

LET 'ER BUCK



James Phifer Photo

Pendleton Home of the Fall Grass Classic

From the cannon blast that kicks off each afternoon's performance to the Indian Relay Races and the champs' victory laps around the track that surrounds the high school football-field arena, you never quite know what's going to happen next at the Pendleton Round-Up. "Let 'er Buck" is the slogan of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association's reigning Large Outdoor Rodeo of the Year, and even with ice nails holding on the horseshoes of the timed-event horses—that basically serve as cleats—there are thrills, chills and plenty of spills at both ends of the arena at Pendleton.

I'm really not sure how you get more contestant- or fan-friendly than this one, and that humble attitude of gratitude starts with the committee checkbook. Inspired by that buckle presented to the Pendleton Round-Up in 2015, the directors decided to add another \$5,000 to each event and up the ante by \$45,000. The total 2016 Pendleton payoff was a pretty grand \$516,041.

"All of the directors had to take pencils back to their budgets to prioritize giving the contestants a raise," one of my committeeman friends Randy Thomas told me. Randy and his wife, Tiffany, had a bunch of us out-of-towners—announcers, stock contractors, music directors and even media nerds—to their house for a barbecue one night. Another herd of us, including sponsors, stock contractors and bullfighters, was hauled to the outskirts of town for a fancy feast one evening by longtime committeeman and Rodeo Sports Update host Butch Thurman.

Then there was the traditional Round-Up night spent on the deck of Ron and Rayanne Currin's home with one of the legendary first families of the Pendleton Round-Up. And the one where we sat around a campfire over at Pickup Man Camp, where guitars come out when the sun goes down and all the songs are real-deal Western originals. The only unhappy party after all that Pendleton hospitality was our waistlines.

One of the funniest songs was requested by PRCA stock contractor Jim Korkow. I witnessed a random act of Korkow kindness while walking up behind him one day at the ticket booth out front. An elderly woman had ridden her bike to the Round-Up grounds to buy tickets for the performance later that day and was \$18 short. Korkow heard that from the next window over, handed her a \$20 bill and told her to enjoy the show. Korkow's a character, but a soft-centered, big-hearted one who lives by the Cowboy Code.





Dan Hubbell Photo

Classic cowboy Cody DeMoss won the opening round with 87.5 points wearing Casey Tibbs purple.

This was the 106th edition of the fall classic they call the Pendleton Round-Up, and it fittingly kicked off with the Pendleton Round-Up Hall of Fame and Happy Canyon Induction Banquet on the eve of the first slack. A couple of dear old friends—all-around timed-eventer extraordinaire J.D. Yates and ProRodeo Hall of Famer Doug Corey—along with Doug's late and wonderful wife and first-ever woman Round-Up "committeeman," Heather, Chief Bill Burke and Round-Up saddle horse standout Smokey made up this year's Class of 2016. "I wear a buckle with bucking horses on it every day," J.D. said of his first one dated 1991. "Pendleton is a special place to me."

If you want to talk about an all-around hand, longtime committeeman Dr. Doug's a past director and president of both the Pendleton Round-Up and Happy Canyon, which celebrated its centennial 100th birthday in 2016. He's also a charge-leading kingpin and pioneer on the livestock welfare front in the cowboy sport. We cheered them all on after feasting on prime rib and salmon. Naturally, both the berry and peach cobbler had to be tried—and finished.

There's no sitting tight on the status quo in Pendleton, where the bar keeps getting raised in every possible area of production.

"When we came home from Las Vegas last December, Round-Up President Bill Levy said, 'Let's apply one question to every facet of our planning: What can we do to make it better?'" Thomas said.

Just in time for the 100th annual Round-Up in 2010, they completed a major stadium upgrade that included comfortable, shaded seats, dining and shopping at the West end of the arena. This year, the committee introduced the 1910 Room—a lavish white tent located trackside at the end of the arena, where a celebrity chef prepared a five-course meal for tables of people or parties of one who wanted to treat themselves to a royal VIP rodeo experience. Round-Up ticket sales have been "extraordinary," and have not backslid since the centennial, which is common.

There's nothing common about the Pendleton Round-Up, and there's something for everyone. I'm kind of a milk-and-cookies girl myself, but those wanting to let their hair all the way down have a blast cramming into the Pendleton Whisky tasting room that's best known as the Let'er Buck Room on the backside of the main grandstand.

Each cowboy entered received a \$10 food voucher "to have lunch on us" anywhere on the grounds. Most of the food vendors on the Round-Up

grounds are run by local non-profits, and about \$200,000 is raised on the grounds each year for community non-profits.

I was amazed to see cowboys feeding their horses—which they kept in free pens—from the Pendleton Round-Up-provided haystack. While out at the barn, I met Pendleton Arena Director Dave O'Neill, and he told me Pendleton provides 342 contestant horse pens free of charge, and that contestants and stock contractors went through 137 tons of free hay during Round-Up week in 2016.

There were countless cowboy highlight reel moments that really stood out again this year. The Bronc Riding Wright Dynasty from Milford, Utah, left another mark, as Jesse picked up a Pendleton buckle of his own to match Cody's from 2010, twin Jake's dated 2013 and the one Spencer won in 2015. Jesse was 170.5 points on two rides, and placed second in both rounds.

The guy who grabbed my attention and heart more than once during this rodeo's run was Cody DeMoss, who catapulted his 2016 campaign back into contention by winning Ellensburg (Wash.) over Labor Day Weekend and finishing a close second at Pendleton. When I mentioned I'd run out of time to grab a bite before the rodeo one day, he ran and grabbed me a couple pieces of cold pizza out of the cowboy locker room. When announcer Wayne Brooks

announced the final tally at the start of Cody's long walk back across the grass to the bucking chutes after his short-round ride, and that he'd come up half a point short of the title, he broke into hand-clapping applause for Jesse without pause.

Cody's a cowboy throwback, and it's no coincidence that I've run into him up the hill at the old Army barracks that late and legendary saddle-making brothers Duff and Bill Severe bought back in the day, which served as a bunkhouse to the likes of the legendary Casey Tibbs, who dubbed it Hotel de Cowpunch after returning from an exhibition rodeo in France and wanting to show his cowboy friends he'd learned the language over there.

Cody won the opening round at Pendleton with 87.5 big ones aboard Korkow's Duck Butter, and he did it in a purple shirt Casey would have been proud of. Hotel de Cowpunch, where cowboys camp in bedrolls, is still open to the likes of Cody by Bill's son, Randy, who this year made every Round-Up trophy saddle with his own two hands. I still have a set of rawhide dummy horns Bill Severe gave me the first time I went to see him and Duff, and I treasure them.



Dan Hubbell Photo

Guy Allen arrived at Pendleton ranked 15th in the world, and left town likely headed to his 33rd NFSR.

BACKSTAGE PASS

Barrel racer Stevi Hillman mastered the “Green Mile”—the longest cloverleaf pattern in rodeo and the only one with a high school football field square in the middle of it—aboard Martini, which is the same 5-year-old mare that won her the 2016 Wrangler Champions Challenge in Pueblo, Colo. Hillman and Martini were 29.64 and 29.72 seconds in the two respective rounds, and won the two-run average in 59.36. You don’t hear times like that everyday—or anywhere else—but you will see Hillman at her first Finals in December.

There were great storylines galore, complete with bubble-boy drama, in every event. One of my personal favorites was the one that played out in the steer roping, Guy “The Legend” Allen—ProRodeo Hall of Famer, owner of 18 gold buckles and a 2002 Pendleton Round-Up Hall of Famer—entered the week ranked 15th in the world, and one of the tryingest, toughest-per-pound cowboys of all time, Brent Lewis, was 17th.

I watched Guy track down a runner way off down there, going so fast on that grass that most guys would have pulled up and nobody would have thought less of them to get through the first round. There was a week to go in this regular season at press time, and if Guy gets to his 33rd Clem McSpadden National Finals Steer Roping, it’s because he deserves it. Brent won the first two rounds, and came back high man in the short round, with the Legend next in line. Third was 37-year-old Ryan Rochlitz of Minatare, Neb., who’s primarily a Badlands Circuit cowboy.

I’d noticed Rochlitz all week, in part because his horse would stop and graze on the grass while he was warming him up and even during his rodeo runs, and it kind of cracked me up. Rochlitz is the son of PRCA secretary and timer Jackie Higlin, who was secretaring the rodeo in Sioux Falls, S.D., the same time her son was winning Pendleton. It let the air out of all of us when Brent’s last steer checked off and he missed him, and Guy’s last one jumped up. But it was hard not to be happy for Rochlitz, who’s lived to learn all about perspective on such things after having a heart transplant at 18.

Rochlitz has been working on his horse herd, so only entered about 10 rodeos this year. “But Pendleton’s just one of those you don’t want to miss,” said Rochlitz, who sells real estate during the week. “Pendleton and Cheyenne are 1 and 1A for me. Pendleton’s my ultimate favorite. I like the setup, coming down off that hill and roping on the grass. It’s just a cowboy rodeo.

“I sure didn’t think we were going to catch Brent with him having a six-second lead. Even with me winning the round, he still had 18.8 to win it. What happened to him has happened to all of us. That steer threw him a dirty, and it just popped off. It was an amazing feeling to win Pendleton. I’m not sure it’s really sunk in yet.”

Rochlitz rode a horse he bought from Harold Bumgardner, Hiram. “The steers were bigger this year, and he’s pretty strong and stays strong,” said Rochlitz, who’s roped his way to being a regular at the National Circuit Finals Steer Roping. “And he’s pretty sure-footed, so he was good on the grass.”

When the teenage sports standout’s heart swelled to twice its normal size due to Idiopathic Cardiomyopathy, and right before it failed for the last time, Rochlitz received the gift of a lifetime from a family who’d lost their son to a tragic motorcycle accident. That was 19 years ago on Oct. 5.



James Phifer Photo

Ryan Rochlitz has cleared more obstacles in life than any other Pendleton champ, and learned all about perspective after having a heart transplant at 18.

“This is one of rodeo’s iconic buckles,” he said. “You can spot a Pendleton buckle from across the room.”

Every trip to Pendleton is packed with memorable moments. How awesome to find time for coffee and oatmeal in the hotel lobby before the first day of slack with lifelong friends Jim and Terry Wheatley. Jim’s an NFR header and dad to NFR header Wade. Terry answers to Mom and Nana, is an entrepreneurial rock star in the wine industry and the cancer-surviving founder of Tough Enough to Wear Pink, which to date has raised more than \$24 million to fight this country’s most dreaded disease. Terry’s goal is to raise \$50 million by the 20th TETWP anniversary in 2024. I know and respect Terry Wheatley, and when she makes a mission of something she always finds a way to get it done.

How fun to see cowboy stock contractor Ike Sankey compete in the steer roping short round—his first Pendleton short round since riding bucking horses there in 1979.

How heartwarming to see the beautiful wife, Annie, and twin girls, Justine and Julia, of my late, cool cowboy friend from college at Cal Poly, Clayton Livingston, who lived in Pendleton, right before the cannon blast of the closing round.

How great to see a Pendleton tie-down roping shot of another late fellow Mustang from the Great Northwest, 1988 Pendleton Round-Up All-Around Champ Mike Currin, on the wall of the renowned Cimmiyotti’s when we went downtown for a steak when the 2016 Pendleton Round-Up was in the books.

Thanks for the good times and great memories, Pendleton. To many more... 🌵



James Phifer Photo

Brent Lewis won the first two steer roping rounds at Pendleton and defines “cowboy.”