



Kevin Murphy,
• bull rider

Bull Riders in Alabama

Live **Excitement,**
Competitiveness
and **Adrenaline Rush**

By *LOYD McINTOSH*

Despite broken bones and head injuries, Alabama cowboys can't get enough of 8-second adrenaline rush

Whatever the level of experience, one thing is clear... Alabama's rodeo scene is energetic, vigorous and ever growing.

Even though the world of rodeo is most active in Texas, the Midwest and the Western United States, Alabama has a lively rodeo scene as well. On practically every weekend of the year, cowboys can be found riding bulls, roping and wrestling steer and riding horses throughout the state.

Children get started in rodeo as young as eight years old, and in some cases, continue throughout high school, college and even into the professional circuits.

Being able to travel to an event close to home is important for many young rodeo athletes, most of whom have to keep a regular job in order to pay the bills. One such athlete is Kevin Murphy, a 24-year-old bull rider from Ashford, Ala.

Murphy competes year-round at events sanctioned by the PRCA (Professional Rodeo Cowboy's Association) and SPBRA (Southern Pro Bull Riders Association) throughout the Southeast. A gas-fitter by day, Murphy regularly climbs behind the wheel of his car on Fridays and travels to Georgia, Tennessee and Florida seeking to success on the rodeo circuit. Currently, he seeks sponsors for the 2005 season, but Murphy says he hopes the hard work will eventually pay off. He says he'd like to make bull riding his career.

"I work a 40-hour week," Murphy says. "It's not something where I've been able to quit my job and just go. There are some guys who don't have another job but riding bulls and are gone 200 days or more. I'm shooting to ride bulls full time and make it to Vegas to ride in the (PRCA) finals."

Competing in one of the most

dangerous events in rodeo, Murphy says he always wanted to ride bulls as a child, but his mother wouldn't allow it. However, after seeing a SPBRA finals in person when he was 18, Murphy was hooked.

He started working in the practice pen every day and competed for the first time at age 19. He says the significant chance of danger combined



Natasha Parker

with the thrill of riding atop a wild animal is enticing for many young men, despite the injuries and broken bones that are certain to follow.

"It's an adrenaline rush and a way of life," Murphy says. "I've broken both arms, and my right arm twice. I've been stepped on all over and knocked out a few times. I used to wear braces and had them knocked completely off my teeth by a bull."

Murphy says he is one of only a few serious professional bull riders in this state, but says the sport is attracting new athletes from some unlikely places, including larger northern cities. However, he says he believes the sport is gaining in popularity throughout Alabama as more people

come to rodeos interested in high-energy, danger-defying action.

"I think the rodeo scene in Alabama is growing in spots," Murphy says. "There are only a handful of bull riders from this part of Southeast Alabama. We're getting people from all different walks of life. There are bull riders coming from big cities like Chicago, Ill.

"A long time ago, rodeo was based around the farm," he adds. "Now, cowboys and rodeo athletes come from all walks of life. It's just an extreme sport."

Wherever there is a 4H or Future Farmer of America program needing support in a community, there could be a rodeo. Some have been around for many years, such as the Annual Southeastern Livestock Exposition Rodeo, which celebrates its 48th year on March 10-12, 2005, at Garrett Coliseum in Montgomery. Others are relatively new, including the Shelby County Cattleman's Rodeo, scheduled for March 3-4 at the Shelby County Exhibition Center in Columbiana.

The Shelby County Cattlemen's Rodeo is a fundraising opportunity for the Shelby County Cattlemen's Association's efforts to support the FFA and 4H programs of the local Shelby County Schools. It's also a popular rodeo for both fans and competitors, who pack the indoor arena for the first sanctioned rodeo in the spring, according to John Jones, a SCCA member and one of the rodeo's organizers.

"Last year we had more than 400 entries for people wanting to compete in this rodeo," Jones says. "We have the bull riding, bareback riding, calf roping, team roping, steer wrestling, and we even have our own clowns (also called bull fighters) at this rodeo. We have people coming from several states just to see it. On occasion, for the last two years, police have had to close the gates. There have been so many people trying to get in that we've had to turn some away."



Jake Littlefield

Held indoors, the SCCA Rodeo is perfect for spectators, especially children who want the best possible views of the action. And with events taking place until late hours of the night, there is plenty to enjoy.

"It's a good rodeo," Jones says. "You're close enough to see it, feel it and smell it. It's really adaptive for young people. You're right on top of the action and can see it all."

Rodeos are sanctioned by any number of organizational bodies, such as the SPBRA and the PRCA. As young athletes "earn their spurs" on their way to the top rodeos on the circuit, they may travel each weekend from small town to small town gaining experience. In some cases, they earn some money along the way.

"Our guys can earn anywhere from \$12,000 to \$15,000 per year at this level," says Martha Young, an official with the Southern Pro Bull Riders Association. Founded in 1995 by her now late husband "Cotton" Young, and based in Opelika, the SPBRA sponsors bull-riding events throughout the south, particularly in Alabama, Georgia and Florida.

Young says her organization is strong in Florida, where the warmer weather provides a perfect climate for events all year long. But, she says, the sport is growing in Alabama and is popular in certain areas of the state.

Colleges Wrangle Rodeo Action

Rodeo Riding: Alabama's Other Sport?

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

As rodeo competitions grow in popularity throughout Alabama, a few colleges have climbed in the saddle.

The University of West Alabama at Livingston and Troy University have nationally recognized rodeo teams for both men and women. The teams compete with other universities throughout the nation as part of the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association (NIRA).

The NIRA was founded in 1948. It crowned its first champion, Harley May of Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Texas, at the inaugural NIRA Championships in San Francisco a year later, in 1949.

Not only do West Alabama and Troy have competitive and vibrant rodeo teams, they have found some success. At one point during the current 2004-2005 season, the Lady Tigers of West Alabama were ranked third on the NIRA national polls.

Rodeo athletes are not hard to find.

"Most of these athletes have a lot of experience in rodeos," says West Alabama head rodeo coach Jason Schoenfeld. "Almost all of them have been around rodeos since they were 8 or 10 years old."

Schoenfeld, a former professional rodeo athlete and a native of Oklahoma, won an NIRA title with Oklahoma Panhandle State University in 1997. He has led the West Alabama program for the past seven seasons. Since the West Alabama program was launched in 1995, its rodeo team has qualified for the College National Finals in four of its first five seasons.

A small college with an enrollment of only 3,600, West Alabama enjoys tremendous support for its rodeo program. With each college in the NIRA competing in 10 rodeos per year – five in the fall and five in the spring – each member institution hosts only one rodeo during the season. However, Schoenfeld says that one weekend per year – usually in late October – is a special time for the UWA students and the entire city of Livingston.

"We'll have more than 300 student-athletes from 10 different states here to compete in our rodeo, and we get a lot of support from this community," Schoenfeld says. "This city and the students here care a lot about this program and show it by giving us a lot of support."



Ashley Blakely