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## Medics patching up rodeo cowboys

By Tammy Bain

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*Dr. Nathan Jacobson shakes the hand of a cowboy after treating him in the Great Plains Health Sports Medicine Trailer, at the Buffalo Bill Rodeo.*

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**L**ike so many others, the cowgirl circles the Wild West Arena on horseback, as people in the grandstands cheer. But at the north end of the arena, the rodeo queen is thrown from the horse she's been given — it isn't hers; rodeo queens seldom ride their own horses as they travel.

Behind the chutes, professionals with Great Plains Health are ready for this. While health professionals have been at the Buffalo Bill Rodeo for years, they now come with a full sports medicine trailer, equipped to help professionals with “everything short of a transport,” as orthopedic surgeon Dr. Nathan Jacobson says.

This is the second year that Jacobson, athletic trainer Tyler Oberlander and other members of their team have brought the trailer to the rodeo. They treat cowboys and cowgirls of all kinds, including bullfighters and, yes, rodeo queens.

The first big rush isn’t after the bareback riders are thrown off their horses. It’s right before the event. Knowing what to expect from their sport, the riders come in to wrap their joints, preparing to be tossed and thrown around out of the chute. It’s the first event, unlike the long-awaited bull riders who take the arena after dark.



*Doctor Nathan Jacobson, an orthopaedic surgeon at Great Plains Health, stands in the hospital's Sports Medicine Trailer during the Buffalo Bill Rodeo. This is where many cowboys start their nights, before they take the arena to perform.*

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“The bulls are the sexiest” looking sport, Jacobson says. “But the ones that are hardest on your body are bareback.”



*Tyler Oberlander, a certified athletic trainer with Great Plains Health, watches the Buffalo Bill Rodeo from the chutes at the Wild West Arena.*

Jacobson and Oberlander have spent months traveling the college rodeo circuit. They go to 30-40 rodeos a year.

Oberlander is entering his third year at his job. He pitched the idea of bringing sports medicine to rodeos during his job interview, expecting it to go nowhere.

Later, he found himself pitching his idea to the Great Plains Health Foundation, the nonprofit sector of the hospital.

Members gave the team a trailer in the spring of 2016, the inside of which looks a lot like a camper. This year, the team received a pickup to pull the trailer.

Jacobson and Oberlander give out rolls and rolls of tape to the cowboys. They likely won't use it all that night, Jacobson says, but will travel to a rodeo that doesn't supply it.

They've spent time before the rodeo stocking the trailer's cupboards: tape, splints, supplies to stop blood, kits to stimulate and loosen muscles before the hard ride or after. If need be, they can splint at the arena.

They'll evaluate hurt personnel for concussions and monitor the symptoms.

“That's where cowboys save some money,” Jacobson says.

Staff will watch for signs of internal bleeding. If a cowboy or cowgirl isn't recovering quickly enough or starts regressing, they're automatically taken to the hospital. If not, they saved the bill of having to go for observation.

Jacobson remembers one college rodeo athlete who was kicked by a horse and ruptured his spleen. He regressed every time he seemed to improve, and later spent days on bed rest at the hospital.

Although Jacobson grew up in southern California, his eyes light up as he talks about rodeo and the cowboys' stories. His wife, Jennifer, who hangs out in the trailer and around the chutes — and will bring their two young children later in the week — says she hopes North Platte is their home forever.



*Jennifer and Dr. Nathan Jacobson stand near the chutes at the Wild West Arena during the Buffalo Bill Rodeo. It's here that Dr. Jacobson helps treat cowboys, bullfighters and cowgirls; Jennifer often comes with.*

Raised in rural South Dakota, Oberlander grew up around rodeo but never competed. He nods as Jacobson relays the story: Oberlander's dad said he couldn't have a horse; his mom said he couldn't be a bull rider.

"My textbook in college had a picture of a guy taping up a cowboy," Oberlander says. If he was going to work in sports medicine, that's what he wanted to do.

Later, the cowgirl is bucked off. She arrives at the trailer covered in mud from her face down. She laughs at herself as the team offers her a towel to wipe off. They give her a bottle of water, which she swigs and spits outside the trailer to get dirt out of her mouth.

One of the bullfighters is here for stimulation treatment to loosen his joints, before he distracts bulls as cowboys escape the arena. He offers the rodeo queen a mirror.

She's in pain, but doesn't want to go to the hospital — she's transitioning between her parents' and her own health insurance. So she accepts ice from athletic trainer Destri Millsap, a member of the sports medicine team, and she takes Jacobson up on his offer to lie down, just to be safe.

Oberlander spends his time at the arena on the go. He watches events from the gate. He runs up the metal stairs behind the chutes, where cowboys are getting on their horses to ride. This is where Jacobson and another team member will watch the rodeo.

“I’ve seen bull riders get bucked off in the bucking chute,” Oberlander says.

Then it’s back down the other side of the chutes near the south end of the gate, where another team member watches the rodeo. From watching in the past, Oberlander has noticed this is where injuries are likely to happen.

The rest of the night is pretty steady. The bullfighters do their clown makeup while stimulating their joints. Cowboys come to get tape, and when they ask if they can give something, Jacobson refers them to a foundation donation.

Jacobson gives cowboys advice on long-term care: lots of leg presses, he tells one. The investment the hospital receives from the sports medicine trailer, he says, is continued care.

A bull rider limps in as the rodeo ends.

“Where do you want me?” he asks.

Others follow, filling up the trailer.



*Dr. Nathan Jacobson watches the Buffalo Bill Rodeo from inside the chutes at the Wild West Arena. Here, bull riders are sometimes bucked off before their ride begins.*



*Tyler Oberlander and Destri Milsap chat between events at the Buffalo Bill Rodeo.*



*After the Buffalo Bill Rodeo ends, many cowboys become medical patients.*

The first bull rider explains a prior injury to Jacobson, for which he had received a cortisone shot two days before.

“One bull” is all it took to undo the cortisone’s positive effects, he says. Jacobson tells the bull rider that the cortisone numbs the pain, and the steroid in the shot allows the joint to heal. The shot itself, he said, doesn’t heal anything. He warns the cowboy he may have to look into surgery.

The last few cowboys apologize for taking so long and Oberlander assures them that’s what he’s there for. After they leave, the team will take the dirty laundry — pillowcases, towels — and use “high-powered wipes” to wipe the trailer down. Oberlander keeps bleach under the sink just in case.

At 7 a.m., Oberlander will be back for the next day’s rodeo slack session, offering tape, wraps, stimulation treatment and a chance to swap stories.