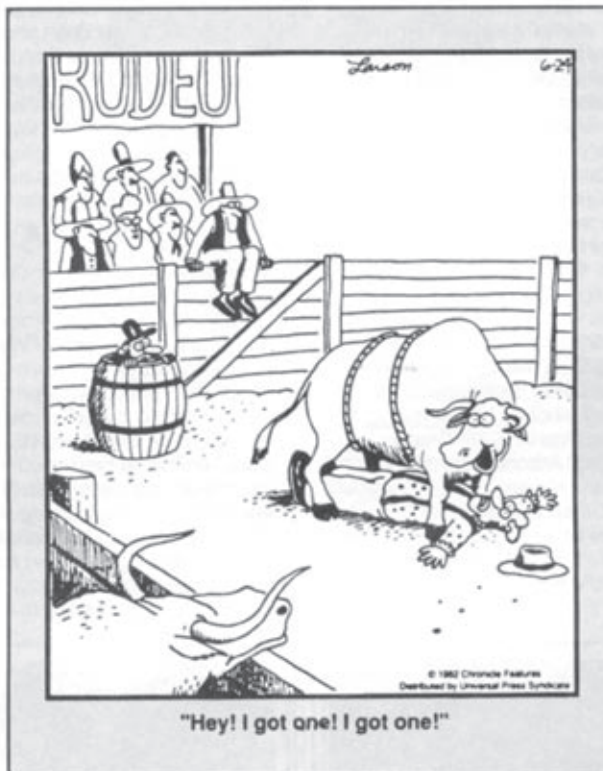
Public outcry over steer dressing helped bring about the demise of a police charity rodeo in northern California recently. A subsequent editorial in the *San Jose Mercury-News* suggested a compromise: "Have cowboys wrestle another cowboy to the ground and dress *him* in lingerie. If the point is humiliation, you might as well do it to somebody who can blush."

The rodeo arena would seem a fertile meeting ground for an alliance between women's groups and animal rights advocates. Just for starters, consider all the anti-woman epithets of animal origin, or the closely-related issue of dominance.

### Children and rodeo

Rodeo seems an anomaly in a society that prides itself on kindness to animals. We've mentioned the "Little Britches" rodeo circuit. Many county fairs present "mutton bustin'" contests, in which preschool children attempt to ride a panic-

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"Hey! I got one! I got one!"

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stricken sheep. Pig and calf "scrambles" put children and animals alike at risk. Children receive a very mixed message and become confused when, on the one hand, they are encouraged to be kind to animals, yet at a rodeo they routinely see animals terrorized and harmed, seemingly with adult approval.

Some public school districts even send their kids on field trips ("Buckaroo Day") sponsored by various rodeo associations, an apparent attempt to build future audiences. Dr. Jeri Ryan, a child psychotherapist, wrote in 1989 to the Livermore (Calif.) school board of her concerns relating to the "potential damage to a child's psychological and moral development that can result from witnessing such a brutal event as rodeo." Some would call these field trips a form of child abuse.

Humane education is mandated in California's public schools. It seems a real conflict of interest for a school district to take children to see animals abused—not only on school time, but at taxpayers' expense.

One of the more poignant examples of just how insidious rodeo mythology has become is the story of an Indian child at the Pendleton (Oregon) Round-Up a few years back. When asked by a rodeo cowboy what he wanted to be when he grew up, a cowboy or an Indian, the child replied without hesitation, "A cowboy!"

### Lights in the tunnel: the future of rodeo

Baltimore County, Maryland has successfully banned standard calf roping, as has the State of Rhode Island. Rhode Island also passed a law in 1989 requiring that a veterinarian be present at all rodeo events (largely through the efforts of Friends of Animals). In California, the Solano County Fairgrounds and the Hayward Rowell Ranch now have policies requiring a vet, and prohibit steer dressing, pig and calf scrambles, and the use of the electric prod. A similar policy is being considered by the California State Fair Board. There has been progress, assuredly.

Without major reform, growing public awareness and concern about rodeo cruelties could well lead to the sport's demise in spite of its "traditional" appeal. Looking toward such a future, a superior court judge in the Netherlands ruled in 1988 that any Dutch city could ban rodeos simply because "they show a basic disrespect for animals." Sounds downright civilized. □

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### What You Can Do About Rodeos

☞ Educate yourself about the realities of rodeo. Firsthand experience is invaluable: attend a few, both professional and amateur. Talk to the cowboys and the fans to get their views.

☞ Read the book, *Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame*, by Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence (Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1982) for an understanding of the cowboy psyche.

☞ Write for a copy of "Humane Facts" (and other materials) from the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, 101 Pro-Rodeo Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80919; 719-593-8840. The PRCA Commissioner is Lewis Cryer. Subscribe to the biweekly "ProRodeo Sport News," \$17 per year, to keep up-to-date on rodeo.

☞ Contact HSUS for a price list on anti-rodeo materials at 2100 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037. ISAR has a rodeo fact sheet available at 20 for \$1.00 (421 South State Street, Clarks Summit, PA 18411). PETA has free materials: P.O. Box 42516, Washington, DC 20015. Use these materials for educational leafleting.

☞ Contact major sponsors of rodeo to express your concerns: Adolph Coors Co., Golden, CO 80401 (800-642-6116); Coca Cola USA, P.O. Drawer 1734, Atlanta, GA 30301 (800-GET-COKE); Safeway Stores, Inc., 4th & Jackson Sts., Oakland, CA 94660 (800-962-1660); Winston Cigarettes, c/o R.J. Reynolds, Inc., Reynolds Blvd., Winston-Salem, NC 27102 (919-741-5000); Wrangler Jeans, c/o Blue Bell, Inc., 301 N. Elm St., Greensboro, NC 27420 (919-373-3400). Other major sponsors include United Airlines, Copenhagen-Skoal, and Black Velvet. Check the rodeo program for local advertisers; then contact them.

☞ Set up meetings with facilities management and with country supervisors and/or city councilmembers to work out rodeo policies. Encourage legislation pertaining to rodeo animal welfare.

☞ "Letters to the Editor" are effective—and free. Rodeo is vulnerable on a number of points, particularly calf and steer roping and the lack of veterinary care.

☞ Make use of picket lines, especially with media coverage. Investigate the possibility of radio and TV free-speech messages, and phone in to radio talk-shows.

☞ The U.S. Postal Service is currently considering a commemorative rodeo stamp. Protest to them at 475 L'Enfant Plaza SW, Washington, DC 20260-6700, Attention: Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee. □

—E.M.



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