

CHAPTER 9

The Half a Mile of Heaven's Gate

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On June 1, 2006, at Grande Prairie, Alberta, two chuckwagon drivers had occasion to reflect on the sport that defines their summers if not their lives. Mark Sutherland and Jason Johnstone, both second-generation members of two venerable chuckwagon racing families, were competing in the same heat when their wagons collided. The result was a spine-chilling, hair-raising ride that beggars the excitement of any Roman chariot race, ancient or modern.

Competing in that heat were Buddy Bensmiller, his son Kurt Bensmiller, Mark Sutherland (son of Kelly Sutherland), and Jason Johnstone (son of Reg Johnstone). These are the royalty of chuckwagon families, names that ring on every track across the West. The horses were restive at the barrels, refusing to stand, nerves and excitement making them eager to go. And take off they did, even though before the horn went Sutherland, fighting to control his horses, yelled for the other wagons to pull up, pull around for another start. But the klaxon sounded, and coming out of the infield, Sutherland discovered that the harness on his right wheeler had broken. In a vain effort, he tried to pull up his horses, but they were already in race mode. Jason Johnstone, with only a split second to make a decision, thought he could get past Sutherland on the rail, but couldn't. His wagon slammed into Sutherland's as they were going around the first turn. A collision between two wagons, pulled by that horsepower at those speeds, is extravagantly forceful. It knocked Johnstone off the seat into the back of his wagon box; unable to fight his way back to the seat, he desperately tried to control his raging horses for the rest of the race from the box. But Sutherland was knocked off of his seat onto the ground. Which might seem anti-climatic – a wicked bump and the end of a race. Except that between wagon, horses, and a melange of dirt and hooves, Sutherland was in mortal danger. "I landed on my head pretty good and bounced. When I was going under and saw the wagon box coming down on me...saw the wheel, I thought, 'this is it.' But I kept my wits about me ... I pushed away from the wagon and luckily, I pushed the right way."¹ As if that wasn't enough of a challenge, Sutherland's right leg had the reins wrapped round it; the left front wheel of the moving wagon struck that same right leg. Knowing he had only one chance to survive, Sutherland grabbed the reach (the pulling pole under the wagon) and hung on, all the while trying to kick the reins off his foot. They caught on his boot, and holding the reach with his arms, he kicked with his left leg, trying to free his foot. When he managed to pry off his boot, he swung both legs around the reach, and then tried to figure out how to climb out from under the still racing wagon. He couldn't get out at the front because the horses' hooves were too close, and at the back he was stopped by the stove

box, so he had no choice but to hang on to the reach of that careening wagon, still pulled by thundering, unstoppable horses, to hang on for dear life – and not metaphorically. His outriders raced beside, trying to keep the horses running straight and shouting encouragement to Sutherland to hold on, hold on. When they finally pulled the horses to a stop, far past the finish line, Sutherland emerged, bruised but alive. He gave a thumbs-up to the crowd, and rode back to the barns on a quad. Anxious about his horses' welfare, and determined to check on them first, he declined a trip to the hospital.

Sutherland and Johnstone weren't engaged in some faked and exaggerated feats of showmanship that were set up more than real. They demonstrated, in the heat of a race gone wrong, the powerful strength and quick thinking that separates gladiators from gumshoes. Accidents take only a split second to happen; they take dedicated intelligence to manage. That both men emerged with only bruises and that no horses were hurt speaks volumes about chuckwagon racing as a sport that requires strategy and style as well as speed.

The "chucks" are fast, dangerous, and distinctive. Combining the skitish strength of thoroughbred horses with a driver's rein-control finesse of a weaver, they demonstrate an intricate skill and beauty that isn't always evident in the mud and the dust and the shouts and the thundering hooves of horses and wagons after the klaxon has sounded. To a novice, each heat looks chaotic, a jumble of harness and canvas and hats and horses in the infield before the wagons careen around the barrels and then hit the track. To the discerning fan, outrider, or wagon racer, it is the most incredible spectacle we can witness, and it is our own, born and bred in the West. Mark Sutherland himself has described it best, in a famous summary, almost understated for its precision. "Picture yourself in a ready-made coffin tied by tooth-floss to the tails of four charging dinosaurs. That's wagon racing."² Sutherland, clinging to the reach under his wagon in the dust of the horses' hooves, and with his own mortality singing in his ears, probably thought those lines would be inscribed on his tombstone. Or didn't bother to dwell on death. Instead, he used strength and skill to survive.

Chuckwagon racing, or "wagon racing," as the aficionados call it, is the sport of kings adapted to the wiles of the Canadian prairie. Complex and challenging, it is history, technology, the open range, and contemporary horse breeding all rolled up together with sheer speed, nerve, and psychological taunting. While thoroughbred horse races are simply composed of a race between different horses, each horse ridden by one man, wagon races are as tangled and dramatic and earth-bound as their reins. This race is not just a simple test of speed. The chucks require stamina, skill, spirit, and teamwork.



The goal of a chuckwagon race is to win (to be the fastest around the track) without penalty. But this end is remarkably difficult, a chuckwagon race far more complicated than a regular horse race. At the Calgary Stampede, the über-competition of these races, four outfits compete in each of nine heats. The men, horses, and wagon of each chuckwagon comprise an “outfit.” An outfit includes a team of four horses, two of them wheelers (the rear pair in the four-horse team), two of them leaders (the front pair of the four-horse team). Those four horses are hooked up to a 1,300-pound wagon, which is precisely weighed and measured and certified to a rigid standard. No more plywood boxes: these are state of the art vehicles. The drivers, who sit on a hard bench with only a tight spring for bounce, manoeuvre four heavy leather reins to control the horses. Complicated enough? There’s more. At the Calgary Stampede, each outfit is assisted by four outriders. One holds the two leaders steady until the horn sounds. Three outriders are positioned at the back of the wagon. Two toss in a pair of tent poles and a canvas, and a fourth outrider pitches a (now plastic) stove into the stove rack at the back of the wagon. The outriders, having completed these necessary tasks, then leap

onto the backs of their individual horses and follow the wagon, which must turn a tight figure eight around two barrels in the infield before coming onto the track proper and settling into a lane to race.

Gazing down into the infield, a spectator will see a confusion of colourful wagons with drivers, each pulled by four horses, and on the ground four times four outriders, each with his own horse. That makes four wagons, twenty men, and thirty-two horses, milling between eight carefully staggered white barrels. Sixteen of the horses are harnessed to the wagons. Four of the men control the wagons; sixteen men are busy with the work of split-second assistance. Teamwork is essential and timing is crucial. Men must be able to multi-task while remaining aware of their own positions as well as those of every other animal and wagon in the infield. Outriders might hold their horses' reins between their teeth at the same time as they pitch a tarp, then literally spring onto their own horses' backs before chasing the dust of a thundering wagon setting a blistering pace. There is nothing simple about this sport. It defies any reduction to a mere horse race.

Historically, chuckwagon racing was less sport than recreation. Chuckwagons were the movable kitchens that centred every camp. During joint roundups or cattle drives, every ranch was expected to contribute to the enterprise a wagon with a cook, food, and bedding. When the largest general roundup was held in Alberta in the late spring of 1885, it included a hundred riders, fifteen chuckwagons, and five hundred horses.³ They gathered some 60,000 cattle over several weeks from a huge territory. The men would start as early as 3 a.m., fuelled by a quick breakfast at the chuckwagon. Then the hands would catch their horses and begin to move the herd in the agreed-upon direction. Wagons, horses, and riders would shift, before noon, to the place designated as the next campsite. Once there, the chuckwagons would set up and the cowboys would ride off to gather the scattered cattle, sweeping a huge circle about ten to fifteen miles from the camp inward. When the riders returned late in the day, all the cattle were merged in a large open area, and the chuckwagon served as the workers' home away from home. The combined effort was so complex that large roundups were quickly abandoned in favour of smaller ones, although the same structure of gathering animals applied. And three times a day the camp cook (or camp boss) served up coffee, beans, bread, and bacon or beef from the wagon; cowboys had to be fuelled as much as the horses that they rode.

Charles Goodnight, a Texas cattleman, is credited with inventing the portable kitchen by adapting a Civil War army kitchen wagon or "Conestoga" to supply cooks and workers at roundup time in the 1860s. The

Conestoga wagons, or prairie schooners, which Art Belanger claims were the early forerunners of chuckwagons, “sailed through the waist-high buffalo grass from the mid-eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth.”⁴ These heavy, durable wagons had to carry all that migrating settlers required, and so became the moving vans of an earlier era. But as part of cattle drives, the chuckwagon followed the herd and provided a nomadic rest station, water, food, coffee, and a bit of shade. A rough box on the back served as a pantry to carry food, mostly sourdough, coffee, and beans. Add a toolbox and a water-barrel, stretch a long canvas tarp over top, and the travelling kitchen was complete. The wagon also carried harness and slickers and bedrolls (to keep them dry), while a cowhide stretched underneath carried wood and buffalo chips for fuel. The cook drove the wagon horses, made three meals a day, and might even provide haircuts and shaves. At night, the cook’s last job was to “point the pole of the wagon toward the North Star, providing a compass heading for the trail boss in the morning.”⁵ Chuckwagons were used from the 1860s to the 1900s. And of course, despite serving elemental necessities, the wagons and their drivers contributed to the rousing stories of the increasingly mythopoeic West.

The idea of races between these wagons blossomed slowly. All moving vehicles archetypally suggest the notion of a race or a competition, with the first arrival across a finish line earning the cachet of winning. Roman writer and statesman Pliny the Younger wrote in his *Letters*, in the first century CE, of the chariot races.

I am the more astonished that so many thousands of grown men should be possessed again and again with a childish passion to look at galloping horses, and men standing upright in their chariots. If, indeed, they were attracted by the swiftness of the horses or the skill of the men, one could account for this enthusiasm. But in fact it is a bit of cloth they favour, a bit of cloth that captivates them. And if during the running the racers were to exchange colours, their partisans would change sides, and instantly forsake the very drivers and horses whom they were just before recognizing from afar, and clamorously saluting by name.⁶

In contemporary terms, the crowd in the bleachers at the Calgary Stampede might not forsake one favourite for another merely for their colours

– or in current terminology their canvasses – but there is enough enthusiasm for the gaily-coloured wagons to make it seem as if two thousand years have not passed. The informal wagering (legal betting on the chuckwagon races is not permitted at the Stampede) in the stands is largely based on visuals or vernacular knowledge, with predictable loyalties. And the wagons do incite spectator loyalty, too: visitors can vote for their favourite driver, and the top rookie driver wins the Orville Standquist Award, while the Guy Weadick Memorial Award is presented annually to the chuckwagon or rodeo competitor who best typifies the Stampede’s spirit of showmanship and sportsmanship. More germane, statistics on those watching the Rangeland Derby are huge. During the ten days of the Calgary Stampede approximately 180,000 people watch the chuckwagon races at the track and hundreds of thousands more watch them on television every night.

So how did those ancient horse races arrive, in the outpost of the West, Calgary, Alberta, and the Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth? Promoter Guy Weadick was determined to provide the Calgary Stampede crowd with thrilling events. He was also determined to include racing. Wild horse races were fine, but Weadick could imagine even more compelling competitions. Belanger suggests that “Weadick was looking for a replacement for the Stagecoach Race,” a previous entertainment, or that he was inspired by a race he had seen at the Gleichen Stampede, when several farmers “ran their farm wagons with four horse hitches in an exciting match race.”⁷ They knew too the lore of the American land rush, when the United States opened up thousands of acres in land lotteries. Once a prospective homesteader had won the right to make a claim, he lined up and waited for a starting gun to fire before racing across country to stake a piece of land. And the tradition, at the end of a long roundup, of cooks racing one another to the nearest saloon for a drink was common as well. That informal cross-country race was rough and ready, and accompanied by jangling pots, dust from bags of flour, and rattling tin cups, a source of much merriment. One story contends that in 1892 in Fallon, Montana, when the cooks from the Hog-Eye and the L-Cross ranches were in town to stock up on supplies, someone made a bet on the relative speed of his cook’s team of horses. By this time, everybody was well lubricated, and the wagons were loaded with supplies, but they agreed to the six-mile race, and a blaze of gunfire signalled the start. The wagons ran across country, frying pans rattling, everybody shouting, and the Hog-Eye outfit won by one hundred yards. They got the case of whiskey, but one of the cowboys recalled, “The aftermath of the race was felt and tasted by us for at least the next ten days. We had beans, sugar, coffee, and mica axle grease in

our grub.”⁸ Other races were spurred by chuckwagons eager to reach ranch house or saloon, the last one to arrive required to buy everyone else drinks.

In search of an exciting event to cap his hyperbolic rodeo, Guy Weadick figured that some kind of wagon race would be crazy and chaotic enough to guarantee audience interest. The chuckwagons could answer popular desire for a competition. Weadick put out a challenge to the surrounding ranches, and despite understandable reluctance on the parts of ranch owners, he managed to taunt, challenge, and cajole the ranchers of the area into participating. The entrants in that initial race were a variety, mostly “pool” wagons where several owners from a district got together: the Mosquito Creek Pool Wagon (representing ranches owned by Jim Cross, Dan Riley, Jack Drumheller, and Rod MacLeary); the “Double Dishpan” (Sid Bannerman and the Hodgkins Brothers); the VU outfit (from Permez Creek), which was driven by well-known competitor Clem Gardner; the Sheep Wagon (put up by Jack Butler and Ora Demille from Sheep Creek); the V Quarter Circle Ranch outfit (from the Langdon district); and “Sundown” Morton’s Gleichen outfit.⁹ Six wagons (there were supposed to be two others, but they either threw in with the others or withdrew) comprised the original competitors in the first set of races. These races ran daily, and each outfit had to carry every item necessary to the chuckwagon’s traditional job: a water barrel, a stove, a canvas cover, a fly, and a branding iron. Every wagon was pulled by four horses and each driver was to be assisted by four outriders. Those early wagons weighed about a ton, two thousand pounds, meaning that the horses had to be large and strong. Since then, the contents of the wagon have been modified, although now many more rules attend the races themselves.

Running rules for that first race were decided on the ground just before the start. To make the task more difficult, each wagon would cut a figure eight around two barrels set to lead away from the track in front of the grandstand. The wagons would then cut across the infield and enter the racetrack in the middle of the backstretch, which meant that they ran a quarter mile, not the current virtual half a mile (actually a kilometre). At the end, the wagons would turn back into the infield, stop beside their first barrel with the wagon-back to the grandstand, and set up camp, requiring that the crew unhook the team from the wagon, stretch the eight-foot fly, unload the stove, and build a fire. “First smoke decides winner” stated those initial rules. In races to come, lighting the stove incited interesting pyrotechnics, some drivers stuffing the stove with kerosene-soaked straw and tossing a match from a safe distance.

Six wagons meant that the first race was divided into two heats, which ran five nights of the week-long Stampede. The prize money was \$300 total,

“\$15.00, \$10.00 and \$5.00 for the first, second and third running times for each evening of racing.”¹⁰ The winner overall was long-time Yukon stage-coach driver Bill Somners, in charge of the Mosquito Creek rig owned by Riley, Cross, Drumheller, and MacLeary. Somners’ outriders, Dan Fraser, Gus Sonnie, Laurel Millar, and Bill Livingstone, were familiar names in the ranching circuit.¹¹ For winning the greatest number of races out of five, the Mosquito Creek outfit took home a \$25.00 John B. Stetson hat. But that was an understated outcome to the course set that Friday, July 14, 1923. The first ever professional chuckwagon races signalled the launch of the sport. Weadick knew he had a crowd pleaser.

From those rather rude beginnings, the races have gotten faster, more exciting, less forgiving. Changes were implemented quickly. In the interests of time, the team being unhooked, the tent fly stretched, and the campfire starting were dropped in 1925, but gestural elements of those actions remain, although the wagons are streamlined and the equipment is safety engineered. For example, the stove, originally a heavy ranch stove, was replaced by a metal replica, then a wooden one, and now is a rubber imitation (and like the barrels, collapsible). But outriders still toss a tarp and tent poles into the back, still throw a cook stove into the stove rack before jumping onto the backs of what are now thoroughbreds, raring to go. As the years rolled along, rules proliferated. The wagons tried to improve speed by lightening their load, and smaller, lighter wagons and faster horses appeared immediately. The fastest track time in 1923 was 2 minutes and 50 seconds, but although the race was doubled in length in 1924 (to the whole track or half a mile), the fastest time that year was 1 minute and 52 seconds. And to balance the inequity of distance, the barrels were re-positioned in 1925, the starting positions fanned out in front of the grandstand.¹² The chuck box and water barrels came off the wagons in 1946. Whips were outlawed in 1947. In 1948 a growing awareness of safety introduced the rule that each wagon must run in its own lane and could “cut for the rail” only at certain places.¹³ The game was becoming a sport.

That transformation was effected by a combination of fast, wily horses and strong, skilful men – and yes, they are all men. This is a male sport, requiring powerful upper-body strength, although wives and mothers, daughters and sisters do a huge amount of behind-the-scenes work. These drivers appear to love risk and to embrace speed and danger. How does a chuckwagon driver start or train? It helps if he belongs to chuckwagon royalty, those families who have driven outfits for generation after generation. Sutherland, Bensmiller, Glass, Vigen, Dorchester, Cosgrave, Walgenbach, Nevada, Willard, Knight,

and Lauder – these names ring with their own chuckwagon glamour. But a driver has to be a horse person, has to know horses, their habits and their harness, to be able to hold the reins and imagine a perfect combination of driving and running. An intergenerational sport, drivers are mentored by fathers, grandfathers, and other drivers – Kelly Sutherland often cites Ralph Vigen – or they begin as outriders, a real test of toughness.¹⁴

The work of the outriders is often unclear to spectators, but they are indispensable to racing and its outcome. An outrider can make the difference between winning and losing. The peg men are responsible for throwing the two tent pegs into the back of the wagon; the peg man closest to the barrel has to ensure that his horse doesn't back into that barrel. The outrider holding the lead horses has to be agile enough to let go and scramble out of the way when the horn sounds, simultaneously leaping onto his own horse, negotiating the figure eight around the barrels, and following the wagon to cross the finish line within a prescribed 150 feet of the wagon crossing. From afar, these movements look effortless, but the athleticism required is astonishing. To identify themselves with the appropriate wagon, the outriders wear matching colours, based on the barrel position. Now the colours are standardized and unmatched shirts result in a penalty (Barrel 1 is white, Barrel 2 is red, Barrel 3 is black, and Barrel 4 yellow), although in the past, outriders and drivers selected their own colours. As is more than evident from the Sutherland accident, outriders are essential to the safety and cohesion of the race, and they can make or break its outcome. If an outrider lifts the stove before the horn goes off, the team earns a 2 second penalty; a 1 second penalty applies if a pole is off the ground or if the fly is not stretched. An outrider must continue straight ahead at the sound of the horn, may not assist the driver after the race starts, must follow the proper figure eight pattern, must not miss a barrel or knock over a barrel, cannot force an injured horse or finish ahead of the wagon team. Every one of these rules targets infractions that will be penalized. And outriders have to work in tandem, recognize one another's body language.

The wagons and drivers too face a particular set of measurements. Stringent controls test drug and alcohol abuse. And the equipment must meet certain criteria of weight and size. On the track, potential penalties abound. Wagons that start ahead of the horn or line up ahead of the barrel are penalized. Creating a false start, missing a barrel or knocking over a barrel (the most common penalty), interfering with another wagon or with other outriders, failing to cooperate with the starter or moving out of an assigned lane, are all subject to penalty. With wagons moving at speeds of more than

sixty kilometres per hour, the need for rules is understandable. Largely due to its history of accidents and even fatalities for both man and horse, this has become a much-regulated race. In truth, spectator sports both abhor and scream for blood, and the chucks do not disappoint. Chuckwagons have overturned, drivers and outriders have been dragged or ejected, horses toppled or injured. In July 1986 one chuckwagon cut off another, leading to a spectacular pile-up and claiming the lives of six horses. Even onlookers have been injured and killed. Since 1960 four men have died, and many more have suffered injuries.

The animal rights movement is vocal and vociferous, arguing every year about cruelty to the horses. It is true that the races are dangerous. Six horses were killed in 1986, one in 1999, six in 2002, one in 2004, two in 2006, and three in 2007. There is some compromise: the Humane Society and the SPCA together inspect the horses, observe the races, and keep a watchful eye on the sport. The Stampede officially contends that it has always worked to protect animals, and that part of the ethos of this celebration is the relationship between humans and animals. Yet, the races are called cruel and insensitive, and the controversy surrounding their enactment is fierce and ongoing (see any Internet site for endless discussion about the subject). In response, the drivers argue that thoroughbreds that have been culled from the race-track face certain euthanasia, and becoming chuckwagon horses gives them a second lease on life. Mikkelson reports Jim Nevada's riposte to accusations of reckless endangerment: "We don't pay four or five thousand dollars for a horse and try to kill it. You don't win money if you don't take care of your horses. We're drug tested, both us and the horses. Those horses would be in a dog-food can or on a plate in France, if it wasn't for wagon racing."¹⁵ That too is a truism. Good wagon racing horses are treasured, even pampered.

Horses are the body of the sport, and it is horses that give the races their excitement. They need, for this particular challenge, to have a certain character and drive. These animals are hooked together in a four-horse hitch in tandem. The leaders, lighter and faster, are in front. The right-hand leader is key to the team: that horse has to be able to carry a line, has to be quick turning, with a will to run and a ready intelligence. On the outside of the first turn, that lead horse must be able to run faster to make the U around the top barrel, must be prepared to turn sharply on the bottom barrel. Only one in twenty horses make good right-hand leaders. The pole team or wheel team closest to the wagon are the muscle, pulling the load behind them. Wheelers are chosen for their size and stamina, while leaders are chosen for speed and leadership. This combination is difficult to configure and even more difficult



to measure. It requires careful attention to each horse's skill, training, and ability, a genuine equine knowledge. And it takes practice and patience, the drivers hooking their horses in different combinations in the spring when they begin to train, observing carefully their animals' talents and responses.

Most of the horses now are thoroughbreds, pure blood, although some cold bloods are still used. Some are culled racehorses, saved from the glue factory to enjoy a distinctive and longer life. And they are coddled and cared for, through winter and summer, a chuckwagon family's most valued assets. Some horses stay with individual families for ten to twelve years. Their job is to train in the spring, to run something like a minute every few days in the summer (most horses do about twenty-five to thirty races each year), and to relax in the fall and winter. And it is obvious that the horses love to run: the race is as exciting for them as it is for humans. Outriders' mounts must be fast as well, good saddle horses with speed and dexterity. Every outfit will carry forty to sixty horses, training them, evaluating them, and choosing to run different animals depending on track, temperature, and temper. Drivers will juggle and gnaw over these combinations, trying to achieve the perfect mix. Equipment too is key, and must be cared for and maintained. A chuckwagon outfit moves as a major entourage, requiring a wagon, feed, tack, and at least eight horses, if not more. The gypsy energy of travelling from event to event, hauling horses in semi-trailers and living in motor homes beside barns and corrals, requires a certain flexible temperament on the parts of humans and animals alike. Most important, the whole undertaking of running a chuckwagon is a team effort. One rogue horse, one careless outrider, one slip of the driver's reins, and all is subject to failure.

Despite its difficulty and mysterious chaos, its ineffable cachet, chuckwagon racing is not a well-sponsored sport, and definitely not a sport that is internationally known. Relatively free of commercial inflection, except for the sponsorship of those companies that buy a wagon tarp, the culture has developed without the monetary pressure and rewards that accrue to other professional athletes. This distinctive activity has more of a flavour of domesticity, related partly to the powerful family connections that seem essential, and partly perhaps to the race's origins of being a kitchen on the move. Research on rodeos and on the iconic image of the cowboy (lone, stoic, and individual) tends to sidestep the carnival of wagon racing, as if it does not fit into the historic triangle of man, horse, and cow. Instead, this is a team effort, a community investment, a family undertaking. As Glen Mikkelson argues, "the chuckwagon cowboy personifies the co-operative spirit of Western Canada...[they] remain independent spirits in a communal enterprise. And their sport, which embodies team sportsmanship, community, and collaboration, is an apt mirror of the Canadian West and a symbol of the character of western Canadians."¹⁶ The young child standing between his dad's knees and holding the lines of a chuckwagon team in the Calgary Stampede parade might be a more iconic reference for this sport than the buckles and trophies of the rodeo cowboy. More than anything else, chuckwagon racing requires a steady and observant horseperson, and the patience of practice, practice, and practice.

Commercial interest, while it is nowhere near the money tossed at hockey or football, has begun to accelerate. A chuckwagon first carried advertising in 1941, when the Buckhorn Guest Ranch paid Marvin Flett to promote it on his wagon. In 1956 Lloyd Nelson was the last driver to win driving a wagon under his own name.¹⁷ But the expense of racing crept upwards, and in 1979 the first annual canvas auction was held. Organized and formalized by the Stampede, it has accelerated into a gala event. In 2007 all records were shattered, with a total amount of more than four million dollars bid on the thirty-six drivers and their canvasses. The highest bid went to "the King," Kelly Sutherland, whose canvas sold for \$205,000. Advertisers who purchase chuckwagons share a unique experience, which goes far beyond the canvas as marketing tool. The social and philanthropic aspect of advertising, the wagon drivers' public appearances and general participation in Stampede celebrations together weave a strange tapestry of competition and cooperation. In 2002 Professional Wagon Racing Inc. introduced chuckwagon races at the Las Vegas Stampede, hoping to establish an annual event. The venue

and the arena seemed right, but the event has not been repeated. Even Vegas, it seems, cannot accommodate the strange extravaganza of wagon racing.

The characters surrounding the Rangeland Derby both embody and amplify a compelling eccentricity, the layers of a powerful mythology that, for all its hyperbole, is a virtual mystery beyond the western Canadian world. In the early years, the most colourful or foolhardy driver was easily “Sun-down” or “Wildhorse” Jack Morton. He was famous for throwing his reins on the ground and grabbing his horses’ tails to make them run faster. To light the cook stove, he carried gas on his wagon, but it exploded, and made his horses even crazier. Morton broke his leg, rammed the barrels, and lost a wheel, but he retired only when he was close to sixty, in 1938.¹⁸ Various stories credit him with starting the downtown pancake breakfasts served from the back of the wagons. The voice of the Rangeland Derby, Joe Carbury, has announced the races for more than forty years, and his trademark cry, “They’re Offffff,” is a benchmark for the event. Dick Cosgrove, who won first in 1926, would win the Derby nine times before retiring twenty years later. His record has been beaten only by “the King,” Kelly Sutherland, who has won ten times. These champions are not young men, but wily veterans who have learned from experience. They carry the talismans and markers of gladiators: Kelly’s long black feather, the checkered wagon of the Glass family, Dallas Dorchester wearing his father’s old felt hat. They are the heroes of inside stories, and yet eternal in terms of their own playful dodges with mortality.

For chuckwagon racing is about staring at mortality, the possibility of death always hovering, the thunder of hooves an apocalypse. Jim Nevada recounts, “I was fifteen years old, it was my second show outriding, and I was nervous. Veteran driver Orville Strandquist said to me, ‘Jim, when your card’s laid, it’s played. It could be on the racetrack or in a car on your way to Calgary, but as long as you’re doing something you like, that’s what you do. You don’t know when you’re going to die, and don’t push it, but when you card’s played, you’re dead.’ After that I was never nervous.”¹⁹ Such fatalism might belong to the world of unpredictability, but it also speaks to an acceptance of danger as a companion to the adrenaline of risk. That calm acceptance might have been what enabled young Sutherland to hold on to the reach of his runaway wagon all the way around the track.

What then to conclude about this unique sport, played out as part of the Calgary Stampede, an event that is powerfully rooted to a place (Calgary, Alberta, and the greater West) and an iconic ethos (ranching and riding). Almost archaic in its origins, almost shyly naive in its development, accidental and local rather than part of the international jockeying that accompanies

soccer or basketball, chuckwagon racing is unique in every aspect of its risk and its achievement. It is a living anachronism, and yet beautifully performative. Most of all, every race articulates a hope that out of the complicated danger of these competitions will come a gently persuasive story. This legend might indeed hark back to the ancient chariot races, but it also echoes a yearning to witness the long-lived haunting of a western tradition.

Notes

1. *Calgary Herald*, 3 June 2006, E1.
2. Glen Mikkelsen, *Never Holler Whoa!: The Cowboys of Chuckwagon Racing* (Toronto: Balmur Book Publishing, 2000), 2.
3. Warren Elofson, *Cowboys, Gentlemen, and Cattle Thieves: Ranching on the Western Frontier* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 51.
4. Art Belanger, *A Half Mile of Hell* (Aldergrove, BC: Frontier Publishing, 1970), 3.
5. Mikkelsen, *Never Holler Whoa*, 3.
6. H.A. Harris, *Sport in Greece and Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 220–21.
7. Belanger, *Half Mile of Hell*, 6.
8. Mikkelsen, *Never Holler Whoa*, 4.
9. Belanger, *Half Mile of Hell*, 8.
10. *Ibid.*, 11.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 14.
13. *Ibid.*, 43.
14. Mikkelsen, *Never Holler Whoa*, 26.
15. *Ibid.*, 82.
16. *Ibid.*, 19.
17. Glen Mikkelsen, "Greasing the Wheels," in *Grand Souvenir Program* (Calgary: Calgary Stampede, 2004), 19.
18. Joan Dixon and Tracey Read, *Celebrating the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede: The Story of the Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth* (Canmore: Altitude Publishing, 2005), 101.
19. Mikkelsen, *Never Holler Whoa*, 147.