

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Tracing the origins of rodeo
- » Understanding the official main events
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Chapter 1

Rodeo 101

Rodeo, derived from working ranch tasks and skills, is the marriage of the legacy of the American West and good ol' fashioned competition. Rodeo takes more than skill; it takes courage, grit, and — frankly — a loose screw or two.

Rodeo is its own culture. It's feast or famine. It's man versus beast. You're away from home the entire year, chasing white lines and gold buckles. It's unrelenting, dangerous, and the ride of a lifetime. This chapter explains the important history of rodeo that shaped the modern sport and provides a basic explanation of the modern rodeo format so that you can follow along while you get acquainted with the world of rodeo.

Understanding Rodeo's Western Roots

Rodeo in its current format and purpose began to take shape in the 1800s, but its roots were planted even earlier. Spanish settlers came to America and started ranching cattle in what is now California. They moved cattle from the ship ports off the West Coast and in the Gulf, settling ranches all along the American Southwest. Spanish *vaqueros*, meaning cowboys, became American cowboys while frontier territories expanded after the Civil War. The word *rodeo* in Spanish means

roundup, describing how ranchers gathered cattle by circling them up into a tight herd before mobilizing them.

Raising cattle largely occurred in mainly the Southern United States because of the length and dangers of cattle drives. It could take cowboys weeks or months to drive a herd from the Southwest to the Northwest, and driving them to the Northeast was unheard of at this point in time.

Cowboys faced treacherous conditions and had to plan for the seasons — if they were driving to Montana (or, really, anywhere north of Kansas), they had to beat the snow. The seasons therefore took winter and most of spring off the table. In the summer, the heat made it difficult to travel, and droughts made water scarce. Conditions could quickly turn dangerous for the cowboys, horses, and cattle alike. Fall was (and still is) the most common time for cowboys to move cattle.

Assuming the camp survived the elements and overcame the more common ailments of that century, including flus and fevers, they also had to outmaneuver thieves, called *cattle rustlers*, who tried to steal cattle and sell them for profit. And then they had to manage encounters with Native American tribes, some of whom were more peaceful with the cowboys than others.

Driving cattle across a state — much less a country — was a dangerous and difficult task, to say the least. But it was an essential job for the country's economy and for Southern ranchers to survive.

Evolving from ranch work to rodeo events

Rodeo events are all rooted in real-life skills that cowboys had to use (or still use) on a working ranch. Before they could drive cattle across state lines, cowboys had to ensure that they had their livestock properly trained and maintained:

- » **Riding broncs:** Cowboys had to break young horses and train them to ride, which is where rodeo gets its *broncs* (bucking horses).
- » **Roping:** Cowboys had to rope calves and tie them down to give necessary medication, or perform branding, castration, and so on. So, calf roping, steer roping, and team roping all come organically from the needs of a cattle ranch.
- » **Steer wrestling:** When a half-grown steer really made a run for it, you needed a good steer wrestler on your team to avoid losing that steer.
- » **Barrel racing:** Ranches breed their horses for strong, fast, agile bloodlines, and barrel racing horses helps provide proof that those genetic crosses are producing the best of the best.

Of course, the standard rodeo events of steer riding and bull riding don't necessarily fit into the skillsets of a working ranch cowboy (but they do tell you a little something about a cowboy's ego).



REMEMBER

At the end of the day, all modern rodeo sports likely trace back to one cowboy betting another that he can do something faster, better, bigger, or all of the above. It's the sport of guts and of glory, after all.

CATTLE DRIVES AND THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

The invention and expansion of the railroad resulted in cattle drives ranging all over the Southern United States to stockyard cities and major rail lines. By the 1850s, the United States had as many miles of rail line as the rest of the world combined.

The Northern territories had an increased demand for beef, and Texas had an oversupply of it after the Civil War. Cattle trade helped the Southern economy recover and drove a demand for more cattlemen, ranchers, and cowboys.

The Western industry was thriving — the railroad cut down on how far cattle drives had to go. Cowboys now needed to get cattle to the nearest stockyard city, rather than across the country. It was safer, shorter, simpler, and more profitable.

By the 1900s, major stockyards included Fort Worth, Texas; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Kansas City, Kansas; Chicago, Illinois; and Omaha, Nebraska. Business around the stockyard cities thrived because they drew clothiers, meat processors, shoemakers, home goods crafters, and more.

Eventually, the automotive industry diminished the use of railcars for livestock transportation. The increase of industrialization and decentralization of the meatpacking industry was the nail in the coffin for most major stockyard cities. The Kansas City Stockyards flooded after heavy rains in 1951 and never recovered. Today, the Fort Worth Stockyards are an active and thriving tourist destination, but they no longer house and transport livestock. The Oklahoma National Stockyards are the only remaining yards that have continuously operated for over a century and still serve as a functioning cattle market center.

Going to the Wild West shows

By the late 1800s, Wild West shows began touring the Eastern states that had less access to real ranching life. These shows gave audiences a dramatized version of what real American ranchers were doing in the states in the West. The cowboys rode horses, shot guns, staged bison hunts, reenacted scenes of Native American attacks on cowboy camps and cabins, and helped propagate the lore of the American frontier.

The most notable Wild West show was Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, founded by William "Buffalo Bill" F. Cody. It was one of the most influential Wild West shows in the country and even toured internationally toward the end of its multi-decade run. This show also produced some of rodeo's original cowgirls, such as Annie Oakley.

Another notable Wild West show that had an immense impact on rodeo was the 101 Ranch Real Wild West Show. This show featured famous rodeo performers, including Bill Pickett, a black cowboy who invented modern-day steer wrestling. Pickett was the first notable black rodeo cowboy, although he often had to enter rodeos as a Native American to be eligible to compete. Today, the Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo tours around the United States to educate people about the honorable contributions of black cowboys and cowgirls and to celebrate their legacies.

These Wild West shows grew immensely popular, and it was clear that Western entertainment had an audience. In true American fashion (and in the true nature of cowboys), the storyline shifted from folklore to competition, and the sport of rodeo was born.

Going from exhibition to sport

No one truly knows where the first rodeo took place — some argue that the late Wild West shows were as much a rodeo as anything else, and others claim that their local arena held the first true competitive rodeo outside of these Western spectacles. Early rodeos were unsanctioned, the events and entertainment varied between cities, and so little media existed in those days that no one can really prove an authentic original.

Historians do know that the modern rodeo is largely modeled after the Prescott Rodeo, held for the first time on July 4, 1888. Prescott Rodeo was the first rodeo on record with established competition rules, awarded prize money, charged admission for tickets, and featured many of the existing modern-day rodeo events.

Creating an American pastime

Rodeo, like many other American sports, shares an origin story with that of the country itself. Its roots start with the first European settlers of the country. Its growth — like the United States — came largely with westward expansion and the introduction of the railroad. And its nature is inherently competitive.

Its formal beginnings started on Independence Day at the Prescott Rodeo and everything rodeo represents — chasing a passion, opportunity for all, success in hard work — align with the larger American dream.

Standardizing the sport

While the sport of rodeo began to popularize in the late 1800s, it evolved to include a standardized set of events. The original event lineup included bronc riding, steer roping, and cow pony races. Later, steer riding was added to the competition list, which would ultimately become bull riding. The next event to be added was calf roping. Eventually, high-production rodeos included five main events:

- » Bareback riding
- » Saddle bronc riding
- » Steer riding
- » Steer wrestling
- » Calf roping

At the time, women often competed in rodeo events alongside the cowboys. They rode broncs and roped steers in competition, in addition to competing in a variety of racing and trick riding events. In 1929, a bronc-riding cowgirl by the name of Bonnie McCarroll was killed in competition at the Pendleton Round Up in Pendleton, Oregon. Between the McCarroll tragedy and the formation of the Rodeo Association of America (RAA), women began to be left in the dust of rodeo competition.

The RAA was formed in 1929 to standardize the rules of rodeo and the types of events offered, and to protect the integrity of the sport. The founders of this organization wanted to highlight the best cowboys in the world by creating a point system and a payout system that incentivized cowboys to compete within their circuit of sanctioned events. However, those founders formed the RAA as a men's organization, and the now-largest sanctioning body of rodeo events didn't allow women to participate.

At the same time, large independent rodeo producers on the East Coast continued to hold rodeos that focused more on production value than competition. Many of these rodeos allowed women to compete, but some shady money management and a continued lack of record keeping drove those athletes to form their own organization. Those cowboys then formed the Cowboys Turtle Association (CTA) — the name being an homage to the cowboys who were slow to evolve but eventually stuck their neck out. This group also decided to no longer allow women to compete within their events.

The RAA and CTA competed against each other contentiously for years, but eventually, the CTA prevailed. It later changed its name to the Rodeo Cowboys Association (RCA), and then became the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA), which is today's largest producer and governing body of rodeo. They set the standard and the rules for modern rodeos that spectators enjoy.

Rodeoing with the PRCA

The Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA), also known as ProRodeo, based out of Colorado Springs, Colorado, is the oldest and largest professional rodeo-sanctioning body in the world. Its events constitute the Mecca of rodeo — anyone who's worth their salt in the arena competes in PRCA rodeos against the best of the best.

Their mission is to maintain the integrity of rodeo by improving conditions for contestants, monitoring livestock welfare, boosting entertainment value, and promoting their sponsors. They fund youth programming for children who are passionate about rodeo and the Western American way of life.

Paying to play

Unlike most professional sports, rodeo contestants don't receive salaries. In fact, they pay an entry fee to get into rodeos that they want to compete in. The purse prize for each competition is developed from those entry fees and paid out to the top riders in each event. The contestants who don't win actually lose money on those events. (Deciding to compete professionally in the sport of rodeo requires a whole lot of passion and certainly some lack of logical thought processes.)

Standard events

PRCA standard events (see Table 1-1) include the classics, with a few newer events thrown in. The rodeo arena (see Figure 1-1) is strategically laid out to support these events and keep the spectator's attention. By alternating between *roughstock* events (meaning events that utilize livestock such as bucking bulls or bucking broncs) and timed events (events that are based on the fastest time) at opposite ends of the arena, spectators rarely have a delay in the action.

TABLE 1-1 PRCA Roughstock Events

Event	Animal	Equipment	Skills
Bareback riding	<i>Bronc</i> (a bucking horse)	<i>Leather rigging</i> (a leather hand strap resembling a suitcase handle that is cinched around the horse), neck roll (a piece of protective safety wear the rider wears around his neck to prevent whiplash)	Physical strength, timing
Saddle bronc riding	Bronc	<i>Bronc saddle</i> (a modified version of a classic saddle), bronc halter and bronc rein (the headgear on the bronc attaches to the bronc rein which the cowboy will hold in his riding hand)	Precision, control
Bull riding	Bull	<i>Bull rope</i> (braided nylon rope to secure the rider's hand), padded vest, helmet (encouraged)	Strength, control, balance



TIP

If faulty equipment or a horse or bull that doesn't buck to performance specifications affects a rider's score, the judges may offer the cowboy a clean-slate run on a different horse or bull.

Roughstock events

All roughstock events share some requirements:



REMEMBER

- » The rider uses a *flank strap*, a padded leather or cotton belt that they secure around the flanks of the horse or bull, causing a restrictive sensation that encourages the animal to buck.

The flank straps don't cause pain to the roughstock animals. Their natural instinct is to try to displace the flank strap so that they don't feel anything unnatural on their bodies — it's an annoyance rather than distressful.

- » Both the riders and the livestock are judged on a scale from 1 to 50, and the final score is the sum of those two scores.

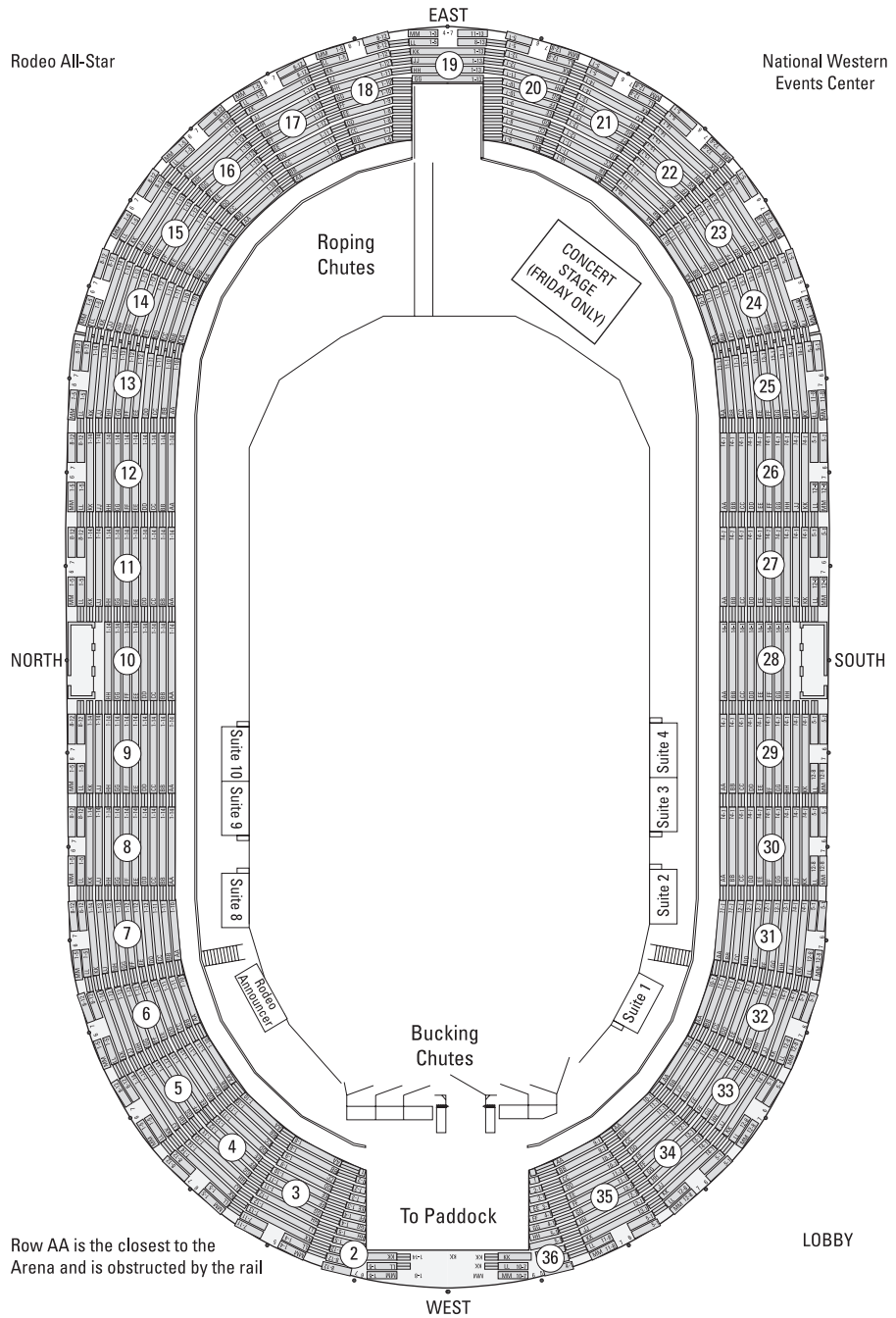


FIGURE 1-1:
The layout of the rodeo arena features timed events and roughstock events at opposite ends.

Row AA is the closest to the Arena and is obstructed by the rail

- » To qualify, a rider has to last at least eight seconds atop the animal with no penalties.
- » The rider has to keep their free hand above them without making contact with the horse or bull during the eight-second ride.

Table 1-1 outlines the specific needs for each roughstock event.

Timed events

In timed events:

- » The winner has the fastest qualified time.
- » If the rider *breaks the barrier* (leaves the box, or chute area, too soon), they can be penalized.
- » The rider can use their preferred saddle and bridle gear.

Table 1-2 shows what specific equipment a rider needs for each timed event, as well as what skills successful completion of the event demonstrates.

TABLE 1-2

PRCA Timed Events

Event	Extra Equipment	Skills
Steer wrestling (bulldogging)	None	Physical strength, timing
Team roping	Ropes	Timing, teamwork
Tie-down roping (calf roping)	<i>Piggin string</i> (a small rope used to tie the legs of the calf once it's roped)	Physical strength, timing, accuracy
Steer roping	Piggin string	Timing, accuracy

All-Around Cowboy title

A cowboy who has the highest average score out of the pool of contestants who compete in two or more roughstock events or timed events receives the All-Around Cowboy title. The rider who has the highest total money earned across their events wins overall. The big skill that a rider has to master to receive this title is consistency.

Organizing a Rodeo Association for Women

The Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA) is the oldest women's sports organization in the United States. The WPRA has overcome many challenges including growth alongside the men's rodeo events. Its development saw women fight for equal recognition in rodeo:

» **1948:** Ten years after the Cowboys Turtle Association was formed (discussed in the section "Standardizing the sport," earlier in this chapter), a group of women fed up with their exclusion from the sport decided to take matters into their own hands. In San Angelo, Texas, that group of women officially formed the Girls Rodeo Association (GRA), which opened with 74 members and 60 approved rodeos.

Even with the help of the GRA, women were struggling to make a living in the sport of rodeo. The GRA featured just one event at major rodeos — barrel racing — and while most rodeo committees opted to add the event to their lineup, the payout was significantly less than the professional cowboys were making.

» **1955:** Almost ten years passed before the GRA hit a grand milestone — the then-Rodeo Cowboys Association (RCA) signed an agreement with the GRA stating that it would:

- Strongly urge RCA rodeo committees to have a GRA-approved barrel race at their events
- Not complete any contract or agreement with an alternative barrel-racing association

» **1967:** More than ten more years later, the first barrel race was featured at the National Finals Rodeo alongside the men's events (it had been previously held in a different location from the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association [PRCA] rodeo). But they still had a long way to go. Cowgirls couldn't make a living wage in the rodeo arena.

» **1980:** The GRA Board of Directors approved a motion to refuse approval of any PRCA rodeo not offering barrel racers equal pay to at least the lowest-paying men's event. In the end, 98 percent of PRCA-approved rodeos met that requirement, and the GRA became the WPRA shortly thereafter.



REMEMBER

It's worth noting that within one year of the PRCA enforcing the equal-pay motion, a WPRA barrel racer finished the regular season as the top money earner across the entirety of rodeo, even the men's events. The women thrived when they were given a chance to go toe-to-toe with the boys.

The WPRA has big dreams for their next milestone: breakaway roping. The sport has taken off in women's rodeo popularity over the last ten years, and the organization is spearheading a huge push to get breakaway roping included in major PRCA rodeos alongside the main events. The hold-up is simply entertainment value and production quality — rodeo has become both an art and a science, with production time coming down to the minute. Adding a new event would throw a massive wrench in the craft that organizers have delicately mastered for audiences over generations.



REMEMBER

Although the WPRA does offer separate memberships for the roping division, the PRCA does not recognize those events in the same way that they recognize barrel racing. For now, the WPRA focuses on the barrel racing and breakaway roping events (see Table 1-3) on the PRCA stage.

TABLE 1-3 WPRA Standard Events Lineup

Event	Equipment	Requirements	Disqualifications	Penalties	Skills
Barrel racing	Crop (optional)	Complete the clover-leaf pattern around three barrels without knocking any barrels down	If the horse and rider deviate from the clover-leaf pattern	Knocking down a barrel	Speed, agility
Breakaway roping	Rope, rope string, flagger (rope flag)	Rope a calf around the neck, with the roper's rope "breaking away" from the saddle when the rope slack is pulled	Improperly catching the calf or missing the calf	<i>Breaking the barrier</i> (leaving the designated box next to the timed event chute too soon)	Speed, precision

In these timed events, the rider who completes the event in the fastest time (without being disqualified) wins. The rider can use their preferred saddle and bridle gear, which are usually selected based on fit and varying needs for different horses.

Creating the Rodeo Calendar

For competitors, the draw of a rodeo is the *payout* (the prize money that you get if you win events). Riders want to hit the rodeos that have the largest purse prizes to maximize their income every season. Generally speaking, a rider looks at the rodeo schedule and selects rodeos on a route of sorts that eliminates the need to backtrack throughout the year.

The type of event that a rider competes in can also determine how they plan their event schedules:

- » **Timed event riders:** Haul their own horses to rodeos all year long, so they have to meticulously plan their schedule for efficiency and to take into consideration the wellbeing of their horse — where they can stop between rodeos to get their horses off the trailer, stretch their legs, and let them rest.
- » **Roughstock riders:** All they need to bring to a rodeo is their equipment. These riders can fly between rodeos if they need to, so their schedule can allow for more backtracking than timed event riders because they don't have livestock to consider in their travels.



REMEMBER

But rodeo is more than a competition, it's a spectacle — and rodeo organizers have to consider the spectators. If you look at a rodeo schedule, you'll notice:

- » Many rodeos overlap so that cowboys can more easily stay local when they need to.
- » Major rodeos never overlap because they want to maximize their spectator base.

Choosing Your Adventure

Landmark, iconic rodeos throughout the year almost never have to compete for a crowd. These big rodeos all have a hook of sorts that goes beyond intense competition to differentiate them from the rest.

You can choose your preferred rodeo by deciphering what's important to you. Do you want a convenient location, a variety of activities and experiences, high-tech production quality, some good music, or old-school tradition? Do you want to watch your rodeo indoors or outdoors?



TIP

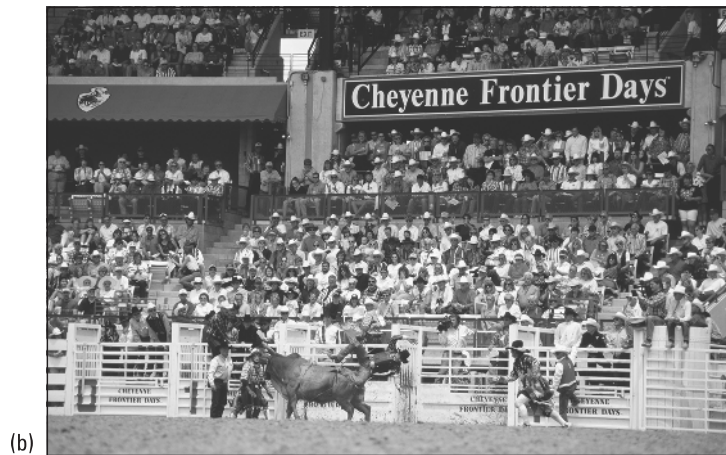
After you determine what kind of rodeo you want to see (I recommend trying them all out), then you can narrow down which rodeo you want to visit first. The PRCA website (www.prorodeo.com) has a great schedule resource that you can use to find upcoming rodeos near you.

Going old-school with outdoor rodeos

A few rodeos gain their fame from their arenas or, better yet, the location of their arenas. You can see examples of these rodeos in Figure 1-2 — the Pendleton Roundup (a), Cheyenne Frontier Days (b), and Calgary Stampede (c). Outdoor rodeos have a classic feel that's reminiscent of the original Wild West shows and old days of rodeo, where the dust flew, the rain fell, and the elements were a part of the show.



Brett/Adobe Stock Photos



Holger Leue/Getty Images



Jeff Whyte/Adobe Stock Photos

FIGURE 1-2:
Outdoor rodeos
feel nostalgic
and iconic.

Pendleton Roundup

Perhaps the most well-known outdoor rodeo venue is the Pendleton Roundup in Pendleton, Oregon. This fall-season rodeo's famous arena still features a huge grassy plain, rather than only dirt. It's also one of the largest rodeo arenas that a cowboy can compete in. Pendleton follows old-school practices, having riders wait on deck off to the side of the arena, rather than in a fancy behind-the-scenes area.

The rodeo also features a massive celebration of Native American culture, featuring members of the Umatilla, Cayuse, and Walla Walla tribes, who host a grand tribal village made up of more than 300 teepees during the Roundup.

The massive arena can make the competition more of a challenge. Especially for the roughstock riders and barrel racers, a large, open arena entices livestock to run wide open rather than stay in a typical pattern. Bulls and broncs tend to want to stretch and run in the space, rather than buck, and the timed event horses tend to become distracted by the wide open space around them rather than focusing on their job. Despite the challenge, riders appreciate the history of the Roundup. Don't be surprised when a random passerby greets you with a "Let'er buck!" It's a thing. Just say it back and keep going.

Cheyenne Frontier Days

The Cheyenne Frontier Days' huge outdoor rodeo happens on the *Cowboy Christmas run* (they call it Cowboy Christmas because it's a stretch of big, high-profile rodeos with a lot of money up for grabs. If you win some, or even just one, of these rodeos, it will feel like Christmas morning!) right in the middle of July. Cheyenne is iconic because of its historical significance as one of the oldest rodeos on the circuit that honors early explorers, cowboy tradition, and the enduring spirit of the American West. Known as The Daddy of 'Em All, more than one hit song on country radio talks about this rodeo. There's just something truly magical about it.

Calgary Stampede

The Calgary Stampede, called The Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth, draws one of the largest crowds (if not the single largest) to rodeo during its ten-day run. The crown jewel of Calgary is its chuckwagon races, fondly referred to as the "half mile of hell," where chuckwagons pulled by four horses race around the rodeo arena. It's dangerous and fast and exciting to watch.

Following the music

Some rodeos draw a crowd through an exceptional lineup of musical talent. These rodeos are grand in production value in their own right, and you can find many spectators who are more interested in the concert than the rodeo itself:

- » **RodeoHouston:** A music-first rodeo that has concert headliners including Post Malone, George Strait, Cody Johnson, The Chainsmokers, and more. RodeoHouston is a 20-day event, versus the 10-day format of most rodeos. You can find so much to do and see at this rodeo, and the organizers have done a great job of using music to attract new audiences to the sport. RodeoHouston is also the nation's largest indoor rodeo.
- » **National Finals Rodeo:** The only other rodeo that can compete with Houston's musical talent, but they have Vegas on their side. Every year, over the ten-plus days of rodeo activity around the National Finals in Las Vegas, you can catch multiple live music performances throughout the day and night. It's hard to choose where to enjoy music daily because there's so much of it, but unlike RodeoHouston, these concerts happen around Vegas and not in the rodeo arena.

Staying traditional

Some rodeos lean into tradition over all else and don't fuss with the light shows, fancy bands, or extra attractions. These two traditional rodeos both take place in Forth Worth, Texas:

- » **Fort Worth Stock Show & Rodeo:** A great example of a rodeo that has stayed true to its roots through the years. Although it did get a facelift when it entered a new venue in 2020, the rodeo event remains largely the same. They play traditional music, have a traditional run of events and production, and don't have a lot of distractions throughout the rodeo performance.
- » **The Stockyards Championship Rodeo:** I can argue this is one of the most traditional active rodeo setups still standing, and they sell out their seats to the Cowtown Coliseum every single weekend. This rodeo, unlike the majors, happens every Friday and Saturday. It's a great way to see local competitors, but don't be surprised when a big name pro rodeo athlete rolls through town and makes an appearance in events.

Attending a Rodeo

Rodeo can sometimes feel like a different world entirely, especially if Western isn't your native culture. You can do a few things to prepare yourself if you're going to your first rodeo.

Looking the look

Dress appropriately, but don't go crazy kitting yourself out. You can pick up plenty of accessories — authentic and otherwise — at the actual rodeo, so don't feel obligated to invest in anything that you don't already own for the occasion.

You usually have to do a lot of walking, so wear clothing that you feel comfortable in and shoes that you won't regret wearing in the first hour — I recommend boots if you have them because they will provide both comfort and protection from any horse manure you may encounter (you are sharing a space with animals, after all). Also, rodeos have a lot of animals and dirt around, even outside the arena. Wear clothes and shoes that you can get a little dirty.

Seizing the day

Rodeos almost always have adjacent events happening throughout the day, such as carnival rides on the midway, a separate horse or stock show, musical entertainment, food or drink tastings, and so on. Check the rodeo's specific website and make a day of it. The rodeo itself will probably last one and a half to two hours, so plan accordingly.

Picking up the slack

Speaking of additional activities to do before a rodeo performance, check out the *slack*, a rodeo performance for the overflow competitors, if your preferred rodeo offers it. A main rodeo performance (shortened to *perf*) can sustain only 10 to 12 contestants per event. When a rodeo gets more entries than available slots, they may hold a slack during the day (before the *perf*) where the extra competitors can compete. Spectators can often attend the slack for free!

The slack competition is just as official as the main rodeo performance, and slack contestants compete for the same points and prize money as the riders in the actual *perf*.

Rodeos often have a progressive round, sometimes just referred to as *the progressive*, where riders qualify to advance and the competition gets fiercer while the week goes on. Try to figure out where they are in the competition week when you attend so that you know whether you're watching round winners or overall rodeo winners.