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THE MYTH OF THE COWBOY



by Brenda Shoss

Dawn's light swept the rocky divide as horse and man moved in smooth cadence. With gunslinger's grit, he defended woman, child and cow from gnarly no-goods. This cowboy of America's Wild West...

Cut. This guy never existed. Hollywood crafted John Wayne, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry as fast-drawing heroes with hearts of gold. "Much as minstrel shows reinvented slaves as happy-go-lucky banjo-pickers, cowboy movies reinvented cowboys as guitar-twanging knights errants," writes Merritt Clifton, editor of *Animal People*, in his essay "The Cowboys."

Orphans, immigrants and former slaves populated early cowboyland, claims Clifton and historical authors Mark Twain, Jack London and Joaquin Miller. As frontiers forged West, so did adolescent drifters who were bought and sold for cheap labor and sexual exploitation. "They most definitely were not rodeo-riders, nor rodeo fans, nor people who glorified the cowboy life if they were able to escape it," Clifton asserts. After Hollywood concocted the celluloid cowboy, rodeo spread beyond its lower-class Spanish cultural roots across the West.

The Humane Society of the U.S. condemns rodeos as sham "rough and tough exercises of human skill and courage in conquering the fierce, untamed beasts of the Wild West." In reality, handlers antagonize tame animals with electric prods, straps, spurs and tail twisting. Veterinarians (when present) don't intervene once a deliberately agitated animal is released into the ring.

On July 24-30, 2006, the National High School Rodeo Association (NHSRA) returned to Springfield, IL for its finals rodeo. So did Steve Hindi, founder of Showing Animals Respect and Kindness (SHARK). At NHSRA's 2001 finals, Hindi documented unconscious horses, lame steers, and calves tormented at rehearsals. "Without the noise of the crowd and the announcer you can actually hear the calves' bodies slamming on the ground, and their choking and coughing after being clotheslined," Hindi says.

NHSRA lost major sponsor Choice Hotels in April 2007. But handlers still electrically shock and spike animals with sharp implements to coax a "good show." In 2006, reporter Bruce Rushton exposed rodeo brutality in the *State Journal-Register*, prompting an Illinois Department of Agriculture probe that uncovered violations of state law and rodeo rules.

Hindi's 2001 footage of shock prod overuse swayed rodeo organizers to install a limited-use rule. Still, cowboys want to perpetuate the myth. Kent Sturman,



Denver's NHSRA general manager, says "Those of us who work around animals know [electric shock] is not perceived the same from people who don't have that experience." Blasting 5,000 or more volts into an animal's flesh for entertainment purposes seems unjustifiably cruel. SHARK offers money to any competitor willing to take a jolt himself. So far no cowboys have volunteered.

CALF-ROPING: In the calf-roping event, 3-4 month old babies are "clotheslined" around the neck as they race at breakneck speeds. Painfully harassed in holding chutes, they flee into the ring at speeds up to 27 miles per hour where a contestant neck-chokes and smashes them into the ground. He typically body-slams them again for theatrical effect.

Tail twisting — wrenching tails over metal slats of a fence — causes acute physical distress in animals. Rodeo people use it to unhinge calves and steers in chutes. Even the tails of horses and bulls are yanked and raked.

Competitively timed calf roping can result in broken necks, backs or legs. When spent calves arrive at the slaughterhouse, they have "broken ribs, punctured lungs, hematomas, broken legs, and severed tracheas," says Dr. Robert Fetzner, one-time Director of Slaughter Operations for FSIS (USDA). The ligament that secures the neck to the body is often disengaged.

STEER CONTESTS: A rider lassos a running, 700-pound steer and jerks the animal's head and neck in a 180-degree loop, pitching him into the dirt. The steer is tripped, tossed and lugged for 30 feet or more so the roper can subdue him and bind his legs for a score.

BUCKING EVENTS: Players goad horses with abrasive spurs and flank straps. The horses' intestines and groins are cinched so tightly they lurch in response to pain. Animals who won't buck may be shocked with electric prods. Many career into fences, posts or chutes.

In San Antonio, Texas (February 2000) a bucking horse shattered his spine. Dazed and crippled, he lurched across the stadium floor. Though authorities called it a "freak accident," fans are often unaware of the sprains, splintered bones, muscle pulls, saddle blisters, and bloody wounds at every rodeo. Hindi says "if the animal doesn't drop dead in front of the bleachers, the audience usually doesn't know anything is wrong."

Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) hosts most of America's 5000 annual rodeos, followed by International Professional Rodeo Association (IPRA). Rodeos go to great lengths to conceal violence. "It's obvious rodeos are cruel and perilous to animals. For this reason, requests from SHARK to review various rodeo animal injury records have all been denied," Hindi claims.

In a "dash for cash" contest at the Guilford Rodeo in Connecticut, organizers sent in the clowns to relieve a shocked audience after a steer's head was twisted until his neck snapped. During a similar incident at the Grand National Rodeo in San Francisco an announcer wisecracked, "[the dead bull] was gonna have a big headache when he wakes up."

Clowns and quips can't disguise violence. "Without torture, there can be no rodeo," claims Peggy W. Larson, DVM, MS, JD, a former bareback bronco rider. "In my opinion, and based on my extensive training and experience, it is impossible to create a humane rodeo."

Their eyes bulge in terror. They wheeze and tremble. Some suffer for days before hauled to the slaughterhouse. While rodeo organizers allege compliance with animal welfare rules, graphic documentation tells a different story.

For television's "Hard Copy," Hindi investigated a Big Bear, California rodeo where handlers excessively shocked animals and raked their tails over bars. Hindi's footage was televised on a split screen with a stock contractor who denied any tail twisting or electric shocks. After the evidence aired, the contractor claimed he didn't know the animal abuser. Turns out, it was his son.

Ask corporate sponsors of the rodeo to end their endorsement of animal abuse: www.sharkonline.org/?P=000000453



BREAKING DOWN RODEO: ONE SPONSOR & LAW AT A TIME

● **Phoenix, AZ: Roping or tripping equine animals for entertainment (horse tripping) becomes a misdemeanor punishable by jail time or fines.** Horse tripping contestants win points for roping a galloping horse or donkey to the ground. (11/14/08)

MORE RODEO ORDINANCES & STATE LAWS: Pittsburgh forbids "electric prods or shocking devices, flank or bucking straps, wire tie-downs, and sharpened or fixed spurs or rowels." San Francisco prohibits rodeos and Fort Wayne, Ind. doesn't allow them within city limits. **MORE: www.sharkonline.org/?P=000000768 www.bucktherodeo.com/ords.html**

● **AT&T/Cingular Wireless ends longstanding support for rodeo.** And so goes one of few lingering mainstream corporate rodeo sponsors, thanks to SHARK's relentless campaign and Kinship Circle letter writers!

● **New Zealand - Auckland City Council bans rodeos from council-owned land within the city,** citing animal welfare concerns. The United Kingdom and Australia's Capitol Territories already prohibit rodeos. Germany and Vancouver, Canada ban calf roping. Santo André, São Caetano, Franca, and Diadema in São Paulo, Brazil, bar rodeos. The Netherlands outlaws USA rodeos (7/8/08).

● **Matchbox Twenty cancels gig at Cheyenne Frontier Days Rodeo** upon learning about horses slammed face first into the ground and baby animals brutalized. A press release states: "It would be impossible for us to put ourselves in the position of making money from what we believe to be the mistreatment of animals. (4/12/08). **MORE CELEBS DUMP RODEO:** SHARK convinces Rikki Rockett and glam metal band Poison, Grammy and American Idol winner Carrie Underwood, and star Hilary Duff to bail on the rodeo.

● **Trader Joe's Chairman/CEO, Dan Bane, drops rodeo ads after customer complaints.** Trader Joe's ads ran at Tucson's La Fiesta de los Vaqueros Rodeo where horses are electrically shocked to coax out a "wild" show — until the animal-welfare minded grocer pulled the plug. (2008)

● **"Campbell Soup Company and Pace Foods are no longer sponsors of Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA)." Kinship Circle gets on board with SHARK's 2005 campaign to end Campbell Soup/Pace Foods' role in rodeo abuse — sending letters, faxes, emails that demand the company not renew its PRCA sponsorship. Public pressure works! (10/23/06)**

● **Starbucks tells SHARK it will stop funding rodeos in its role as sponsor, advertiser or any other manner.** While the coffee giant continues to let some stores donate products to local rodeos, it won't permit rodeos to cash-in on Starbucks' name/logo. (3/06)

● **Mattel Bullfighting Barbie makers assure SHARK she's history.** Production stops on "Spanish Barbie," a matador doll with bloody bull accessories sold to kids.