

CHAPTER 8

A Spurring Soul: A Tenderfoot's Guide to the Calgary Stampede Rodeo

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Rodeo. Sure as bobcats are ornery, it's no tea party. Ask any cowboy who explodes out of a chute biting off a sunfishin' chunk of fury...and then chews it. That, though, is his life...skinned raw from the living flank of adventure. He takes it, tames it and loves it...from raking a saddle bronc to taking on a whole, snorting, pure-out mean ton of enraged bull. Every afternoon of Stampede '78, latigo-tough and arena-wise world champion cowboys compete for a bulging total purse of more than \$110,000.

Watch 'em cannonball out aboard twisting, walleyed streaks of sheer hellhorse. See 'em dig in to wrestle down steers whose independence matches their muscle. Hang in as they milk wild cows, race the clock in calf roping, gallop for the finish line astride untamed mustangs in the wild horse race. And grip your seat as daredevil Indians tackle the brute power of plains buffalo. Rodeo. Stampede style! The non-stop action show that leaves hoofprints across hell. Go for it!

1978 Calgary Stampede promotional brochure

The rodeo is to the Calgary Stampede what shadows are to Groundhog Day. Without the rodeo there is no Stampede. It was the rodeo that renewed the Calgary Exhibition's vitality in 1923, and the rodeo has become the foundation of the Stampede's attitude and its community. It holds the imagination for the entire week. The rodeo sustains and nurtures the values of the Calgary Stampede, and it is where the Stampede's traditions are held holy.

The Stampede rodeo is revered as a fabulously grand sensory pageant. Participants and spectators are surrounded by glorious western notions, including beautiful Stampede Princesses bedecked in shimmering sequins atop flowing quarter horses; the taste of jalapeño-laden nachos and cold beer; the smell of dust-laden air rife with manure, hay, and sweat; and the heaving grunts and bellows of kinetic men and beasts. The Stampede rodeo is sensational and unpredictable, and it transcends conceptions with stirring and riveting western moments.

Rodeo competitors face daily peril, and, in fact, the Calgary Stampede rodeo calls upon divine safekeeping prior to each performance. Before the first chute is opened, competitors and fans are united in a communal expression of faith as they stand with hats removed and heads bowed while the Rodeo Cowboy's Prayer is recited.

A Rodeo Cowboy's Prayer

Our gracious and heavenly Father, we pause in the midst of this festive occasion, mindful and thoughtful of the guidance that you have given us. As cowboys, Lord, we don't ask for any special favors, we ask only that you let us compete in this arena, as in life's arena. We don't ask to never break a barrier, or to draw a round of steer that's hard to throw, or a chute fighting horse, or a bull that is impossible to ride. We only ask that you help us to compete as honest as the horses we ride and in a manner as clean and pure as the wind that blows across this great land of ours.

So when we do make that last ride that is inevitable for us all to make, to that place up there, where the grass is green and lush and stirrup high, and the water runs cool, clear, and deep – you'll tell us as we ride in that our entry fees have been paid.

These things we ask. Amen.¹

With the conclusion of the prayer, the spectacle begins in Canada's largest rodeo, one of the world's most famous. Arguably, it is the most spectacular outdoor rodeo on the planet.

But it is not only the size and show of the Calgary Stampede rodeo that makes it special. The Calgary Stampede is an iconic event within the rodeo circuit, symbolizing western images and themes. The Stampede rodeo is not just sport; it is a tribute to the romanticized sentiments of western North America.

The images evoked daily upon the infield's dirt capture people's fantasies of the West. Through its competitors and its stock, the Stampede rodeo is both propaganda and factual elicitation of the West's savageness. Man vs. beast, life vs. death, luck vs. destiny; each Stampede afternoon the yin and yang

of the West's splendor is re-enacted and renewed. As the "Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth," the Calgary Stampede rodeo has played, and continues to play, a pivotal role in preserving and propagating what the West is perceived to be.

The Calgary Stampede also represents the dreams of rodeo cowboys and cowgirls. The best of the best compete at Calgary. What the Masters is to golf, the Calgary Stampede is to rodeo. Its fame, even more than its sizable prize money, pulls rodeo's superlative competitors to Alberta from across continents and around the globe.

Fred Kennedy writes, "Over the gates, which lead into the rodeo arena of the Calgary Stampede, there is room for a sign which could well read: 'through these portals have passed the truly great names in rodeo.'"² These include such cowboys as Pete Knight, Herman Linder, Casey Tibbs, Jim Shoulders, Larry Mahan, Fred Whitfield, Dan Mortensen, and Ty Murray, and barrel racer Charmayne James.

Rodeo champions came to Calgary to compete in the rodeo's six major events: Bareback Riding, Saddle Bronc Riding, Bull Riding (collectively known as the rough stock events), Steer Wrestling, Tie-Down Roping (formerly known as Calf Roping), and Ladies Barrel Racing. Also included in the contemporary Stampede rodeo are Novice Saddle Bronc Riding, Novice Bareback Bronc Riding, and Junior Steer Riding. The afternoon rodeo is orchestrated symphonically, beginning with the Grand Entry's pageantry of sponsor flags and contestants and leading to the crescendo of Bull Riding – rodeo's final event.

The Stampede Rodeo Bucks Out

The Stampede rodeo originated with Guy Weadick in 1912. From the beginning, he promised a western show of extraordinary proportions, "entertainment on such a grand scale of magnificence as would be a fitting finale to the glorious history of the justly celebrated range."³ The 1912 Stampede rodeo celebrated the cowboys' past, without realizing it set the stage for their future.

However, the 1912 show was significantly different from the show seen today. In 1912 Weadick had no regular rodeo circuit from which to draw competitors. Even though the first recorded rodeo took place forty-eight years earlier in Prescott, Arizona (on July 4, 1864), rodeo had not evolved into a regulated sport. There were no rodeo associations, no memberships, and no standardized rules. To entice the West's top ropers and riders,

Weadick used his charisma and prize money. He stated, “The money is here, come and get it.”⁴

Weadick also needed to attract an audience to this fledgling, unknown sport. Ticket-buying Calgarians were not familiar with rodeos, but they did understand rodeo’s predecessor – the Wild West show. And thus the union between the rodeo “sport” and Wild West “entertainment” was fabricated for the newly urban audience.

Buffalo Bill Cody had brought enormously popular Wild West productions to audiences throughout North America and Europe between 1883 and 1916. His show, and similar troupes such as Colonel Zack Miller’s, demonstrated skills such as riding, roping, and shooting, incorporated into dramatic narratives. The Wild West shows blurred the lines between fiction and fact, entertainment and education. Billing themselves as preservers of memory, they regaled audiences with their own romanticized versions of western history.

Wild West promoters and performers created fabricated historical connections, inventing a common western history and culture built entirely upon entertainment. Audiences watched performers who could claim personal experience in the West, but their interpretations of frontier life were based on dime novels and sensational journalism. In a manner familiar to watchers of today’s reality television shows, fictional entertainment was taken for “the real thing,” and showmanship became inextricably entwined with the ability to sell tickets and put bums in seats.

The legacy of these Wild West performers morphed into the Stampede’s rodeo arena. The Stampede rodeo became a reaffirmation of the Old West: the people who knew death on intimate terms, and the men and women who struggled to cheat it. From 1912 onward, the rodeo built upon the values promoted in Wild West show tents: fortitude, independent nobility, and toughness.

Several events demonstrate this; for example, take steer wrestling or bulldogging. On southern Alberta ranches, no cowboys bulldogged as part of their jobs; this rodeo event was invented by black Wild West performer Bill Pickett. Calling himself “The Dusky Demon,” Pickett brought steers to their knees by biting on their lips (just like a ranch bulldog). In time, this accomplishment evolved into steer wrestling, became accepted as “sport,” and is now one of the six major rodeo events (known as “the big man’s event”).

The two thrilling and unpredictable events of Wild Cow Milking and the Wild Horse Race are no longer part of the Stampede rodeo. From the 1920s

to 2005 they delivered the Wild West show's formula of bravado, conflict, and conquest of the wild.

Wild Cow Milking (or the North American Cow Milking Championship) featured twenty teams of two cowboys competing at the same time. When the horn sounded, the teams chased a herd of wild cows in the arena. One cowboy on horseback roped a long-horned cow, while the other cowboy, the "mugger," took hold of the cow by the horns or neck. The roper then dismounted and attempted to milk the cow into a small-necked bottle. The first milker to run to the judge's stand with the required milk was the daily winner.

The Wild Horse Race (or Stampede Horse Race) featured twelve teams of three cowboys each scrambling to saddle and ride an untamed bucking horse. Simultaneously, all twelve chutes opened. Each man had a specific job: there were the ear-man, the shank-man, and the rider. The horses all wore halters with long shanks. When the horses were released from the chutes, all three-man teams held on to the halter shanks. The ear-man moved up the shank, grabbed the horse by the head, and bit its ear (in later years, the cowboys could only twist the ear). This generally sufficiently distracted and calmed the horse. The rider then moved in to saddle the animal. When the saddle was secured, the ear-man and shank-man released the horse and the rider attempted to ride it across the finish line in front of the grandstand.

It all sounds straightforward but watch it – with an arena full of wild horses, each being saddled by a team of cowboys and each team trying to be faster than the next, it becomes a dangerous and rugged event, involving contestants who must be equally as rugged.⁵

Although the Wild Horse Race is no longer featured, the Wild Pony Race is now included on the event list. But this Stampede event is more amusing than "wild," as teams of three youngsters aged eight to twelve try to tame a wild pony long enough to get a rider aboard for a two-jump ride. The team with the fastest time wins.

The rodeo event that most blurred the lines between reality and entertainment was the Buffalo Riding Championship. For years the Stampede rodeo began with this event. Simultaneously, eight chutes opened to release buffalo ridden by Indian cowboys in traditional regalia. It was truly an unusual western scene as the buffalo – the monarchs of the plains – bucked to rid themselves of their riders. This event would not have taken place historically

and was distinctly taken out of the Wild West shows genre. (Robert Altman's 1976 film *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson*, filmed outside of Calgary, includes a scene of a cowboy bulldogging a buffalo to the ground, another twisted historical perspective.)

Not all of the Stampede rodeo events merge fiction and fun. Saddle Bronc Riding and Tie-Down Roping are both based on ranching activities, and Bareback Riding originated when cowboys branded young range horses. The horses were held down for branding, but before they were let up, daring cowboys straddled the horses and grasped a handful of mane in each hand. When the horses were released, bronc busters kept their balance by pushing with the front hand and pulling with the back hand.

The "manehold" evolved into riding with a loose rope. A manila rope with a honda (a metal, rope, or rawhide ring) in one end was cinched around the horse's girth and laid across the cowboy's hands (one hand on each side of the horse's withers). The rope was tightened by the chute man and laid back across the rider's hands again. Eventually the rigging matured into a leather strap connected to a handhold resembling a suitcase handle that was fastened to a cinch around the horse. The 1912 Stampede rodeo was notable for hosting one of the world's first bareback riding competitions, and Bareback Riding was recognized as a major rodeo event in 1932.

The First Stampede Stars

The first two celebrities created in the Stampede rodeo arena were Tom Three Persons and Cyclone. Three Persons, apart from Weadick, is the character most feted within the first Stampede's mythology, and Cyclone was his partner. Three Persons, a Blood Indian, drew the famed Cyclone in the 1912 saddle bronc finals. Known as the "Black Terror," Cyclone had thrown 129 of the world's best riders with his frantic pounding style. Cyclone was dangerous and unnerving. The horse would rear as if tumbling backwards (known as sunfishing), then would duck down and leap forward, jerking riders ahead and off into the dirt. INSERT FIG. 5

At the 1912 rodeo there were no bucking chutes, and rides lasted until horses stopped bucking (approximately forty seconds). In the infield, horses were blindfolded or held and released. For Three Persons' final ride, Stampede officials held Cyclone steady. As Three Persons settled into the saddle, Cyclone was released and reared backwards. Three Persons recalled, "He starts to raise with me after the fifth jump, and scared the hell right out of me. I thought he was coming over backwards. Without realizing what I was really

doin', I started to beller at him. He was so surprised that he flattened out. I knew I had 'im then so I just kept on spurring until I heard the whistle."⁶ It was 'Three Persons' supreme rodeo moment and immortalized him and his outlaw horse into Stampede mythology.

The success and popularity of the 1912 Stampede sparked rodeo's development in southern Alberta. For example, the first known side-delivery rodeo chute was designed and constructed at Welling, Alberta, in 1916. A similar chute was built at New Dayton, Alberta, in 1917, and another in Lethbridge in 1919. The side-delivery chute reversed the chute gate so that it hinged at the horse's head, forcing the horse to turn as the gate opened. This design required only one man to work the chute gate and eliminated the hazard of riders' knees getting hung up. It quickly became standard in rodeos.

In 1927 the Stampede also set a rodeo precedent by reducing a qualifying ride to only ten seconds. This important change allowed the show to run more quickly and cut down the number of horses required. It also prolonged horses' careers. Outstanding bucking horses seldom had their spirits broken in ten seconds. In 1972 the ten-second saddle bronc ride was reduced to eight seconds.

Women in the Infield

Reflecting the Wild West show casts, both women and men participated equally in the 1912 Stampede. Western Canada was still civilizing itself, and women carried the freedoms offered by a new land. According to rodeo accounts, "Prairie Rose" Henderson first opened rough stock riding to women. At Cheyenne, Wyoming, in 1901 Henderson defied the protestations of male judges and completed a bronc-riding performance.

Eleven years later, in the 1912 Stampede, women competed in bucking horse and roping competitions.⁷ Fanny Sperry was the first Lady Bucking Horse Champion of the World, and Guy Weadick's wife, Florence LaDue, took the title of Lady Champion Fancy Roper. Although only five feet tall, LaDue could rope a galloping horse with rider from a standing position.⁸

During the 1930s and 1940s women continued to ride in the rough stock events. Cowgirl Tad Lucas earned more than \$10,000 riding bucking broncs on the rodeo circuit during the Depression,⁹ but after World War II, the rough stock were reserved for men. The rodeo atmosphere was turning masculine, with women considered a performance sideshow. For example, Dixie Reger Mosley, a stunt rider, made a living jumping cars on her palomino.¹⁰

Modern rodeo remains predominantly a testosterone fraternity. In both the Canadian Professional Rodeo Association and the Pro Rodeo Cowboys Association, women continue to work outside the main events. Often they participate as contracted “Wild West Show” entertainers. For example, as trick riders, women on swift horses wear flashy costumes and enthrall crowds between events.

However, within pro rodeo, women do have one sanctioned event, and have developed a popular following as professional barrel racers. With competitions timed to 1/100th of a second, Barrel Racing is one of the Stampede audience’s favourite events. It is easy for rodeo neophytes to understand, and the harmonious partnership between rider and horse is energetic entertainment. Nevertheless, Stampede barrel racers have struggled against the male-dominated world of rodeo. Barrel Racing was not a Stampede prize event until 1979, and although Barrel Racing was part of the daily line-up in 1982, when the \$50,000 prize money was awarded in each event, only the events involving cowboys were eligible.

It was not until 1996, when barrel racer Monica Wilson raised \$50,000 herself as finals prize money, that the Stampede began paying barrel racers equally and including them in the Sunday Finals. Finally, women and men were equally paid competitors at the Calgary Stampede.¹¹ For her efforts, Wilson was awarded the coveted Guy Weadick Award, annually given to the rodeo or chuckwagon contestant who combines outstanding accomplishments with personality, sportsmanship, and appearance.¹² The Weadick Award was first presented in 1982, and Wilson was the first woman to receive the trophy.

Bucking Broncs

Within the Stampede culture, the bucking bronc remains the central symbol of rodeo. The bronc represents an outlaw, a force of power over conventional society. Cowboys believe its rebelliousness is genetic and cannot be taught; its power is not controllable. Something within particular horses causes this behaviour and makes them incorrigible. Even when broncs appear docile or calm, they are by nature unpredictable, untameable, and raw. Bulls may be tough, mean, and brutish, but broncs are the wild, renegade spirit beloved in rodeo.

As Louis says in the Alberta motion picture *Road to Saddle River*, “A bucking horse is the meanest, toughest, craziest fifteen hundred pounds of grain-fed



Tilly Baldwin at the 1919 Stampede. Ladies Bucking Horse Riding was one of the premier rodeo events in which women competed in the early 1900s.

animal flesh on the planet. Many a good cowboy has died underneath the hooves of a rank bronc.”¹³

To enhance broncs’ scoring abilities, the Stampede embarked on producing the world’s best bucking horses. In 1961 the Stampede organized the “Born to Buck” program and purchased a ranch near Hanna, Alberta, where it attempted to reverse the centuries-old process of genetic selection for more docile mounts. The Stampede intended to take advantage of economic opportunities and maintain a high level of competition by breeding “hell-horses” for the rodeo circuit.

The Stampede ranch covers about 20,500 acres of leased land and 1,500 acres of deeded property. Fifty mares were the foundation of the breeding program. Presently, more than four hundred horses live at the ranch, including sixty-two brood mares. The Stampede horses are easily identified by the brand (C lazy S) on the left shoulder. The Calgary Stampede is one of the very few rodeos with a registered brand of its own.

One hundred sixty-five of the horses perform in rodeos, and the busiest of those, approximately thirty of them, may be on the rodeo road. The most any horse will buck is about fifteen times. Colts are not moved to rodeos until age five, though they may be ridden twice a year at age three or four. The “top-end” horses, such as the famed Grated Coconut, Papa Smurf, and Guilty Cat, are bucked a maximum of three times during the Stampede.

In appreciation of stock contractors' efforts to produce unrelenting mounts, at every Stampede rodeo performance the horses and bull carrying the day's winning rides and the animals judges deem as the rankest on their scorecards are each awarded \$500. On the final Sunday, one bareback bronc, one saddle bronc, and one bull are crowned the overall Calgary Stampede Champion Stock. The contractor receives a bronze trophy, and the animals are let loose in the infield to receive the crowd's praise. These Champion Stock trophies have been awarded since 1979.

In addition to Stampede week, the Calgary Stampede rodeo office produces several rodeos each year in Canada and supplies stock to about twenty other rodeos in western Canada and the United States. It also provides bucking horses for one-day convention rodeos in Calgary and sends its younger stock to rodeo schools and college rodeos. The longest road trip Stampede horses make is to the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas each December.

As any cowboy could tell you, riding a bronc is no tea party. The force of a bronc's first jump out of the chute compares to that of the whiplash incurred in an average car accident. Bronc riding hurts. There are reasons why a bucking bronc's saddle is called a "hurricane deck," yet bronc riding has a powerful mystique and pull, as former Calgary Stampede Rodeo Director Winston Bruce, a world champion saddle bronc rider, explains:

You arrive at the rodeo about a hour to an hour and a half before the ride. You start gathering your equipment together, and your mind changes. It goes to heavy concentration to what you're going to do. As the animal is brought into the chute, you start preparing, putting your saddle and your tack on, becoming more concentrated. The outside world starts to shut off more all the time.

By the time you get on the animal, it's almost like being in a trance. You're totally alert, really alert, but only alert to the things that matter at that moment; things like where the pick up men are, where the chute gate openers are, where the judges are, where the photographer may be. You get that fixed in your mind. And then you feel the animal underneath you. He's usually quiet at that time because experienced horses are probably thinking the same things as you, only in reverse.

By the time the chute gate is opened, the outside world is totally cut away. Your senses are really limited to only what matters at that moment in the arena. As you're riding the animal, you're aware of any movement around you, like the pickup horses or something flickering in the stands, because that could change the direction of the animal. You can usually sense a change of direction in the animal as it's happening.

When you get off the animal, your adrenaline is really running high and you feel good. And because of that, your alertness is on high. So there's a "high" to that in the sense of satisfaction. It's always a personal contest against yourself really. Everybody, I'm sure, has the same goal, and that goal is to make the perfect ride. That's what your goal is. You may never achieve it, but if you ever do, you're probably finished, because what would you want to do the next time?¹⁴

Rodeo's Seduction

For horses, bulls, and men, an underlying Stampede rodeo theme is the threat of injury or death. As sixteen-time world champion cowboy Jim Shoulders said, "People don't want to see a rodeo cowboy die, but they want to be there



when he does.”¹⁵ The Stampede rodeo emphasizes human frailty and the power of nature on a perilous stage; people are drawn into the grandstand like passers-by to an accident.

The first Stampede rodeo of 1912 set the tragic legacy. While preparing stock a few days before the show, cowboy Joe LaMar was trying out bucking horses in the evening arena. Red Wing, a big sorrel from Medicine Hat, fell while bucking. LaMar’s chap belt caught on the saddle horn, and Red Wing kicked him.¹⁶ LaMar died en route to the hospital, inciting the first, but not the last, public outcry about the sport’s brutality but also piquing the audience’s curiosity about cowboys’ bravado and dangerous ambitions.

Rodeo fans can determine what events cowboys compete in simply by looking at their injuries. Bareback riders deal with painful elbows from absorbing the pounding shock of riding and sore knees from awkwardly spurring. Bronc riders have knee problems from constant spurring and kinked necks from flying dismounts. Bull riders limp with strained riding arms and pulled groin muscles (the wide backs of bulls are not designed for riding). Steer wrestlers hurt their knees when they jump to the ground from horses going twenty-five to thirty-five miles an hour. Bulldoggers are also prone to shoulder injuries from rotating their arms while grasping the horns of a steer weighing three times their weight. Unlucky ropers can leave a thumb or finger lying in the infield after a shoddy dally (improperly wrapping the rope around the saddle horn).¹⁷

The spectre of injury is a hook constantly marketed by the rodeo, with the threat not limited to performers. I witnessed this personally in 1978. At that time, there was a children’s playground in the middle of the racetrack, behind the infield grandstand. As the rodeo concluded, a bull named USA was released for the clowns and bullfighters to use to demonstrate their skills. USA was chosen for his broad horns, threatening appearance, and speed.

To the crowd’s astonishment, this agile 1,300-pound Brahma bull leapt over the infield fence. Running up the racetrack, the bull met a group of exiting fans crossing towards the grandstand. Spooked by the crowd, he jumped the railing towards the playground, where a lone seven-year-old girl played on the swings. The bull, with its eyes alert and horns swinging, pranced towards her. I recall a collective gasp as the panicking grandstand audience helplessly watched the bull trot towards the oblivious child. Jim Knowler said, “The woman beside me was screaming, shrieking, and crying.”¹⁸ Finally the girl saw the bull; she took a couple of steps, but could not get out of the way. The bull hit her.



One upset woman said, “I’ll see that as long as I live.”¹⁹ Miraculously, the girl suffered only bruising and a cut lip. After toppling the girl, the bull trotted off towards the barns, where a posse of cowboys eventually roped it.

(The image of a rogue bull is not limited to the Stampede. For example, in Billings, Montana, a Brahma bull broke out of the rodeo arena, crashed through the parking lot, and hid out in a city park. For five weeks the city was on a full bull alert. When the bull was finally captured, he was renamed “Longtimenosee.”²⁰)

These scenes of unpredictable danger – western style – fortify the rodeo’s image as a theatre of cutting drama. The elements of suspense, injury, and pain are embedded in the sport. Tension is guaranteed every time a chute is opened. It is the perpetual conflict between man and beast. Built upon its dirt, the rodeo infield transforms danger into daring-do, pain into prowess, and death into dignity. The infield manipulates and forges Stampede male, female, bovine, and equine legends.

The risks transform the rodeo cowboy figure into the Stampede emissary. The image of a lone cowboy making his livelihood by luck and skill in one of the last vestiges of an aggressive, untamed, and bestial competition is a key message of the Stampede. From posters to websites, the independent cowboy is the Stampede’s ambassador.

Gene Lamb sanctions rodeo as “the last frontier for the individual.”²¹ Rodeo performers project toughness, endurance, and stoicism. The cowboy’s characteristic individualism was reinforced by the structure under which early rodeo contests were conducted. The rodeo cowboy was responsible for all expenses relating to his travels from one rodeo to the next. In this aspect, rodeo differed from many other sports, and it is this element that makes the rodeo cowboy’s situation so difficult for the uninitiated to understand. In most rodeos today, the cowboy is still on his own; he pays his way to the rodeo, pays the entry fees and other expenses, and makes money only if he wins or places in the events in which he competes. This only reinforces his sense of independence.²²

Furthermore, the Stampede rodeo cowboy’s success is based on luck – a cowboy crap shoot. Cowboys draw the stock they ride, rope, or wrestle, so the luck of the draw is essential. There is nothing a cowboy can do to dress up a horse or prevent a bull from performing badly or keep a steer from dropping his horns. Each time a rough stock rider blasts out of the chute, he gambles getting hurt and going broke all at once.²³ Even the most skilled cowboy cannot hope to win without a good draw.

Luck also includes surviving the rodeo lifestyle to qualify for the Stampede. Six time all-around world champion Larry Mahan explains rodeo “survival skills.” “You have to learn to travel without a car, borrow clothes, and put up with ten men in a motel room. Competitors must also subsist on a diet heavy in ‘rodeo steak’ [hot dogs]. Contestants pay a fee to compete and earn no salary. On a bad day, riders end up several hundred dollars poorer.”²⁴

With luck, personal injury, and personal fortitude influencing competitors’ success so randomly, cowboys rightly deserve the flattery and attention lavished on them at the Stampede. After all the miles travelled, when cowboys qualify for Calgary, for ten days they are the city’s heroes. As the Stampede’s pre-eminent personalities, their images and performances dominate local television and print.

In an ironic reflection of urban Calgary’s longstanding relationship with rodeo, however, despite their honoured role and their significance in Stampede mythology, the rodeo and chuckwagon cowboys are anonymous superstars. Former professional chuckwagon driver Jim Nevada relates the cowboys’ plight: “Chuckwagon drivers are a hero for ten days in Calgary, but the rest of the time we’re just some Joe Shmuck cowboy. You see some guys walking around like a peacock, but no one notices you. Some wagon drivers don’t realize [they’re] not a household name.”²⁵

Most Calgarians do not know, and do not care, who wins the Stampede events. The cowboys' and cowgirls' names are meaningless, and forgotten. Even Albertan Kelly Sutherland, who is arguably the Stampede's best-known cowboy – a chuckwagon driver for over thirty-five years and record-tying ten-time Rangeland Derby champion – told me he is undetected as a celebrity without a cowboy hat. His black hat and eagle feather give him his recognizable identity. It is the cowboy iconography of hats, buckles, and Wrangler jeans that urbanites seek and crave for one week a year.

Furthermore, by donning their uniform of hats and Wranglers, the lone cowboys identify themselves as a group. As an example, notice the predominance of either black or white cowboy hats behind Stampede rodeo chutes. There is a strong conformist code within rodeo ranks. It is ironic in a sport celebrating individual talents that its men (and women) are perceived collectively.

The cowboys' anonymity stems in part from the Stampede's origins in the Wild West shows, where the athletes were seen as cast members rather than solo performers. The sport is a novelty. The rodeo is still often called a "performance" rather than a "competition," and the cowboys are the cast.

Secondly, cowboys have traditionally received little recognition because they are seen so briefly. Even with the help of a Jumbotron television, an eight-second ride is not long enough for an audience to identify individual cowboys. Typically, cowboys are on their broncs, out of the chute, on the ground, out of the arena, and off down the road, sometimes literally within minutes. With their hats sitting low on their heads, cowboys appear as anonymous, interchangeable figures.

Rodeo organizers recognize that spectators need to empathize with the competitors. It is difficult for new fans to relate to the sport. Urbanites cannot differentiate individual cowboys' rides; apartment dwellers have no shared experiences with a bronc rider.

One tactic rodeo announcers use to build empathy is to introduce cowboys by their hometowns – "Billy Richards, Cochrane, Alberta"; or "Zack Oates, Tonasket, Washington." A connection to the audience is attempted through shared geography. Since experiences are invalid, geography is used to elicit compassion and emotion. Perhaps audience members familiar with the cowboy's hometown, province, or state will support him with a cheer due to the common reference.

Geography is also a constant element in the Stampede rodeo's marketing. The rivalry between Canadian and American cowboys has been emphasized to enliven the show since 1912, when Tom Three Persons was the only

Canadian to win a major event. This competition was also celebrated in the Stampede team rodeo during the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics. In 2005 a *Calgary Herald* headline proclaimed, “Canadians Rock Stampede’s \$75,000 Sunday Showdown,” and the story added, “When all was said and done at this year’s instalment of the world’s only regular-season million-dollar rodeo, five out of the six \$75,000 bonus round winners were Canadians.”²⁶

Relieving Tedium

Ironically, even though the rodeo offers numerous opportunities for thrills, much of the performance can be tedious. By its nature, there are ample gaps in a rodeo program. The rough stock events consist of dramatic eight-second rides punctuated by long pauses as cowboys prepare to mount. Even within the timed events, there are gaps between competitors’ entrances.

Tedium is not distinctive to the Stampede, as Wayne Wooden and Gavin Ehringer point out. “Boredom is, to be sure, an occupational hazard of the contemporary sport of rodeo and one with which the contestant has to deal, along with a host of other risks inherent in the profession. But boredom has not always been part and parcel of the contest. In fact, rodeo itself was more or less invented to counteract that very condition – the monotony and loneliness of the life of the working cowboy in the days of the cattle drives and the open range.”²⁷

The tradition of “action gaps” began at the 1912 Stampede, which had no bucking chutes and no time limit on rides. Donna Livingstone writes, “The events themselves were long on promotion and short on delivery ... Most events went on far too long, with unexplained delays ... The steers brought in for the steer roping proved too fast for the Canadian rope horses and had to be chased as much as a quarter of a mile. Competitors often found themselves at the far end of the vast centre field, far from the view of the audience.”²⁸

The Stampede was not alone in facing timing issues. In rodeo’s early years, producers frequently staged poorly organized shows. Often performances were an endless series of slow-moving contests of several hours’ duration that stimulated neither the spectators’ interest nor the cowboys’ cooperation.

Today aficionados understand the nature of the sport and head to the concession or beer garden during the pauses. They appreciate rodeo’s rhythm, the short, but climactic, eight seconds competitors have to test their skills. Experienced fans know what events they like and patiently await their arrival.

To preserve the attention of Calgary’s greenhorn rodeo fans, “Wild West” acts are hired. Entertainers have included trick riders, whip performers,

ostrich races, and First Nations dancers. Bud Munroe, the 1986 World Saddle Bronc Riding Champion, elaborates, “Good acts add to a rodeo. All of us in rodeo are entertainers. Acts break up the monotony of the rodeo, and at the same time give the contractor extra time to do things like run stock in. It’s important to have something flamboyant enough to keep the crowd’s attention while all this takes place.”²⁹

Clowning Around

For keeping the crowd entertained, the most significant Stampede rodeo act is the clown. The clown fills in gaps between rides and events and distracts the crowd if a cowboy or animal requires attention in the infield. A regular feature of rodeos since the 1920s, clowns initially did double duty as comedians and cowboy protectors. In addition to entertaining the crowd during lulls, they participated in bull riding, distracting bulls from thrown cowboys. (During this era, “bulls” might be real bulls, range cows, or good-sized steers; in fact, during the 1920s they might be anything that could remotely be considered a “bull.”)

In the late 1920s Brahma bulls were introduced. Clowning duties were then split between bullfighters – those fearless men dashing to the cowboy’s rescue – and clowns who told jokes, performed skits, and bantered with the announcer. The comedic clowns also often worked within a safety barrel, the “clown lounge,” during bull riding.



Whether facing bulls or telling jokes, Stampede clowns are known for their chutzpah. For example, for many years the Stampede held thoroughbred races between rodeo events. During one race, clown Buddy Heaton had a substantial bet on a particular horse. As his horse faded badly around the final turn, Heaton watched from the infield. Infuriated, Heaton sprang on his pet buffalo, an animal used in his acts, rode onto the racetrack, and charged the oncoming horses. Jockeys and horses scattered in every direction, avoiding Heaton and his speeding buffalo.³⁰

Apart from spontaneous wild antics, it is up to the clown to entertain the crowd. The rodeo clown is the comic to the announcer's straight man. Jokes rehearsed between the announcer and clown are delivered between events and when a cowboy has trouble saddling a mount. Like Heaton with his buffalo, clowns use chickens, dogs, monkeys, sheep, and other animals in their skits. And few rodeos do not include explosions – exploding outhouses, guns, vehicles, and suitcases are mainstays in rodeo clown skits.

Clown Gene Clark describes rodeo clown humour. “We use common humor that the audience can relate to, especially children. For example, mothers continually fuss at their children about hygiene and manners. One of the simplest jokes kids always love is, ‘I stuck my finger up the bull’s nose and a booger bit me.’”³¹ Coarse humour is a rodeo constant, humour based on homophobia, wife-humiliation, gender bashing, and basic bodily functions. Clowns belittle their wives and draw laughs by embarrassing and tormenting animals and cowboys.

For example, clowning dialogue from a 2006 professional rodeo featured the following lines:

- **Clown asks the announcer:** “What’s the difference between my wife and a car battery?”
Announcer: “I don’t know.”
Clown: “A battery has a positive side.”
- **Clown:** “You don’t want to make my wife mad ... She’s big enough to sell shade.”
- **Clown:** “Do you know the difference between broccoli and boogers?”
Announcer: “No.”
Clown: “Kids don’t eat broccoli.”
- **Clown:** “Constipated people don’t give a crap.”

- **Clown asks the announcer:** “Do you know the difference between a cow’s tail and a water pump?”
Announcer: “No.”
Clown: “Don’t ask me to send you for water.”³²

In another demonstration of clown humour, Jasbo and George Mills lassoed and held a cowboy down in the dirt. While Mills sat upon his chest and held his hands, Jasbo reached into his voluminous patched trousers and pulled out a pair of very pink, very large, very feminine panties. He sat upon the cowboy’s kicking legs and tussled the garment over his boots and Levis to its proper position. The clowns stood up to survey their handiwork, staggering about in fits of laughter. The cowboy scrambled out of the rope, and with the overly large legs of the pink underpants flapping, he chased the galloping little clowns out of the arena and around the grandstand.³³

Throughout the history of rodeo clowning, the humour has reflected rodeo’s basic nature as a simple competition between and against men, women, and beasts, a sport without refinements. Its raw personality and culture evoke a certain wildness that makes the clowns’ humour tolerable to many spectators. Nevertheless, the clowns’ buffoonery reflects sentiments not appreciated by broader urban audiences. Typically, rodeo clown acts have no subtlety, no nuances, and no graciousness; they fail to address society’s changing expectations. Without recognizing a modern audience’s refinements or tastes, the entertainment potentially alienates rather than amuses spectators.

Dogged by Abuse Accusations

More significant than rodeo clown humour, the main issue dogging the Stampede rodeo is animal abuse. Rodeo everywhere faces accusations constantly; however, in July the world media focus on the action in the Stampede infield (and during the evening, around the chuckwagon track). With each buck and twist, reporters, particularly from those from eastern Canada, pursue any controversial story involving animals.

Questions about animal abuse were raised as early as the 1912 Stampede. Genevieve Lipsett-Skinner, self-appointed spokesperson for “every woman,” described in a *Calgary Daily Herald* article “the appalling cruelty to the steers chosen to illustrate the prowess of the cowboys in the manly art of ‘bulldogging.’” Her article claimed that a wrestler tore off a steer’s horn.³⁴ How the horn was broken is not recorded. Under normal circumstances,

the pain induced by breaking a steer's horn partway compares to that of a human breaking a fingernail. It is nearly impossible for a cowboy to break a steer's horns painfully – by tearing them off the animal's skull. Following their rodeo careers, most steers are dehorned when they are fattened for the beef market.

Lipsett-Skinner's concerns did not stop steer wrestling and steer roping at the 1919 Stampede, but these events were not on the bill in 1923, for two reasons. The first was economic: cattlemen did not like the sports because when their cowboys practised by running steers on the ranch, the wearied cattle lost weight. (In the mid-1960s steer wrestling was re-introduced at Canadian pro rodeos, including the Stampede. The CPRA [Canadian Professional Rodeo Association] wanted integration with the PRCA [Professional Rodeo Cowboy's Association] in the United States, where steer wrestling was still an event, so points won in the event could count in both countries.)

Steer wrestling and steer roping also were not included in the 1923 Stampede as a result of the Calgary Humane Society's incorporation as a charitable organization in 1922. Although claims that steers suffered may have been misguided, the Humane Society offered Calgarians concerned about animal welfare an agency through which to protest perceived cruelties. The incorporation of the society was the beginning of a closer scrutiny of the Stampede's actions.

In rough stock events, animal rights supporters argue that the flank strap inflicts pain to the genitals of a bucking bronc or bull. (A flank strap or scratcher cinch extends around the animal's body at the flanks.) Rodeo proponents argue the flank strap only irritates the animal, inciting it to buck more enthusiastically. Nevertheless, there is an assistant whose job is to pull solidly on the strap when the door opens and the animal leaves the chute. Especially in the finals, when emotion and money are on the line, no effort is spared to make that animal buck.

Stampede rodeo critics take strongest exception to calf roping. With calves literally pushed out of the chute into a run, injuries occur when the rope catches them by the neck, tightens, and pulls them sharply back. In 2003 pro rodeo's public relations advisors recommended that the event be called Tie-Down Roping instead of Calf Roping. The event is unchanged, but the name was changed to make it more marketable.

As a reflection of how this event unnerves spectators, Stampede television broadcasts the "sport" strategically. The initial camera position is set up facing the cowboy and the calf. As the calf leaves the chute, the camera focuses

on the cowboy and his horse. Only after the calf is roped does the camera pan down, letting the viewer see the cowboy run to tie the calf. Viewers are intentionally prevented from seeing the rope stop the calf.

Stampede rodeo proponents do their sport no favours by dramatizing its perils. Take Darrell Knight, writing about his famous great-uncle, bronc rider Pete Knight:

Everyone knew Pete's first ambition was in the bucking horse event. That, after all, was the true "lone knight" occupation of the stampede – the premier event of every rodeo in North America – and Pete's first love. It involved the greatest individual danger but reaped the biggest rewards for the sole contestant, where one expert rider placed all of his skill against one superbly notorious bucking horse, fully saddled and quickly released.

Charging from an infield chute from 'stand-still' – in a fight for supremacy that carried the bronc rider through a nightmarish ten seconds – both horse or contestant could be battered, bloodied...or killed. Bronc riders losing their place in the saddle – an upset to their delicate balance and timing with boots spurring in stirrups and buck-rein 'see-sawing' in a clenched fist – were often thrown through solid wooden railings or wire fences. Horses bucked in a maddened frenzy over high walls and through chute gates and onto the bleacher seating of stampede grandstands, rupturing themselves and often crushing their riders in the process. It was a blood-sport born of the plains, but an honest depiction of the daily life faced by the last western hero – the cowboy – on a frontier that was rapidly vanishing.³⁵

Such depictions mobilize protesters to march at the Stampede's gates. In 2005 the Stampede faced a hail of criticism after horses drowned near the end of a 206-kilometre trail ride. As part of Alberta's centennial celebrations, some of the Stampede's bucking horses were herded from the Hanna ranch into the congested city. Near the entrance to the Stampede grounds, a train whistled, spooking the herd crossing a Bow River bridge. Horses fell into the

unusually high water; three died on impact, five drowned, and one was put down later because of its injuries. No charges were laid in their deaths.

Even some clown acts have historically dealt questionably with animals. For example, Wes Curtis and Sammy Reynosa's routine included tying a Roman candle four inches above a calf's tail. When the calf was released and ran to the ketch pen, one–two–three flares shot up into the air. Announcers prepared the audience by stating, "These Roman candles are specially made and they will not harm the calf in any way,"³⁶ but undoubtedly they tormented the animal. How would spectators appreciate rockets tied to their buttocks?

The Humane Society of Canada's executive director, Michael O'Sullivan, writes, "Rodeo spectacles are nothing but entertainment for bored 'city slickers.' Horses, calves, steers and bulls suffer during countless hours of practice sessions where riders and ropers train to race against the clock for prize money. People need to find new ways to entertain themselves that don't involve this kind of trauma for animals."³⁷

To the Stampede's credit, there is no question the rodeo managers take care of their animals. Stock contractors nurture and coddle their horses and bulls to ensure they are in prime physical and mental condition. Keith Marlington, senior manager of Rodeo and Chuckwagon Racing, states, "They are our friends. We get very emotional, get passionate, we're attached to them. They're like our kids."³⁸ The animals are equine and bovine athletes. The success and livelihoods of contractors, contestants, the sport, and the Stampede itself lies in the well-being of the animals.

Not all people questioning animal care are animal activists. As one observer noted, "Rodeos are obviously not pleasant for the animals, even though they may not actually be hurt. The flank strap irritates them enough to make them thrash and buck wildly. For a calf, being yanked backwards from a full run by a rope around its neck has got to be a nasty experience. How can we really justify this? And lumping everyone who might be worried about this under the umbrella of animal rights activist seems too easy and an oversimplification."³⁹

The Calgary Stampede is not alone in feeling the intensified scrutiny of people concerned about animal welfare. The rodeo in Cloverdale, British Columbia, ranks among the top five Canadian rodeos, but in 2007 a calf was euthanized after a tie-down roping performance. For the 2008 show, in response to tremendous pressure from the Vancouver Humane Society and local politicians, Cloverdale became the first rodeo to ban tie-down roping, team roping, steer wrestling, and wild cow milking.

Roy Call, stock contractor and owner/manager of C-Plus Ranch in 150 Mile House, British Columbia, says, "That got way too much coverage for what it was, but I will say one thing, the cowboys have been very slow to respond to the changing makeup of our spectators."

Call explains the dynamics of tie-down roping:

How you handle your rope after you catch your calf determines where the calf lands. If you pitch it up his back in a straight line, the calf goes straight over backwards. If you hold the rope off to the side the calf is going to snap around and probably stay on his feet.

You want them to stay on their feet. And where the calves are well-conditioned and fast, you have to do that because if you jerk him off his feet you'll be too slow and you won't place. Where the calves are bigger, or if it's not for a lot of money, you might take a chance and risk that, and that practice needs to be stopped. There's no doubt, injuries to the calves do occur, just like you see with the contestants, and there's no good way to handle those incidents.

Call concludes:

Very few people in Cloverdale come from rural backgrounds and they're not used to seeing things like that. [Rodeo] has been very slow to make rule changes and bring in extra protection for the animals. This should result in some major changes that will come forward to make it safer for the cattle and make it more palatable for the public."⁴⁰

Unquestionably, the Cloverdale Rodeo faces more intense scrutiny than many other rodeos because it is situated in B.C.'s lower mainland, yet Call's comments reflect animal issues in all rodeos, including the Stampede. Simply, there is greater community compassion for animals. Even in the grocery store, urban cowboys and cowgirls have a broader understanding of animals and are more interested in their lives. They want free-range eggs and organic beef; they want to know the animals have a fair shake. The changes originating

from West Coast rodeo may ultimately be recognized within the Calgary Stampede infield as well.

Stampede Rodeo's Challenges

The Stampede rodeo faces other less celebrated but perhaps more pressing issues. Even though the rodeo is so vital to the Stampede, a curious dichotomy is seen in the grandstands. Despite its eminence within the Stampede's *raison d'être*, the rodeo grandstand is rarely sold out. Even on the final day, seats are available. Although the Stampede revolves around rodeo's men, women, and beasts, Calgarians are not clamoring to buy tickets to the Stampede's showcase event.

The rodeo's odd position within Calgary culture is related to the audience's perception. At its best, the Stampede rodeo is an unequalled western spectacle of cowboys, cowgirls, horses, bulls, calves, and steers. In a fashion not seen in any other sport they compete co-operatively and competitively. At its worst, the rodeo is an insular and closed-minded community competing in a world separate from modern-day Calgary. Regarded as a novelty by visitors and as a historical souvenir by many Calgarians, the rodeo is a ranchland curiosity. To its proponents, the rodeo is misinterpreted; to its detractors, it is brutal, elitist, and anachronistic.

One concern is how to keep the live show compelling when the stock out-competes the cowboys. For example, the hyped bull-riding competition frequently does not meet its billing. Due to the successful breeding of mighty bulls, the bovines often rule the riders. Cowboys are tossed, the rides are short, and although tension is built, commonly the bull riding is tedious. For example, in 2005 only three cowboys out of ten finalists made it to the bonus round. After each of the three cowboys failed to ride two more bulls, the judges used the final round's high scores to determine a winner. Stock contractors have done their task all too well!

Communicating the judging of bulls and horses is another issue faced by the Stampede. Thousands of international tourists attend the rodeo, and most do not understand its judging system. If a sport is complex to understand, it is difficult to nurture a broader fan base.

Rodeo judging is supposed to work like this: In the rough stock events (bareback riding, saddle-bronc riding, and bull riding), the cowboys and the stock are judged equally – 50 points to the cowboy and 50 points to the animal. At many rodeos, two judges are used, but at the Stampede, four judges are used, each calculating 50 points, with the total divided by two.

Judges consider how hard the animal tries to throw the rider, for example, how hard the bull lunges and kicks. Bulls that change directions are scored higher, since spinning animals are harder to ride than ones bucking in straight lines. Likewise, bulls that “belly roll” or “sunfish,” exposing their bellies, add another dimension to the bucking actions and are awarded more points.

In scoring animals in the rough stock competitions, judges seek high kicking action with the animals' hind legs fully extended (especially with horses). The higher the kick, the better the score, since high-kicking animals are more difficult to ride. The strength and force of the animal's bucking efforts are also awarded points.

To those attending, the attributes sought by judges are unclear. It is not unusual for an exciting ride to be marked lower than a less thrilling ride. Pro official Jade Robinson explains, “If a wild horse looks hard to ride, it may not be as powerful or difficult. A green or wild horse doesn't have the degree of difficulty, in the sense of power, that you see in a horse that has an even drop and kick style.”⁴¹ Even with guidance in the program, it remains difficult for part-time or novice fans (most of the Stampede crowd) to understand the scoring system.

In addition to performance issues, the Stampede rodeo is pressured by Calgary's growth. As Calgary has become an increasingly diversified urban metropolis, its links to rodeo culture have deteriorated, as shown by the following three examples. First, the loss of the stockyards in south Calgary removed a visible, odorous, tangible link to its rodeo roots. Calgarians no longer drive past stockyards full of hundreds of bellowing, milling cattle where they could see, and in particular smell, why Calgary was called “cowtown.” The sensory experience was immediate and lasting.

Second, with over a million residents, and thousands more arriving annually, Calgary at the end of the twentieth century became a multicultural city. Families from around the world moved to share the prosperity of southern Alberta, creating a community of different skin colours and languages. As of 2005, 200,000 immigrants were living in Calgary, one-fifth of its population. Calgary prides itself on being an innovative and forward-looking city, but those ideals are reined in at the rodeo chutes.

When one enters the Stampede grandstand and walks up the nine steps to the tarmac level, the first colour seen is white. Sure, the cowboy hats are white, but the majority of people under them are white too. Professional rodeo is a Caucasian man and woman's world; it is not a representation of the Calgary community outside the gates.

The sport's colour was obvious as I sat in the infield's outdoor bar with a long-time friend, a Calgarian born in Bangladesh. As cowboys wrestled steers, my colleague's dark brown skin was an obvious anomaly amid the crowds of limping wild-horse racers and milling fans. The Stampede organization is taking steps to attract new cultural groups, but the rodeo, specifically, is challenged to become meaningful to the non-Caucasian spectator.

Third, when I was growing up in Calgary during the 1970s and 1980s, the whole city seemed to participate in the rodeo festival. Now that I live outside of Calgary and return to visit the Stampede, it is noticeable that the city as a whole no longer embraces the event. Upon driving into the city, except for banners at intersections, it is not immediately apparent that the Stampede is on. People are not commonly "dressing western" throughout neighbourhood communities.

Certainly at social engagements, downtown, and on the Stampede grounds, people are participating. But the city's complete enthrallment with the rodeo festival no longer exists. The sprawling city is metamorphosing, losing its agricultural nucleus of rodeo energy. The sheer size and diversity of the city foretell a greater misunderstanding of and ambivalence towards the Stampede.

The environmental image of the "unending western skyline" is deteriorating around the Stampede grounds. The psychological affect of "space" is prevalent within western mythology, but the new apartment towers around the west of Macleod Trail are changing the "big country" setting. Much like the barbed-wire fences across virgin plains over a century ago, the towers are "fencing in" the Stampede. They are literally casting their developed shadows over the expansive vistas towards the Rocky Mountains. While not affecting the rodeo directly, they reflect the changing atmosphere and environment in which the rodeo exists. As Cole Porter pleads in "Don't Fence Me In,"

Oh, give me land, lots of land under starry skies above,
 don't fence me in
 Let me ride through the wide open country that I love,
 don't fence me in
 Let me be by myself in the evenin' breeze
 Listen to the murmur of the cottonwood trees
 Send me off forever but I ask you please, don't fence me in

Just turn me loose, let me straddle my old saddle
 Underneath the western skies
 On my cayuse, let me wander over yonder
 Till I see the mountains rise

I want to ride to the ridge where the west commences
 And gaze at the moon till I lose my senses
 And I can't look at hovels and I can't stand fences
 Don't fence me in⁴²

With suburban sprawl paving over grazing lands, no tangible cowtown links in the city, and fewer people with agrarian roots, the understanding of a rodeo festival is bound to deteriorate. The rodeo holds the myths so valued by the Stampede's marketing offices, but they are increasingly irrelevant. As the city briskly and recklessly evolves, the rodeo risks reverting to a former cowtown's competition among cowhands – a Wild West anachronism, rather than Calgary's proudest showcase of rodeo's elite athletes.

The Stampede Rodeo Responds

In response to these issues, including the changing demographics, animal activists, entertainment tastes, and the need to re-invigorate rodeo, the Stampede rodeo managers made aggressive changes in 2005. They responded to demands for a faster-paced show, creating relationships with the competitors and fashioning a rodeo more relevant to a modern audience.

In 2005 the American Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) decided not to count Canadian prize money towards the world finals. The Stampede, with its international clout, fought back. In October 2005 the Stampede announced a new rodeo format and an overall increase in prize money to \$1.6 million, which includes a \$1 million Final Showdown Sunday. No longer sanctioned by the Canadian Professional Rodeo Association or the PRCA, the Stampede made a bold move, with the potential to reshape the sport worldwide.

As of 2006, twenty of the world's highest-rated competitors in each of the six events are invited to participate. Entries are reduced to twenty per event (from fifty in rough stock and sixty in calf roping and steer wrestling). Spectators see these top contestants a minimum of five and a maximum of six times. Contestant entrance fees were eliminated (participants had been paying \$400 per event), and each contestant is given a \$1,000 travel and living allowance. The two fringe events of Wild Cow Milking and Wild Horse Racing were dropped to create a fast-tempo two-and-a-half-hour show.

The Stampede rodeo is now a tournament, with rodeo's richest prizes. The winner of each event during the final Sunday Showdown walks away with pro rodeo's largest cheques – \$100,000. Keith Marrington states, "Everybody

in the industry has known – and agrees – rodeo needs to go in a new and innovative direction. We believe we need to create more stars out of our cowboys and cowgirls, get them out in the community to talk about their lifestyle and their background.”⁴³

Stampede staff and the Rodeo Committee, to their credit, are trying to increase the rodeo’s relevancy. They acknowledge they need to make their competitors and their sport valued by a uninitiated audience. By implementing these changes, they are tackling the issues threatening their show, attempting to create a ticket-buying urgency and fill the grandstand. Their task is not an easy one, particularly in a city expanding so rapidly that it is effectively paving over its roots.

Riding Off Into the Sunset

As the Stampede rodeo rides on amid an increasingly challenging metropolitan environment, the vitality of its enduring mythology should ensure its legacy persists. Its legends are iconic fixtures in the history and personality of Calgary. Romantic images of women, horses, men, and bulls, dancing in an infield of jeopardy and bravado remain at the hub of the Calgary Stampede’s marketing and story-telling. The Stampede will undoubtedly evolve, but the essential simplicity of its conflicts, in such brilliant spectacle, will continue to reiterate desired western perceptions.

Even if most Calgarians do not go to see the Calgary Stampede rodeo, they want it there. During ten days each summer, Calgary pays attention to rodeo, its symbolism and its ceremony. For most Calgarians, the rodeo’s existence justifies community and individual actions taken during the Stampede. The rodeo faces amplified misunderstanding in a swelling urban setting, but it promises to adapt and to endure because its myths and icons are so extraordinary, and their representations so collectively imagined.

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