The Half a Mile of Heaven’s Gate

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On 1 June 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, resulting in 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. That day, 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 out, pull out 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 hold back 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 he 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 from the box for the rest of the race. But Sutherland was knocked from 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 mélangé 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.” 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 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 exaggerated feats of showmanship that were artificial 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 and athleticism 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 skittish strength of thoroughbred horses with a driver’s rein-control requiring the finesse of a weaver, they demonstrate an intricate skill that is not 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 observer, 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 an incredible spectacle, 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.” 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, relying as well on trained and sensitive horses.

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 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. And the true athletes are the horses, the drivers merely their partners.

The goal of this equestrian sport is for a wagon to win (the fastest around the track) without penalty. But this end is remarkably difficult, a chuckwagon race being forty times as complicated as 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 constitute an “outfit.” An outfit includes a team of four horses, two of them wheelers (the rear pair), two of them leaders (the front pair). 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 the plywood boxes of the past: these are state of the art vehicles, still square and wooden but precisely measured. Wagon boxes are 38 inches wide, 24 inches high, and 11 feet, 4 inches long. A wagon must weigh a minimum of 1,325 pounds with its driver and equipment. The driver, who sits on a hard bench with only a tight spring for bounce, manoeuvres four heavy leather reins to control the horses. Complicated enough? There’s more.

At the Calgary Stampede, until 2011, every outfit was supported by four outriders. That year, citing safety reasons, the Stampede, falling in line with the World Professional Chuckwagon Association and the Canadian Professional Chuckwagon Association, reduced the number of outriders assisting each wagon to two. That
took eight men and eight horses out of the melee at the start and presumably reduced the potential for accidents, the continued bane of the sport and the source of ongoing opposition from animal welfare groups and objectors. In earlier races, one outrider held the two leaders steady until the starting horn sounded. Three outriders were positioned at the back of the wagon. Two tossed in a pair of tent poles and a canvas, and a fourth outrider pitched a (plastic) stove into the stove rack at the back of the wagon. With the rule changes, one outrider now holds the two leaders steady at the front, and only one outrider, positioned at the back, tosses in the stove; the tent poles and canvas have been eliminated. 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 gallop around the track.

Gazing down into the infield, a spectator would, up until 2011, 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 made four wagons, twenty men, and thirty-two horses, milling between eight carefully staggered white barrels. Sixteen of the horses were harnessed to the wagons, trigger-happy to run. Four drivers controlled the wagons; sixteen men were busy with the work of split-second assistance. Teamwork was essential and timing crucial. Every human involved had to be able to multi-task while remaining aware of his own position as well as the position of every other animal and wagon in the infield. Outriders might hold their horses’ reins between their teeth at the same time as they pitched a tarp or the stove. After 2011, the sheer quantity of man and horsepower—and the potential for collision or interference—was reduced, with only eight outriders instead of sixteen. But those outriders still have to accomplish very precise tasks before springing onto their own horses’ backs and chasing the dust of a thundering wagon setting a blistering pace. In sum, there is nothing simple about this sport. It defies any reduction to a mere horse race. It is instead a distillation of skill, experience, nerve, risk, speed, and manoeuvrability.

Historically, chuckwagon racing was less sport than diversion. Chuckwagons were the movable kitchens that centred rangeland 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. They gathered some sixty thousand cattle over several weeks from a huge territory. The men would start as early as 3:00 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 base. 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 in 1866 by adapting a surplus Civil War army wagon to supply cooks and workers at roundup time. The so-called 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.” 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, with 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. A toolbox and a water-barrel, with a long canvas tarp drawn over top, completed the travelling kitchen. The wagon also carried harness, 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.” Chuckwagons were used from the 1860s to the 1900s. And of course, despite providing elemental necessities, the wagons and their drivers contributed to the roistering stories of the increasingly mythopoeic West.

The idea of races between these wagons blossomed slowly. All moving vehicles archetypically suggest the possibility 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 and at the track level is largely based on visuals or vernacular knowledge, with predictable loyalties. And the wagons 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 200,000 people watch the chuckwagon races at the track, and hundreds of thousands more watch them on television every night.

But that is merely the human element. The true stars of the races are the horses, and more and more, horses are celebrated as the premier athletes of the event. In 2013, the Stampede launched the Equine Outfit of Excellence program, awards honouring the top six horses participating in the Rangeland Derby. The six awards recognize the positions of right leader, left leader, right wheeler, left wheeler, and two outstanding outriding horses. Points accumulate over the first eight nights of racing and are measured not only by standings but also through microchip technology implemented by the Fitness to Compete program. That program arose out of the intensity of demands that the sport be “controlled.” A microchip is implanted in every horse competing in the Rangeland Derby, allowing veterinarians to monitor performance and to evaluate their health and stress levels. Over time, the rules have become increasingly precise: horses are inspected by veterinarians on arrival at the track, drivers must submit detailed inventories of horses, pre- and post-race inspections occur every day, and all horses are prescribed mandatory rest days.7 They are treated, in human terms, like royalty.

So how did those ancient horse races arrive in the outpost of the West, Calgary, Alberta, and the Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth? Early Stampede 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.” 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, 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. 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 whisky, 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.” Other races were spurred by chuckwagons eager to reach ranch house or saloon, with 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 run collectively by several owners from a district: 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. Six
wagons (there were supposed to be two others, but they either threw in with the others or withdrew) constituted 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 much modified, and now many more strictures 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 half a mile. 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 in it. “First smoke decides winner,” stated that initial contest. 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.” The winner overall was long-time Yukon stagecoach driver Bill Somners, in charge of the Mosquito Creek rig owned by Riley, Cross, Drumheller, and MacLeary. Somners’s outriders, Dan Fraser, Gus Sonnie, Laurel Millar, and Bill Livingstone, were familiar names in the ranching circuit. 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, 14 July 1923. The first ever professional chuckwagon races signalled the launch of a most unusual sport. Spectators loved it, and Weadick knew he had a crowd pleaser.

From those rather rude beginnings, the “chucks” have gotten faster, more exciting, and less forgiving. Changes were implemented quickly. In the interests of time, the requirements that the team be unhooked, the tent fly stretched, and the campfire started were dropped in 1925, but gestural elements of those actions remain, although the wagons are streamlined and the equipment is engineered for safety. For example, the stove, originally a heavy ranch stove, was replaced by a metal
replica, then a wooden one, and now a rubber imitation (and like the barrels, collapsible), the last remaining echo of the wagons as cooking sites. Until 2011, outriders tossed a tarp and tent poles into the back, but those details were erased with the reduction in the number of outriders. As the years rolled along, rules proliferated. The teams tried to improve speed by lightening their load, and smaller, lighter wagons and faster horses appeared immediately. The fastest track time in 1923 was two minutes and fifty 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 one minute and fifty-two seconds. And to balance the inequity of distance, the barrels were repositioned in 1925, with the starting positions fanned out in front of the grandstand. 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. The unruly game was becoming a sport.

That transformation was effected by a combination of fast, carefully selected horses and strong, skilful men—and yes, they are all men. Wagon racing 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, feeding, watering, and caring for horses. The drivers appear to love risk and to embrace speed and danger without much regard for peril or bodily damage. And this is a sport where age and experience are greater assets than youth; drivers can stay in the game until their sixties, and horses have been known to compete for more than fifteen years.

How does a driver start or train? It helps if he has chuckwagon ancestry, belonging to those families who have driven outfits for generation after generation. Sutherland, Bensmiller, Glass, Vigen, Dorchester, Cosgrave, Walgenbach, Nevada, Willard, Knight, and Lauder are names that ring with their own chuckwagon genealogy and glamour, and many of the competitors are related to one another. In 2013, among the drivers were “five father/son combinations, three sets of brothers, five sets of cousins, and two drivers with sons-in-law.” That familial kinship appears to be a requirement for competitors. Most important of all, 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. As an intergenerational sport, drivers are mentored by fathers, grandfathers, and other drivers—Kelly Sutherland often cites Ralph Vigen—or they begin as outriders, a training ground that offers on-the-ground experience and a real test of toughness.

The work of the outriders may be unclear to spectators, but they are indispensable to racing and its outcome, and an outrider can make the difference between
winning and losing. When tent pegs and flies were still thrown into the back of the wagon, the peg man closest to the barrel had to ensure that his horse didn’t back into that barrel. Now that the tent pegs have been eliminated, the stove man has more room to do his job and to mount his horse. The outrider holding the lead horses at the start has to be agile enough to let go of the reins and to scramble out of the way when the klaxon sounds, simultaneously leaping onto his own horse, negotiating the figure eight around the barrels, and following the race to cross the finish line within a prescribed 150 feet of his wagon team. 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 Mark Sutherland’s Grande Prairie accident, outriders are essential to the safety and cohesion of the race, and they can make or break its outcome. And they are subject to exacting rules. 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, and cannot force an injured horse or finish ahead of the wagon team. Every one of these regulations target infractions that will be penalized. And outriders have to work in tandem with the driver, reading one another’s body language like semaphore.

The wagons and drivers also 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 violations abound. Wagons that start ahead of the horn or line up ahead of the barrel are sanctioned with added seconds. 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 such specifications 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 effect, 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 and consequently euthanized. In 1986, one chuckwagon cut off another, leading to a spectacular pile-up and claiming the lives of six horses. A crash during the 2007 Calgary Stampede that killed three horses and hospitalized a driver led officials to review the safety of the
sport and to implement changes. Between 1986 and 2015, approximately sixty-five horses have died in the chuckwagon races. 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 with increasing zeal that the sport is vicious to horses. It is true that the races are dangerous. Almost every year, at least one chuckwagon horse dies. There is continued 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 powerful 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 culled from the racetrack face certain euthanasia and that becoming chuckwagon horses gives them a second lease on life. Glen 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.”

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 intelligence. 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 partnership. And preparing to race 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 prolonged life, others purchased at the source. 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 (between the Stampede, the World Professional Chuckwagon Association
circuit, and the Canadian Professional Chuckwagon Association circuit, 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 between different rodeos as a major entourage, requiring
a wagon, feed, tack, and horses. The gypsy energy of travelling from event to event,
hauling horses in semi-trailers and living in motorhomes beside barns and corrals,
requires a 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—or worse, disaster.

Despite its difficulty and mysterious chaos, its ineffable cachet, chuckwagon
racing is not a well-sponsored sport and is definitely not internationally known.
Relatively free of commercial inflection, except for the sponsorship of those com-
panies that buy advertising rights to a wagon tarp, the culture has developed with-
out the extreme monetary pressure and rewards that accrue to other professional
athletes. This distinctive activity is flavoured by domesticity, related partly to the
powerful family connections that seem essential and partly 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
points out, “The chuckwagon cowboy personifies the co-operative spirit of Western
Canada.” Such cowboys, he argues, “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.”

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 competitive rodeo cowboy. More than anything else, chuckwagon racing requires a steady and observant horse-person and the patience of practice, practice, and practice.

Still, 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 the ranch on his wagon. In 1956, Lloyd Nelson was the last driver to win while driving a wagon under his own name. 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 2012, the Stampede's centennial year, a total amount of $4,015,000 was bid on the thirty-six drivers and their canvasses. The highest bid went to “the King,” Kelly Sutherland, whose canvas sold for $300,000. Those who purchase chuckwagon tarps share a unique experience, which goes far beyond the canvas as marketing tool. The social and philanthropic aspect of advertising and the wagon drivers’ public appearances and general participation in Stampede celebrations together weave a strange tapestry of rivalry 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, does not know how to 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 has accrued for almost a century, yet 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 “Sundown” 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. Various stories credit him with starting the downtown pancake breakfasts served from the back of the wagons. Joe Carbury, the voice of the Rangeland Derby from the 1960s until he retired in 2008, announced the races for more than forty years, and his trademark cry, “They’re Offffff,” became 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 an incredible twelve 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 they are eternal in terms of their own playful dodges with mortality.

Ultimately, 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 your card’s played, you’re dead.’ After that I was never nervous.” Such fatalism might belong to the world of unpredictability, but it also speaks to an acknowledgement of danger as a companion to the adrenaline of risk. That calm acceptance might have been what enabled young Mark Sutherland to hold on to the reach of his runaway wagon all the way around the track.

What, then, to conclude about this unique extravaganza, played out as part of the Calgary Stampede and many different rodeos in the West, an event powerfully rooted to place (not just Calgary, but the greater West) and an iconic ethos (ranching and riding). Is chuckwagon racing truly an equestrian sport, or is it some barbaric throwback tournament grandstanding human dominance over animals? Archaic in its origins, shyly naive in its development, accidental and local rather than part of the international jockeying that accompanies soccer or basketball, wagon racing is unique in every aspect of its risk and its achievement. It is a living anachronism, and yet indisputably performative, exciting, and at its best, beautiful. Most of all, every event articulates a hope that out of the complicated danger of these competitions will come a persuasive story of man and horse, both athletes and both competitors. This legend might indeed hark back to the ancient chariot races, but it also echoes a yearning to witness and experience the long-lived haunting of a western tradition.

NOTES

1 Quoted in “Driver Survives ‘Slide’ of His Life,” Calgary Herald, 3 June 2006 (ellipses in the original).
5 Mikkelsen, Never Holler Whoa, 3.
8 Belanger, Half Mile of Hell, 6.
9 Quoted in Mikkelsen, Never Holler Whoa, 4.
10 Belanger, Half Mile of Hell, 8.
11 Ibid., 11.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 14.
14 Ibid., 43.
15 Evening Show Program, Calgary Stampede 2013, 26.
16 Mikkelsen, Never Holler Whoa, 26.
18 For 1986 to 2012, see “Vancouver Humane Society—List of Stampede Animal Deaths Since 1986,” CTV News (Calgary), 11 July 2013. Since then, six more have died: one in 2013, another in 2014, and four in 2015.
19 Quoted in Mikkelsen, Never Holler Whoa, 82.
20 Ibid., 19.
21 Glen Mikkelsen, “Greasing the Wheels,” in Grandstand Souvenir Program (Calgary: Calgary Stampede, 2004), 19.
22 Joan Dixon and Tracey Read, Celebrating the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede: The Story of the Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth (Canmore, AB: Altitude, 2005), 101.
23 Quoted in Mikkelsen, Never Holler Whoa, 147.