

focus

Star-spangled Houston Rodeo returns



There is a lot of excitement going on at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. With all the excitement several animals give birth unexpectedly, as was the case with the cow on the left.

Who's tired...

Delivering this calf kept this couple up early Saturday morning but all three seem to be "sleeping it off" well.

Hoopla... but where's the rodeo?

By DOUG GRAHAM

Enormous is the word for the Houston Rodeo. No other word fits. It offers the largest purses and the finest cowboys and riding stock in the country. Add country singers and the modern techno-wizardry of Houston's promoters, and you should have the finest rodeo anywhere.

Which is what I expected at my first Houston rodeo and my first trip inside the Astrodome. But what I found was that in concentrating all the glory of rodeo under that vaulting dome, something was lost.

Perhaps it was transplanting rodeo from its dirt roots to slick professionalism, that did it. Houston's rodeo had lost something basic.

Two impressions hit me as I watched steerwrestling. The first was the dome's vastness, and how far away and small both the men and steers seemed.

The second shocker was the speed. The bulldoggers were quick. One second the steer was up. The next he was down.

There was no collision of flesh, no bone-jarring planting of the heels as cowboys leaped from their horses. Instead of drama, one got the feeling that the event was somehow...antiseptic.

Saddlebronc riding was next. Each man spurred his horse to wilder bucking, but were so far away the nuances of their style could not be discerned — the style which garnered points for both man and animal.

Where was the dust? The smell? The sweat and noise? The chuckwagon races inspired the most audience participation as

they slewed sideways in the dirt — their matched teams of horses straining in their traces. The drivers were western chariot racers.

Next came a piece of Houston space-wizardry. Below a central screen that read:

WELCOME TO THE ASTRODOME EIGHTH WONDER OF THE WORLD.

Mac Davis, the featured entertainer, rode triumphantly into the arena on a shining black and silver pickup bed. He met his band which was pulled into the arena's center on a portable rotating stage.

All around the dome was sterile red, white, and blue bunting stretching in fringed streamers over the cattle chutes.

Mac Davis sang a song about how he really was a cowboy despite his fancy clothes, pickup, and money, but I didn't believe him. He was like too many of the people I saw who were wearing suspiciously new western wear.

When the TV-trained mass was urged to clap along, two ghost hands appeared on the central screen as prompters. But the hollow crackle of clapping soon died, shaming the applauding screen into darkness.

Another screen flashed MAC DAVIS red-green, red-green. Beside it, and its twin, were two huge illuminated signs: Marlboro, and Coca-cola. Above the central screen a huge nylon American flag formed the third member of the American triad — the real thing in the United States of Marlboro countries.

The "country" concert was aimed for a slightly western Donny and Marie set of older folks. It had little to do with real rodeo, and I felt that

the obvious bit of promotion hurt, rather than helped, the show.

But then, I came for a rodeo, not a variety act.

I saw rodeo clowns submerged by the vastness. Their skits, gestures, and expressive faces were quarantined by the distance between them and their spectators.

Bull riding is the most exciting and dangerous event. Bulls not only throw a man off his back, but unlike the bronco, will sometimes turn to destroy their erstwhile riders. The danger to the men was real, but the brilliant lights, and the distance from the action, made it seem as if you'd have seen it just as well if you'd watched it on television.

What I got is what I deserved, I guess. Though for the men and animals competing there was nothing artificial, but for the spectators something didn't ring true. Big bucks breed big promotion. Big promotion needs to reach huge audiences, audiences that might ordinarily not care to see a rodeo. Hence, it was too smooth, too polished, and too slick. Instead of rough fence there was smooth painted bars. Instead of crummy arena-side bleachers there were tiers of comfortable individual seats. Add refreshments, hoopla, and a concert, and you have it.

The Houston Rodeo. More than a rodeo, and much, much, less.

Popcorn, kids, cowboys blend for the big show

BY PAIGE BEASLEY
Battalion Staff

Cowboys ride into town dressed in faded jeans, chaps and spurs. Their jeans, tucked down deep in their tooled-leather boots, are decked by silver-buckled belts adorned with fancy engraving displaying their names. Businessmen put on western hats and boots to join the newcomers in celebrating the 46th annual Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo.

The eighth wonder of the world, the Astrodome, attracts the world's greatest cowboys, who come to claim a \$275 certificate is awarded to each of the 12 tired winners.

A few bets are being made in the audience, as the next event draws closer.

And they're off. Three colorful chuckwagons pulled by teams of four ponies race around the arena, bringing spectators to their feet as they cheer their favorite team to victory.

They have one more lap to go...and it's a neck-and-neck finish. "I win," yells a middle-aged lady as she throws her arms — and popcorn — in the air. "I win, I win the bet," she says. "My team won." She grabs a dollar from the man behind her, and runs to the concession stand to replace the bag of popcorn.

Lights in the Astrodome dim, and the star of the show rides toward the center of the arena in a freshly waxed pickup truck. Flash bulbs light up the entire building, as some of America's finest country and western entertainers come on stage.

Commercial blinking lights form the figure of clapping hands on the billboard. Spectators clap to the music, sing the verses they know, and mumble the ones they don't.

Flashing billboard lights spell out the names of cowboys willing to prove their strength and endurance by tackling anything from bronc riding, steer wrestling, calf roping to bull riding.

Cowboys wait for their chance to explode from the chute riding some of rodeo's toughest stock. Each contestant matches his skills against a clock that keeps ticking away valuable time and prize money.

Hilarity breaks the seriousness of the contest when a white-faced clown with a feather in his cap and wearing a pair of oversized patched overalls walks into the arena to direct a monkey perched on a dog's back attempting to jump several hurdles.

What happens when 24 boys and a dozen calves are turned loose in the same arena? There is definitely a scramble — a calf scramble. Twenty-four screaming boys follow the calves, leaping and tugging at them whenever possible. The calves never know what hits them, but suddenly they are tackled (two, three, or even more times), then haltered and dragged across the finish line, where

Cows and steers, four times size of their young owners, sluggishly toward the arena showing, while being tugger pulled at full force. To think these young 4-H members will be a herd, when one seems to be ing difficulty.

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Popcorn, chewing tobacco and 23,000 animals — Houston Livestock Show

Nerves start twitching and drops of perspiration form on foreheads of each contestant at moment some have waited a for approaches. Tension mounts they search the judge's face for sign showing approval of their

The children's barnyard gives youngsters the opportunity to farm animals. Touch in this case includes pinching, grabbing, poking and hitting.

"Hi, cow," says a four-year-old as she fearfully reaches out to a calf. She takes a quick step backwards though, when the calf's long wet tongue around her hand.

Beer, barbecue, popcorn, cotton candy, sausage, beer stop. Rodeo fans try it all. Spectators take a beating and so do the books.

Money doesn't stop many. They just move from one platform to another, registering for line eating, or drinking and snacking.

A pot-bellied old timer takes the corner of the building, and the dog into his mouth, must stand over his bottom lip and drip shirt.

Music, animal sounds, thousands of voices become a blur. None distinguishable.

But the room is also a blur. A sive blur of people crammed by-side with little room to breathe.

Tired aching feet slow down traffic at the end of the day. Con go home to rest for tomorrow, nnessmen to soak their blistered



A mass of Aggies and would-be Aggies enjoyed balloons, animals and companionship at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo this week. Right, Texas A&M students Kathy Wolfe and Nancy Strickland, both seniors, line up for a souvenir. Top, four Houston wranglers gang up to see the show. Lower left, Ralph Herron, 4, sizes up the livestock.

Battalion photos
by Paige Beasley

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