

Rodeo: Jackson Hole

The rodeo grounds in Jackson Hole, Wyoming are compact. There is a grandstand and bleachers for a couple thousand people. Like the circus, rodeo is family entertainment. Children and sucklings are standard. Teenagers in skin tight jeans are looking each other over. Hawkers sell pop corn, hot dogs, tacos, sodas, beer. They sell leather belts and sandals, silver buckles and balloons, toy guns and holsters. Large women drive up in campers, set up shop and sell patchwork quilts and Virgin Mary kewpie dolls.

The sun sinks and the stadium lights come on. The public address system is energized and a Master of the Rodeo takes over at the mike. He is the metro-
nome of the evening; the pace depends more upon him than on the steers. He is jovial, he is the Spirit of Good Fun. He tells us a joke about horses, so old that

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Odysseus must have brought it back from Calypso's island.

Tonight's performance is a combination of professional rodeo and fancy riding put on by the local riding club. A blast of electronic trumpets! The show is about to begin! A blonde equestrienne in full western rig rides in on a white horse with silver trappings. She crosses the grounds briskly and comes smartly to a halt at the exact center of the grandstand which is where we are sitting.

The national anthem is played. The audience rises, and there is some soggy singing. The white horse selects this exact moment to lift its tail and divest itself of several pails of oats. I am embarrassed. I am an Easterner. I know something of the ways of carburetors and spark plugs but nothing of the ways of horses. Nothing daunted, the rider sits at rigid, military attention during the Star Spangled Banner and at its conclusion rides off briskly.

An inauspicious introduction, thought I, to the world of rodeo. Luckily, matters improved. A dozen young boys and girls ride into the arena and put their mounts through a variety of exercises involving ribbons and flags. At the conclusion, the main business of the

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rodeo starts. The acts are performed by hard bitten professionals who earn their living by competing against each other from rodeo to rodeo. Bronco busting. Riding on steers, Wrestling with steers. Calf roping.

The steer riding can be frightening. A steer is released from a pen with a rider on top. The animal bucks with mighty heaves. It rushes across the arena madly. The rider is skillful and manages to stay on. The animal runs up to the arena wall almost, throwing the rider against the wall. How the rider manages to get out of this with little more than a sore shoulder is a miracle. There are medics on the grounds; occasionally the rider is not so lucky.

The local riding club is now back. There are barrel races and relay races and jumping though flaming hoops. Then the intermission. Time to stretch and time to get another beer and a bag of potato chips. But back for the intermission High Jinks.

A rodeo clown is putting on an act. He pretends to be a frightened, drunken amateur. He puts on a show with a trained horse and a calf. Waves of laughter from the audience. A rodeo magician with a trained dog comes on. He vanishes the dog from the back of a horse.

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Act Two. More bronco busting. More races. One is becoming a bit saturated. A few people are leaving. The electronic fanfare blasts out again. The piece de resistance, left to the last. The hardest, most dangerous act in the whole of rodeo: bull riding. The animals are huge, wild and onery. No rider, at least at this performance, lasts. In the end, all are defeated, and the crowd, mildly pro-bull, is satisfied. The realities of the world are reasserted. In the end, all are defeated.

The last joke was told by the Rodeo Master. The last balloon was released into the air by tired kids. The arena lights are dimmed, and the crowd takes to its Pintos and Mustangs and for five minutes bucks the traffic.