

Rodeo 101

Definitions of Rodeo Events



Bareback Riding

Bareback bronc riding consistently produces some of the wildest action in the sport. It is the most physically demanding of all the rodeo events, and the first event to compete at most rodeos. Cowboys ride rough horses (*roughstock*) without the benefit of saddle or rein.

They ride “bareback” on the horse and use a leather rigging, which looks like a heavy piece of leather with a suitcase handle. The cowboys ride one-handed and cannot touch themselves or the horse with their free hand. A bareback rider begins his ride with his feet placed above the break of the horse’s shoulder. If the cowboy’s feet are not in the correct position when the horse hits the ground on its first jump out of the chute, the cowboy has failed to “mark out” the horse properly and is disqualified. The cowboy spurs the horse from shoulder to rigging, in a frantic style trying to make a qualified ride of 8 seconds. Once the ride is completed, *pick-up men*¹ swoop in to “pick up” the rider and set him safely on the ground.



Cowboys are judged on their control and spurring technique, and the horses are judged on their power, speed, and agility. A good score in the bareback riding is in the mid 80's.

Cowboys competing in bareback take a lot of punishment on their arm, neck, and back due to the power and quickness of the bareback horses.

Steer Wrestling

Steer wrestling, also known as *bulldogging* is the quickest of the rodeo events. It requires strength, speed, and timing, and understanding the principles of leverage. Many of steer wrestlers are large, hefty cowboys which is why this event is sometimes called the big man’s event. Steer wrestling is a *timed event*, and cowboys compete against each other and the clock.



¹ Pick up men are cowboys who work the roughstock events. They manage the horses and bulls and rescue bronc and bareback riders from their horses after they make a ride. They also release the flank strap on horses after their work is done.

Bulldoggers start out *in the box*² just like the tie-down and team ropers. A *barrier*³ is placed across the box and the steer is loaded into the roping chute. As soon as the cowboy nods his head the steer is released and he charges after it on his horse. The steer wrestler catches up to the steer as quickly as possible and then leans over, jumps off of his horse and grabs the steer by its head. The bulldogger then plants his feet and tosses the steer onto its side, thereby stopping the clock.

Steer wrestlers require the use of a *hazer*⁴ to keep the steer running straight and from turning away from them.

A winning time is usually between 3 to 4 seconds, but these big boys keep getting faster and faster. *Breaking the barrier* in the steer wrestling results in a 10 second penalty which effectively puts you out of the money.

Team Roping

Team roping is the only team event in rodeo. Like tie-down roping and saddle bronc riding, team roping grew out of the ranch chores of the past. Larger cattle would have to be immobilized for branding and doctoring by two ropers due to their strength and size. Today, team roping is a *timed event* that relies on the cooperation and skill of the cowboys and their horses.



The two cowboys involved in team roping have unique goals. The first, known as the *header*, does just what the name implies and ropes the head of the cattle. The other cowboy, known as the *heeler*, ropes the heels or legs.

As with the other timed events, the team ropers start from the box.

The header is the first out trying to rope the head as quickly as possible without breaking the barrier. Once the catch is made the header *dallies*⁵ and turns the steer left. This opens up the way for the heeler to work his magic and rope the legs. The clock is stopped when there is no slack in both ropes and the horses face each other.

² The box or roping chutes is a term used to describe a three sided fenced area at one end of a rodeo arena; usually opposite the bucking chutes. This is where calves and steers are loaded into for the steer wrestling, tie-down and team roping events. The “box” is used in conjunction with the barrier.

³ The barrier is a breakaway rope that is pulled across the roping chutes. It is designed to give the steer or calf a head start out into the arena making the competition more difficult. Breaking the barrier (breaking the rope or leaving too early) results in a penalty added to the overall time of the competitor.

⁴ Hazer is a term used in the steer wrestling. A hazer is a mounted cowboy who rides along the right hand side of the steer keeping it running in a straight line. This makes the steer wrestler’s job easier when jumping from his horse.

⁵ Anglicized version of the Spanish dar la vuelta, which means to go around or turn over. The term to dally as used in rodeo is the action of wrapping a lasso around a saddle horn, after a calf or steer has been roped.

If the barrier is broken a 10 second penalty is added to the time. Also, if the heeler manages to catch only one leg, then a 5 second penalty is added. In addition to these penalties there are only 3 legal catches that the header can make. These are:

- both horns
- one horn and the head
- the neck

Team roping is great event to watch due to the amazing coordination and cooperation of all the competitors. Team members must work well with each other and with their horses respectively. It's also an extremely fun event to try out of you are so inclined.

Saddle Bronc

This event is sometimes referred to as the “classic” event of rodeo because it grew naturally out of ranch cowboys breaking wild broncos to use as working cow horses.

Modern saddle bronc riding is much the same with only a few modifications, mainly in equipment. Saddle Bronc saddles are lightweight and have no saddle horn. Along with the bronc saddle the cowboys use a long thick rein, known as a hack rein, attached to a halter on the horses head. In contrast to bareback and bull riding, saddle bronc riding relies less on strength and more on timing, finesse and skill. It is a very hard event to master.



As with bareback riding, the *mark out* rule is in effect. The cowboy spurs from the front of the horse, back to the skirt of the saddle in an arcing motion. The cowboy must constantly lift on the hack rein to keep his seat in the saddle.

Scoring is the same as in all the *roughstock*⁶ events with 1-25 points given to the cowboy and 1-25 points for the animal by each of the two judges. Cowboys are judged on control, spur motion, and timing. Saddle broncs are judged on their bucking ability. A good score in the saddle bronc riding is in the high 80's.

Saddle bronc and bareback riders dismount with the help of a pick-up man who rides up on a horse and helps them to the ground. Saddle bronc riding often appears effortless because of the enormous skill of the cowboys competing in the event.

⁶ These are the wild, adrenaline filled events of rodeo. The dangerous nature of these events makes them extremely exciting to watch. Competitors compete in rodeo performances against the other cowboys or cowgirls entered in each specific event. Horses and bulls are normally bucked-out only once per day and each time that a competitor rides is called a go-round. Some rodeos have multiple performances (over several days) and riders get a chance ride more than once. In this instance prizes are given out for each go-round (known as day-money) and also for the over-all prize (or the average).

Tie-Down Roping

Tie-down roping, formerly known as *calf roping* is the classic old west ranch chore. It is now one of the most competitive of rodeo events. Tie-down ropers compete against each other and the clock for the prize money.



Like the steer wrestlers and team ropers, tie-down ropers start in the box ready to compete. The calf is released and the cowboy must rope it as quickly as possible. As soon as a catch is made the cowboy dismounts, sprints to the calf and tosses it on its side, which is called *flanking*. With a small rope known as a *pigging string*, usually held in the cowboy's teeth, any three of the calf's legs are tied securely. Time stops when the cowboy throws up his hands.

After the tie, the roper remounts his horse, puts slack in his rope and waits 6 seconds for the calf to struggle free. If it does, the cowboy receives a no time and is effectively disqualified from the round. If the calf remains tied the cowboy receives his time. As in the other *timed events*, if the roper breaks the barrier he receives a 10 second penalty added to his time.

Tie-down roping requires timing, speed, agility, and strength. It also requires a highly trained horse. Horses in the tie-down roping play a major role in the success of the competitor. Horses are taught to know when to start walking backward thereby keeping the rope taught and allowing the cowboy to do their work on the other end. It is truly amazing to watch as cowboy and horse compete together in this modern sporting event.

Barrel Racing

Barrel racing is a *timed rodeo event*, where the fastest time is what matters most. Cowgirls compete in the arena against each other and the clock.

Barrel racing is about cooperation between horse and rider. Because of the competition and money involved, finding a good horse is very important to the competitors. A top of the line barrel horse can cost up to \$50,000.



For the barrel racing event, the arena is cleared and three barrels are set up at different marked locations. The riders then enter the arena at full speed, quickly rounding each barrel in a cloverleaf pattern and then exiting where they entered. A stopwatch or timer is used registering down to a hundredth of a second.

Speed is what it is all about in this event. The riders steer their horses as close as they can to the barrels trying to shave precious seconds off the clock.

For each barrel they knock over (which happens sometimes) a 5 second penalty is assessed to their total time. Leaving the barrels standing and ripping through the course is every barrel racers goal.

Thirteen to 14 seconds is generally a winning time in this event, but this will vary according to the size of the arena, as all rodeo arenas are not created equal.

Bull Riding

Bull Riding is the most recognized and popular of all the rodeo events. It is also the most dangerous. An often quoted saying about bull riding is “it’s not if you get hurt, it’s when.” Every bull rider can attest to the truth of that saying.

As with bareback riding, and saddle bronc, bull riders ride with one hand and cannot touch themselves or their bull with the free hand. Doing so results in a “no score.”



Scoring is the same as in the other *roughstock events*. Two judges give 1-25 points for the cowboy’s performance and 1-25 points for the animal’s performance with 100 points being the maximum, and is considered a perfect ride.

To ride, bull riders use a *bullrope* and *rosin*. The bullrope is a thickly braided rope with a cowbell attached. The cowbell acts as a weight, allowing the rope to safely fall off the bull when the ride is over. The rosin is a sticky substance that increases the grip on their ropes. Bull riders wrap their bullrope around the bull and use the remainder to wrap around their hand tightly, trying to secure themselves to the bull.

Unlike the horse events, there is no mark out in bull riding. Cowboys can spur for extra points, but just staying on the bull for 8 seconds is the main priority. After the ride, bull riders are aided by *bullfighters* or *rodeo clowns* and *barrelmen* who distract the bull, allowing the cowboys to escape safely. A good score in the bull riding is in the 90's. There has been one perfect score of 100 in the PRCA.

Bull riding requires balance, flexibility, coordination, and courage. Facing down a two-thousand pound bull takes as much mental preparation as it does physical ability. Bull riding has taken on a life of its own with the *Professional Bull Riders* (PBR) tour, and its popularity shows no signs of slowing down.

Breakaway Roping

Breakaway roping is a rodeo event that features a calf and one mounted cowgirl. The calves are moved through narrow pathways leading to a chute with spring-loaded doors. A 10-foot rope is fastened around the calf's neck which is used to ensure that the calf gets a head start. On one side of the chute will be the breakaway roper who will attempt to rope the calf.



The breakaway roper is behind a taut rope fastened with an easily broken string which is fastened to the rope on the calf. When the roper is ready she calls for the calf and the chute man trips a lever opening the doors. The suddenly freed calf breaks out running. When the calf reaches the end of his rope, it pops off and simultaneously releases the barrier for the roper. The roper must throw her rope in a loop around the calf's neck.

Once the rope is around the calf's neck, the roper signals the horse to stop suddenly. The rope is tied to the saddle horn with a string. When the calf hits the end of the rope, the rope is pulled taut and the string breaks. The breaking of the string marks the end of the run. The fastest run wins.

Breakaway roping is usually seen in junior and senior high school rodeos, and college rodeos. Some amateur rodeos also have breakaway roping as part of their event line-up.

Goat Tying

Goat tying is a fast-paced rodeo event that is typically seen in junior high school, high school and college rodeos. The object is to race to the end of the rodeo arena to where a goat is staked out on a 10' rope (The distance from the starting line to the stake is usually 100 feet or so.). Contestants dismount their horse while it is sliding to a stop or running, and race to the staked-out goat, which must be flipped to its side, in order to tie together three of its legs with a leather, nylon or cotton rope (braided or unbraided with an approximate length of three feet.) If a goat is down when the roper reaches it, the goat must be elevated by the roper so that at least three legs extend directly underneath before being thrown. Finally, contestants signal with their hands to indicate the end of their run. The judge waits six seconds to determine that the goat is securely tied. If the goat becomes untied during this period, contestant will receive a 'no-time'.

