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BEST OF THE BEST: Junior and Senior Champions

It's a long way from the first time in the saddle to top rodeo honors, but for these winners, the journey has been worth it.

Included on the Indian National Finals Rodeo champions board are 2013 Seniors winners Britt Givens (Breakaway); Ted Hoyt (Team Roping Header) and Spider Ramone (Team Roping Heeler). Following in their stirrups are Junior Champions Trisha Walden (Barrels); Myles Dillon (Bulls), and Dean Holyan (Breakaway).

Oklahoma's Walden (and her horse Dago) captured the INFR World Champion Junior Barrel Racer buckle last year at age 12, just 4 years after entering her first competitive barrel racing event where she took home \$60 in prize money. Her mother, Linda, says simply that she is a natural barrel racer and a determined young lady with talent and strength. Father Sam expresses his pride by noting that his daughter is confident as well as sweet and smart.

At INFR, Walden and Dago competed against 31 other racers over three runs. Easy winners in the first two, the duo aggressively charged the barrel in the third with a finishing time of 14.975 --- good enough to win not only the World Championship, but a second title of Average Winner.

The fast-riding honor roll student, who also finds time to play basketball and belong to an archery team, acknowledged that her favorite part of INFR was the victory lap.

South Dakota's *Rapid City Journal* called 16-year-old Batesland cowboy Myles Dillon "a young man on the verge of stardom" after he took home the top prize in junior bull riding, an honor that capped off a year that saw the Little Wound High School 9th grader win the Great Plains Indian Rodeo Association year-around title that sent him on his second trip to the INFR.

After a slow start and a good second-go 80-point ride that put him in the lead entering the final short-go --- "I couldn't wait to get on another bull. The last ride was pretty rough, but I sat back and grabbed tight every jerk on the rope," Dillon said.

It's never an easy ride according to New Mexico's Dean Holyan, son of Carol Jackson Holyan who won her first championship title at age 11. "The competition all year long has been tough and the INFR was a hard-fought battle," says Dean who has been roping since he was 5 years old. Riding his uncle's mare, Dakota, it was his turn in the winner's circle in 2013.

A previous INFR qualifier who was beaten by older teenage competitors, he decided, "Age is just a number and I can be as tough and ready as they are. I worked hard on being sharp with my rope and making every practice count. To defend my title this year, I'll be paying attention to my horsemanship as well as both my mental and physical game."

Among those in the group of Senior Champions is Ted Hoyt of Cut Bank who earned honors last year as team roping header with Spider Ramone, a fellow Montana cowboy.

“It felt good to win,” says the veteran whose previous championship came in 1981, followed by 3 runner-up titles. Hoyt didn’t get a chance to compete in 2012 after being bucked with 5 broken ribs as a result. “This was the first year Spider was eligible to compete in the Seniors and I knew my job was to get 3 steers turned for him.” Mission accomplished.

Looking back on his career, Hoyt says: “The Junior/Senior events are good for the sport of rodeo because they give the kids a chance to see what the sport is all about. If INFR didn’t have these events, I think I’d have hung up my rope and retired because youngsters these days are so good it would be hard to remain competitive. I can still catch steers in the 7-second hole, but the guys nowadays are a whole lot faster than me.”

Continuing with their mission to “provide, promote, and preserve the advancement of professional Indian Rodeo,” Indian National Finals Rodeo --- the largest and longest-running professional Indian rodeo organization in the world --- will hold its 2014 competition in Las Vegas this November.