

Roughest rodeo behind bars

The cowboy convicts ride again

By KEVIN VENNOR

Saliva drooled from the mouth of the 1500-pound bull as it snorted to a halt a few feet in front of the photographer. The fidgety cameraman tried to focus on the bull's eyes, but the angry animal was in no mood to pose for a picture. It charged.

The man scrambled toward the fence, got one foot into the mesh and started his ascent. But the bull had already focused on its target and hit the man's rear end. The man flew over the fence scattering persons on the other side. The man was unhurt, but it was obvious the bull had taken the best shot.

This was part of the excitement in the first day of competition at the Texas Department of Corrections' Prison Rodeo, held each Sunday of October at 2 p.m. in Huntsville. Other thrills are provided by the cowboys as they hang onto bucking and twisting broncos or as they are thrown to the arena dirt by a mass of muscled frenzy. Spectators shift in their seats as they watch the cowboys scrambling from beneath the hooves and horns of an angry bull.

One cowboy though, doesn't dodge the livestock as much as others. The leathery face and hands of Willie Craig look as tough as the chaps he wears. Craig, 57, won the 1976 Top Hand award, which makes

him the oldest to have achieved the title. He is giving the younger cowboys some tough competition again this year. After two Sundays, he leads the riding divisions with two first places in the bareback bronc and a third place win in the saddle bronc riding.

Craig is currently doing thirty years at the Texas Department of Corrections (TDC) and has missed competing in only seven prison rodeos since he first entered prison in 1944. He works with livestock during the year at a prison farm, but he says he still gets restless before riding a wild animal.

"I guess I do get nervous, but I'm always ready to sit down on it (horse or bull). I want to see who's going to win. Am I going to whip it or is the animal tougher than me?"

This is not the only reason the men ride in the rodeo. At least 300 inmates sign up each year to compete with fellow prisoners and try to earn some extra money. Others are anxious to break the routine of prison life.

The list of potential cowboys is first narrowed down by looking at the inmates' behavior record. TDC does not want to take unnecessary security risks. The list is then checked for inmates who say that they have had freeworld rodeo experience.

"We try to choose the best," says

Gail Monroe, public affairs coordinator for the TDC.

Qualifications are held on the two weekends before the rodeo. The list of inmates has been cut to less than 200 and divided between the northern and southern prison units of the TDC. Enough stock is provided for each of the men to ride but it is up to each man to climb onto a horse or bull.

Newcomers are often leery of mounting the live time-bombs that can send a man flying when they explode from the chute. Some opt to return to their cells without trying to ride after they see another inmate stomped on or thrown on his head.

This gives the veterans a chance at an extra ride and they are eager to practice before competition begins. The action is fast and furious with inmate "clowns" having to maneuver with more than one bull in the arena.

By the opening Sunday, 50 inmates are selected to ride the horses and bulls and twenty women from the Goree prison unit are paired into ten teams to compete in goat roping and the greased pig sacking contest. Another 40 inmates called redshirts are designated for the wild cow milking contest and the exciting "hard money" competition.

The hard money event consists of a large bull that has a Bull Durham tobacco sack tied between its horns.

The sack has cash in it and the red-shirt who can get the sack can keep the money. The event is held twice during each rodeo. The first bull carries \$25 in the sack and during the first rodeo this bull promptly ran over a couple of inmates. Afterwards other contestants were so careful that the 5-minute time limit ran out before another inmate would even get close to the bull.

"That's all boys," said announcer Bill Bailey, who works with radio station KENR in Houston. But one inmate didn't like the idea of the bull keeping the money and ran toward it to grab the sack. The bull knocked him down and almost gored him. The inmate lost interest in the money and tried to get up and run but fell in front of the bull. The bull hit the man again and the man coiled up in the dirt and lay motionless. Clowns and inmates distracted the bull while others ran toward the man, but the man uncoiled, got to his feet and was one of the first out of the arena.

A bigger and meaner bull is used for the second hard money event of each rodeo. It carries \$50 between its horns plus any unclaimed cash from preceding events. A nice incentive, but not a nice bull. This is the bull that tossed the photographer over the fence during the first day of competition.

If you're still not convinced the hard money event is rough business, ask Jimmy McCombs, who is lying in John Sealy Hospital in Galveston with a fractured skull, how rough it is. McCombs was trampled by a bull in last Sunday's first hard money event.

Danny Fleming wasn't stomped by a bull, but you won't be able to recognize the handsome baby face of this 20-year-old inmate. The 6-foot blond wears grease paint on his face and a clown's hat. This is Fleming's first year with the rodeo and he is

proud to have been selected as one of five inmate clowns.

Fleming says he knew the competition for rodeo clown was going to be tough. So when he went to the qualification events he was determined to show the officials he was willing to risk injury to himself in order to prevent fellow inmates from being hurt. But no cowboys were getting into any trouble so Fleming started swatting at a bull with a broom, running around it and keeping the bull's attention. He began to tire though and the bull started coming closer to him with each pass until finally he tried to cut away from the bull, slipped and caught a horn in the back.

He says that he was sore for a week, but he thinks the incident may have been a factor in the officials' decision to allow him to participate in the rodeo. The inmate clowns are paid \$7 a day and work under the supervision of two freeworld professional clowns.

The cowboys don't get paid unless they place first, second or third in one of the riding events. The bull and saddle bronc winners for each Sunday receive \$52.50, \$36.50 and \$28 respectively. Bareback bronc winners get \$50, \$35 and \$28 each rodeo and the overall money winner for the month of October will be named Top Hand. He will receive an engraved gold and silver belt buckle proclaiming him "All Around, 1977." Belt buckles will also be presented to the top money winner of each major riding category.

The cowboys tend to the business of preparing their gear for a ride, unless one of the inmates spots an attractive woman in the stands. Ropes are checked and resin applied to gloves, saddles, chaps and ropes to provide a better grip for the rider. Many of the inmates have their own gear from working at the TDC farms and most of the cowboys with chaps have made their own or designed

them and had the chaps made at the leather shop at a prison unit. If they don't have their own gear, they borrow it.

When the riding begins, the casual talk stops and all eyes are on their fellow inmate. They cheer each other on and enjoy seeing someone stay on for the 8 second time limit.

When one of the cowboys is thrown, the other riders are silent but you can hear the announcer Bailey quip, "Ah, too bad for that cowboy today,

but he's got the rest of his life to come back and try again."

And try again they do. Each year 50 inmates strip their regular white uniforms and don the traditional convict black and white stripes. It's all part of the show and the inmates don't mind the jokes...much. One rider said, "Even if we didn't like the things they say and do, we're not in much of a position to do anything about it. Besides, we could always go back to the unit if we don't like something, but it's better to be here."

Elephant survives trip

United Press International

HOUSTON — A 9,000-pound Indian elephant Tuesday broke from a downtown parade, sideswiped several cars and slammed into two buildings before being brought under control by a 100-pound patrolwoman.

Ten patrol cars gave chase as Big Lydia fled through an open garage door at Jack Carswell & Co. funeral home, where officers said she became lodged between a hearse and a parked car.

Witnesses said she tore up the funeral home garage and "left a horrible mess" before bolting back outside to meet Officer Wanda Boehm, who simply grabbed the elephant by the trunk, settling her.

"I don't know how to make out an elephant-fixed object report," a traffic officer complained afterward. "I can see no possible violation on the part of the elephant."

Playlist

HITS

- Linda Ronstadt "Simple Dreams"
- Fleetwood Mac "Rumours"
- Crosby, Stills, and Nash "CSN"
- James Taylor "JT"
- Rolling Stones "Love You Live"
- Foreigner "Foreigner"
- Rita Coolidge "Anytime...Anywhere"
- Foghat "Live"
- Yes "Going for the One"
- Doobie Brothers "Livin' On the Fault Line"
- Heart "Little Queen"
- Chicago "Chicago XI"

RISERS

- Steely Dan "Aja"
- Stephen Bishop "Careless"
- Pablo Cruise "A Place In the Sun"
- Little River Band "Diamantina Cocktail"
- Firefall "Luna Sea"
- Styx "Grand Illusion"
- Jean-Luc Ponty "Enigmatic Ocean"
- Utopia "Oops! Wrong Planet"
- Cheap Trick "In Color"
- Boston "Boston"
- Pure Prairie League "Live, Takin' the Stage"
- Billy Joel "The Stranger"

FADERS

- Ted Nugent "Cat Scratch Fever"
 - Kiss "Love Gun"
 - Dan Fogelberg "Netherlands"
 - Peter Frampton "I'm In You"
 - Elvin Bishop "Raisin' Hell"
 - Steve Miller Band "Book of Dreams"
 - Jimmy Buffett "Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes"
 - Electric Light Orchestra "A New World Record"
 - Kenny Loggins "Celebrate Me Home"
 - Barbra Streisand "Superman"
 - Supertramp "Even In the Quietest Moments"
 - Be Bop Deluxe "Live! In the Air Age"
- NEW ALBUMS
- Racing Cars "Weekend Rendezvous"
 - Point Blank "Second Session"
 - Caldera "Sky Islands"
 - Artful Dodger "Babes on Broadway"
 - Airto "I'm Fine, How Are You?"
 - Rory Block "Intoxication So Bitter Sweet"
 - Zbigniew Seifert "Zbigniew Seifert"
 - Chico Hamilton "Catwalk"
 - Hummingbird "Diamond Nights"
 - Nick Jameson "Already Free"
 - The Domenic Troiano Band "Burnin' At the Stake"
 - Karla Bonoff "Karla Bonoff"

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