

Humane Facts

Animal welfare, which is caring for and meeting an animal's needs, is practiced in the sport of rodeo. Rodeo people respect, admire, and want to take care of the animals that are so important to their way of life.

It's obvious that rodeo is not taxing for the huge, one ton, powerful bulls that toss cowboys around like rag dolls, but some people may wonder if roping is hard on calves. A calf has more than tripled its weight when it is first roped, which is at 225-250 pounds, and is a strong animal. It takes the special roping and handling skills exhibited by the rodeo cowboy to manage the strength of a calf whose instinct is to flee or fight rather than cuddle.

The roping contest is an extension of the necessary skills developed by ranch cowboys to hold cattle for doctoring, etc., without benefit of pens and corrals. The muscular structure of a calf and its hairy, thick hide allows prudent roping without harm. As is observed, immediately upon removal of the rope, calves jog trot out of the arena in a most unconcerned manner. A calf, which soon outgrows its weight limit for the event, then fulfills the same purpose it would have in the dairy or beef industry if it had not been in rodeo — or perhaps grows up to be a bucking bull.

Bull riding has become rodeo's most popular contest. It is not related to any ranch task, but looking at it from the standpoint of the animals, bull riding serves the bull population. More female cattle than male cattle are required in both dairy operations and the building of beef herds. More male cattle are born than are needed for breeding purposes. Rodeo adds years to the lives of some of these excess healthy bulls.

Injury to animals is infrequent with rates documented at a fraction of 1%. The use of horses and bulls in rodeo is so undemanding that they stay healthy and perform well for many years. It is not unusual for a bucking horse to be kicking up its heels in fine fashion over the age of 25 and many bulls are still active buckers at 15 years of age. Veterinarians attribute it to the good care they receive which includes quality feed and adequate exercise.

Rodeo associations throughout the country have rules that dictate how contests will be conducted and animals will be handled. The Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association in 1947 established the first rules for the humane care and treatment of rodeo animals, seven years prior to the founding of the Humane Society of the United States.

The average bucking horse or bull works less than five minutes per year in the arena.

Human skin is 1mm-2mm thick, a horse's hide is 5mm thick, and a bull's hide is 7mm thick.

The flank strap is fleece-lined in the flank area, which can be compared to the waist of a human. The straps do not cover genitalia or cause pain. If the strap were tightened too tightly, the animal would refuse to move, much less buck.

Spurs used by bareback and saddle bronc riders are dull and blunt with free-rolling rowels so that their showy style of leg movement is not harmful to the horse. The rowel, which is the star-shaped wheel on a spur, is loosely locked in bull riding to allow the cowboy a better hold on the loose-hided animals.

An important tool in a livestock operation is the cattle prod. Since large, untrained animals do not reliably respond to voice or hand signals, an effective device is needed for the safety of both people and animals. A veterinarian developed the electric prod powered by size "C" flashlight batteries as a safe alternative to instruments, which can poke and bruise. The prod gives a minor surprise shock without any ill effects.

Each year, the cowboys and cowgirls of the various rodeo associations throughout the country honor the best performing horses and bulls in the rough stock events — bareback bronc riding, saddle bronc riding, and bull riding. The "heart" of these "honest" animals to consistently turn in a good performance is greatly admired, along with the beauty of their efforts.

Awards are also given to the owners of the best-trained horses ridden by the timed event competitors. The performance of rodeo animals is a matter of pride to the owners and riders. The reputations of the best ones live on in our memories and in legend long after the animals are retired.

Friends of Rodeo
Linda Burdick - Executive Director
PO Box 428, Merced, CA 95341
forrodeo@comcast.net
www.friendsofrodeoinc.com