

Westward **WHOA**

Gay Cowpokes Saddle Up to Teach an Old Sport Some New Tricks

by Sheilah Bright

I'm sitting in the stands at the Sooner State Stampede amidst the smell of grain-fed cow manure and the clink-clank melody of metal. The steers standing near me snort their way out of the chute before unwillingly participating in a wrangle and release program. The crowd whoops, hollers and moans as the cowboys and cowgirls hit the dirt, then dust off the backside of their tutus and saunter out of the arena.

This ain't my first gay rodeo. I have friends who are serious contenders and once traveled the gay rodeo circuit. They have the belt buckles, expensive horses and bragging rights to prove it. Still, it's been awhile so it takes me a few moments to get used to the blur of rhinestone belts, bad prom dresses and tangled Barbie hair mixing it up with rawhide rodeo reality. Nothing shakes up the cowboy culture more than a cowboy in a dress. At the 2010 Sooner State Stampede and other gay rodeos across the country, the cowboys wouldn't be caught in the arena without one—at least not in the Wild Drag event.

An audience favorite, Wild Drag features three contestants: one male, one female, one drag partner likely sporting a Goodwill castoff and a bad wig. A steer is released from the chute, two cowboy/girls chase it down, catch it by the rope then push and prod it toward the drag queen/king who must ride it past the finish line until all four hooves cross it. The steers apparently don't like taffeta or men with bad lipstick applications for there is a lot of bucking going on.

Next up, Goat Dressing. Two contestants—one wearing Fruit of the Loom briefs on his arms—stand 50 feet away from a goat on a rope. A whistle blows, the men sprint toward the tethered goat, turn it upside down and slide the underwear over its rear hooves quicker than you can say “Yippe Ki-Yay.”

Panties on a goat may look like comic relief, but it's serious business. You can win money for this.

Cowboy/Cowgirl Up

You don't have to be gay to compete in the gay rodeo, but you usually are. For some participants, it's the chance to show off their rodeo skills. For others, it's a chance to simply show off and experience acceptance in another arena. There is more than an emotional investment required for the rodeo. It takes a lot of monetary investment to be a serious contender, especially in the



roping events. A good roping horse can cost thousands of dollars. Rough stock events, which include bull and steer riding and bareback bronc riding, can be real bone-crushers. You can train for a year just for the chance to stay a few seconds on the back of a beast. You can easily crack a rib. Explain that injury back at the law office.

The Director

Rodeo director Tim Dickmann worked hard to return the Sooner State Stampede back to Tulsa for the 2010 season. Volunteers landed a site—Bridle Creek Ranch in Sperry—and rustled up enough sponsorships to cover the costs of the October event. Some 71 contestants rolled in from as far away as Canada to compete in traditional rodeo competitions like bareback bronc riding and barrel racing, as well as the camp events like wild drag and goat dressing.

Back in 2002 when the Sooner State Rodeo Association was first formed, its goal was to give gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in the Tulsa area a chance to participate in western-related events.

They didn't ride into Rodeo Town with rainbows blazing that first year. Instead, the event logo featured a rainbow printed only in black-and-white for fear of anti-gay backlash. Today, the banners, posters and event programs send a clear message that this is a rodeo of a different color, many different colors, proud colors. Still, there is a major kink in taking the Sooner State Stampede to the next level. It centers around privacy.

“We do run into the problem that we need more people to attend the rodeo to make it raise more money. More money means more publicity. More publicity means more exposure,” explains Dickmann. “And there lies the problem: Some of our contestants still aren't out of the closet so making the rodeo more known is going to take away some of the freedom that they experience here.”

Behind the scenes

NOTHING SHAKES UP THE COWBOY CULTURE MORE THAN A COWBOY IN A DRESS.

As owner of Bar M Rodeo Company, which supplies stock for rodeo events, Mike Pershbaucher thought he understood the world of rodeo until he got a call in 1996 from someone needing steers and bulls for “a funny rodeo.”

“We were operating out of Sulphur, Oklahoma, and, honestly, I was a little embarrassed to tell anyone about the job at first,” says Pershbaucher. “But I loaded up the stock, drove to the arena and watched how these cowboys and cowgirls poured their hearts into everything they did. Now, we tell everybody because it is a great organization, and I laugh all the way to the bank.”

Bar M Rodeo Company supplies the stock for more gay rodeos than anyone else in the United States. Pershbaucher and his straight cowboy crew travel the gay rodeo circuit from Ft. Lauderdale to Palm Springs. He's been hit on once at a rather rowdy campfire after party. His friends quickly put the cowboy with the malfunctioning gay-dar in his place. And there's been





an unexpected bonus: “Gay guys have good-looking straight female friends. Who would think a straight guy could go to a gay rodeo and get hooked up?”

Because of the camaraderie, laughter and pride of seeing serious and not-so-serious gay cowboys learn the rodeo ropes, Pershbaucher enjoys the gay rodeos as much or more than the multitude of small rodeos he attends across this state. Still, after years of learning to understand the culture and proudly defending it, this straight cowboy faced another challenge about four years ago.

“That’s when I became a Christian,” he says. “Morally, I admit I did struggle with it for a while, but then I realized that there are a lot of things we do that we don’t always agree with. I’ve made a lot of good friends that I might never have allowed myself to know if it weren’t for the gay rodeo.”

At the 2010 Sooner State Stampede, only a few vendor booths lined the wall. Shullbitters boasts the slogan “Hang Around And We Guarantee You Will Get Some,” and sells rhinestone belts and leather-scented lotions. A few steps away, a huddle of men best described as burly were bunched up around the Green Country Bears table. They are the kind of men you expect to see at a tractor pull or a feed store in western Oklahoma or a cattle ranch in Osage County. That’s the point.

A sub-group of the gay community, Bears describe themselves as “friendly, fun, cuddly, frisky, teddy bear kinds of guys.” They don’t shave their bodies or say things like “You go, girl.” Many are packing a few extra pounds and lots of facial hair. Their vanity isn’t on display quite as much as the designer-clad “Twinkies,” or so they say. Dressed in Wranglers and XL shirts, the Bears and their cubs (men who prefer Bears) struggle to find their place within the tight-ab-waxed-chest world prevalent in the gay community.

“We are just as gay as any other gay person,” says Curtis, who still hasn’t come out to his family and friends. “There is nothing more prejudiced in a gay community than prejudice within the gay community.”

And so they hand out literature, wear buttons declaring “I just look straight,” compete in the rodeo events and offer support to other gay men who don’t fit the stereotypical gay man mold. They sport shirts featuring a bear paw and muted rainbow colors. Even in a predominantly gay crowd, they tend to form their own den of comfort. Many of the cowboys have spent years working cattle on Oklahoma ranches and learning the cowboy ways through 4-h or Future Farmers of America. For others, a lifelong search for acceptance has landed them in the foreign world of rodeo. They have bought horses and learned to ride not because of a love of the wild west, but because they have a love that needs room to roam. Wide open space where a

man can be a man and love a man at the same time.

Coming out of the closet in Redneckville is frightening and dangerous, the men say. Staying in can be a perpetual nightmare.

“There comes a point when your fear of not being happy outweighs the fear of being found out,” says a spokesman for Green Country Bears. “Everyone reaches that point eventually.”

Rodeo Queen

Anita Richards, a drag queen often seen performing at Renegade bar in Tulsa, has spent years gluing on fake eyelashes, wriggling into tight shiny dresses and teasing her hair to staggering heights—all in the name of entertainment. So going all cowgirl glam for the 2010 Sooner Stampede was just another day in the office except for the manure-laden dirt floor that can ruin a good pair of heels if you don’t watch your step.

One other difference: Anita usually only dresses in drag when there’s a paycheck in sight. This gig—Miss SSRA 2011—is a freebie for a good cause.

Besides offering rodeo competition for the gay and lesbian community, most gay rodeos boast a fund-raising arm. Entry fees, sponsorships and event ticket sales provide funds for local charities each year.

“There is an overall general acceptance of the gay population in the Tulsa community, but we still have a way to go. I want to do my part whether it’s by supporting the equality center or promoting the SSRA,” says Anita.

Overheard at the gay rodeo

Gay cowboys and cowgirls are funny. Not funny as in “Look there’s a cowboy dressed in a mini skirt,” although that’s funny too, but funny as in nearly everything they say makes you laugh until you’re snorting sawdust. It’s like a celebrity roast with no celebrities and no FCC bleep control.

“My finger just went up that calf’s ass.” “I’m sure it wasn’t the first time.”

“On any good day in Tulsa, you can see a bad crossdresser. You just paid \$4 to see me.”

“I didn’t eat enough Wheaties for that fucker.”

A quote from a rather germaphobic steer wrangler: “Always wear a latex glove when you’re sticking your hand up something.”

Heckling is a sport all its own at the gay rodeo. As the contestants tighten their reins, strap up their chaps and readjust their blinged out belts, crowds of their friends shout out phrases like “Ride ‘em bitch” and “It’s on Daddy.” Dudes, dudettes and everything in between may fall off the bull in a mili-second or not even make it out of the chute at all, but as long as they fire off a quick one-liner or provide a good laugh, all is well in the gay rodeo world.

“Do you ladies ever get hairspray on your phone screen?”

“Those steers are serious today.”

“I’m going to take a nap during all this roping crap.”

“Oh, he dropped something shiny. Leave it to the gay guy to spot the bling.”

“Butch up!”

“Ride ‘em like you did last night.”

Sure, the International Finals Rodeo sports top bull riding champions, expensive horses and live television coverage, but the International Gay Rodeo Association ropes in a running commentary of sexual innuendo and belly-busting humor that you just can’t find in the Wranglerized world of a ThunderBull event.

Midway through every gay rodeo, the light-hearted mood shifts as a riderless horse enters the arena for a memorial recognition of contestants who have lost their lives in the past year. Although not AIDS specific, the ceremony draws special attention to the fact that the disease still claims many friends.

It is in that special moment that you realize there is more to this rodeo than cheap costumes and high-dollar horses. You see friends sling their arms around the shoulders of friends. You see cowboys take off their hats in respect while others tip forward their hats to hide a few tears. You see a community coming together for the sake of memories: the good, the bad and the sometimes ugly.

Sheila Bright is a writer based in Oklahoma.