



Hoping to meet a couple of real cowboys and witness some dangerous action at a local rodeo, *Oliver Roberts* unexpectedly ends up on one of the bulls himself

Pictures: *Oliver Roberts*

A LOAD OF BULL

MOST of the time, intense fear is the result of anticipation. If you spend enough time thinking about what might happen — examining all the horrendous possibilities, imagining every deadly corollary — your original, rational concerns mount up and become that dark, insurmountable thing called dread.

It is providential, then, that I realise I am getting onto a rodeo bull only a few hours before I actually do. If I'd known days beforehand, I no doubt would have YouTube'd "rodeo", which would have led to "rodeo fails", "guy falls off rodeo bull" and, finally and inevitably, "rodeo bull attack". I might have reneged then, blamed injury or a sudden rush of common sense to avoid getting onto the bull. Instead, I am standing in a barn on a seething Saturday afternoon in

Bronkhorstspuit, signing an indemnity form. You see, I went to a meeting of the Rough Stock Rodeo Club merely hoping to get a good story. I thought it'd be novel to hang around with some cowboys in chaps and watch one or two of them get trampled by a 700kg bull. "And maybe you'd like to try," says Hachtor "Hekei" Beukes when he's finished telling me what rodeo is (the rider tries to stay on for eight seconds, after which a siren sounds and he must jump off), how it works (competitors are judged on riding style and technique), how long its been around (Rough Stock was established in 2010 and there are two other rodeo clubs in SA) and what the risks are (cuts, concussions and the odd broken leg).

I thought he was joking about me having a go. Would they really just allow some guy to pitch up and get on one of the beasts? I'd had a look — their massive, swaying testicles alone

must weigh more than a small child.

So I shrugged and said okay, Heki, sure, I wouldn't mind trying it. That was when he pulled out the indemnity form. By then, a few other cowboys were standing around listening to our conversation — they'd seen the paper change hands — I couldn't very well say no.

In the meantime, I had proper work to do. I wanted to meet some cowboys and understand why they love mounting bulls and whether they worry about the consequences.

"It's been a lifelong dream for me to ride bulls," says Paul van der Merwe, 20. "I like the adrenalin." Then he falls silent and gazes into the harsh sun. Some cowboys don't talk much.

His friend Friedrich Woest is wearing a black Stetson and a blue shirt replete with Rough Stock Rodeo Club badges. He's young — also 20 — but already has thick black stubble covering his face. He looks a little Eastwoody — the real deal even — but I later find out he's completing a degree in psychology and tourism in Potchefstroom.

Woest says: "I like a challenge in life, and I've played many sports, but taking on something that's much heavier than you, much stronger than you, for eight seconds — that's much more of a challenge than you can find in any other 'ordinary' sport."

"He's lying, he's lying," says Beukes "He likes girls, and girls like cowboys."

I want to know about the relationship between the bull and the rider. Is it comparable in any way to the one between man and horse? Is there any finesse involved or do you just get on the thing, hold on tight, and hope you're still awake by the time you hit the dirt?

"If you don't know animals, you're never going to ride a bull," says Van der Merwe. "If you know animals, know their behaviour and grew up on a farm, that's when you're going to be a good bull rider."

Know animals? Crew up on a farm? I haven't got a chance.

"You don't really need to be scared of them," says Woest. "When it's broken down, the bull is only flesh and bone. When you get into the chute, you mustn't be afraid, you must get in there with the attitude that 'today it's me and you, eight seconds, and we're going to ride the shit out of each other.'"

And what about the injuries? Is man not also flesh and bone?

"If you're not willing to live with injuries,

don't do it," Woest adds.

Beukes says there's a scruff of hair on the bull's neck that you need to focus on while the animal is thrashing about beneath you. He says that watching it will help you anticipate the monster's change of direction. Oh, and keep your legs tight and your back straight. That's all there is to it.

Before it's my time, there are 13 other, proper, cowboys who want to get onto a bull and see what it's got. They each do this twice to decide on a winner. One rider, the pseudo-Clint psychology and tourism student himself, gets kicked near the top of his eye and returns from the ring with bright red blood streaming satisfactorily down his face. A couple of other guys get slammed against the metal fencing. I spot one of the riders — probably the best one there — down on one knee, praying earnestly before getting into the chute. Just then, one of the bulls — having violently shed itself of its human load — goes a bit crackers, butts and breaks its way through the fencing and runs haphazardly about the large property.

Beukes lends me his chaps, though I'm acutely aware of not really knowing how to put them on. Mercifully, most of the guys don't seem to think it too wussy to wear a chest protector so I borrow one of these too, and a hockey helmet Beukes keeps in his kit bag for people like me (ie, deepest animal knowledge extends as far as his Siamese cat, finds farm life a bit dull). The other

cowboys, who do it all in their Stetsons (it's only a concussion after all) laugh and tap their fists on the helmet.

"Dis nou Oliver van die Sunday Times," says the announcer, "so kom ons gee vir hom 'n handeklap."

People might be clapping but I can't hear them. I'm climbing the steps that lead to the chute. The bull is in there, waiting restlessly, waiting for me.

I stand over it. Steady now. Straddle it. A fine sweat on its back. Heat rising off all that savage sinew. Once I'm on it feels oddly comfortable, a bit like sitting on a motorbike, and — I don't know why — this absurd thought calms me completely.

I put my gloved hand under the bull rope, which is like a rein made of thick cord. It's pulled so brutally tight over my upturned palm that I can't move my hand.

I turn to Beukes, unsettled. "What happens if my hand doesn't come out when I fall and the bull drags me around?"

"Don't worry, that won't happen," he says, slapping me twice on the shoulder. "Just the glove might stay in there."

There's nothing left to do now. The bull is ready. But I'm not quite yet. I think about what Woest said ("we're going to ride the shit out of each other") and, for just a second or two before I say okay go, I place my free hand on the bull's colossal neck and try to pass a subliminal message into its impassive consciousness: "Please don't ride the shit out of me."

Then the gate opens ... and nothing happens. The bull goes free but it just sort-of stands there. I feel huge relief but also vague embarrassment. I appreciate the bull's sympathy for about three seconds, and then I give it a kick.

Grip the bull rope now. This is more like it.

It rears, it bucks, it snorts. It salivates and kicks up sand and chases irately after the waving rodeo clown, determined to gore him. Of course, I'm not looking for changes in direction on the scruff of hair on its neck, I'm just trying to stay on.

Just when I think I'm not doing too bad for a guy in a hockey helmet and a pair of Converse sneakers, the sky collapses. The brute has flicked me off. I fall onto my back and every breath I've ever held in my lungs gets forced out. I lie still for a moment. There's dirt in my mouth.

It tastes like old brine. This is good — I'm alive.

It was over in six seconds.

For details on upcoming rodeos (and if you fancy riding a bull), contact Heki Beukes on 083 468 4002, heki@vodamail.co.za or visit www.sarodeo.co.za.

YEE-HAH! Oliver Roberts (far left) five seconds on his way to getting dumped. Left, many of the rodeo riders say a quick prayer before climbing on

“I stand over it. A fine sweat on its back. Heat rising off sinew

WAR WOUNDS: Friedrich Woest patched up after a kick to the face

