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Indian National Finals Rodeo

Ready-for-Release #7 --- BEHIND THE STALL DOORS

Philosopher Mahatma Gandhi and musician Paul McCartney --- both animal lovers --- have something in common:

*The greatness of a nation can be judged by the way its animals are treated*

Gandhi

*You can judge a man's true character by the way he treats his animals*

McCartney

The first rule of rodeo involves animal welfare, an emphasis on humane care and treatment of rodeo animals established by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association long before the founding of the Humane Society of the United States.

With the Indian National Finals Rodeo, the job of stock superintendent falls on the shoulders of Chancy Kittson who understands that Good Health Equals Good Performance because livestock only perform as well as they feel. Horses, cattle, and bulls break from the box faster when they are healthy and at the peak of their abilities.

Indian National Finals Rodeo was developed to unite Native American rodeo associations from the U.S. and Canada and to promote the sport among tribal peoples. The group took a large step forward when their commission agreed that if all the cowboys and cowgirls were Native, all livestock should also come from Native contractors. "Chancy got the association going on this," said INFR General Manager Donna Hoyt. "His mission is to showcase stock from all over Indian Country."

"Prior to 2009, INFR had used non-Native suppliers and my Dad, Smiley, and I felt the stock wasn't the quality we needed," says the man who holds down a day job as Executive Director of Blackfeet Housing in Montana. "I wanted to urge Native rough stock contractors to bring their best short round animals and INFR said if we were going to do that, we needed a coordinator and, just like that, I had a new job," Kittson says.

“Native contractors do year-round regional rodeos, but they hadn’t been given an opportunity to go to The Big Show. And when they get invited to be a part of the Las Vegas event, they bring the cream of the crop of their animals.”

While they don’t stand still long enough for an accurate nose count, there are about 500 four-legged critters at the Finals --- 225 rough stock (75 each for bare back, saddle bronc, and bull riding) and some 300 on hand as timed-event stock for team roping, calf roping, break away, and steer wrestling.

“When stock comes off the trailers, we do visual inspections and run the required tests to ensure the animals are healthy. Once they go in the pens, we monitor to make sure there is constant water and animals are fed according to their owner’s specifications. There is round-the-clock security to guarantee no unwanted visitors. We handle these animals like they were our own kids because healthy and contented livestock is Priority Number One.”

According to a Cheyenne Frontier Days survey by PRCA, the animal injury rate in rodeo is extremely low - less than five-hundredths of one percent (.0004). Out of over 250 performances or qualifying events involving more than 75,000 animal exposures, only 28 injuries --- mostly minor --- were reported.

A former rodeo cowboy himself (“Wasn’t real successful at it and didn’t see a future in it”), Kittson has been around rodeo animals all his life. His grandfather raised bucking horses and his parents were stock contractors. “I didn’t have a choice, I was born into it,” he says.

“An animal only performs for a few seconds, but it takes a lot of time to get them ready and we start working stock several hours before each performance. Spectators see a 2-hour event, but we’ve been working 5-to-6 hours before that to get the animals ready to be loaded into pens. We run hard for several days, starting before 7am and leaving the back pens some 18 hours later.”

His work crew is his family, wife Teri, 15-year-old son Kolby, now in his 5<sup>th</sup> year at INFR, and younger son Chance, age 12, who can be found mucking with a garden hose envious that other kids are playing in the arcade.

This year’s line-up of well-cared-for critters can be seen November 4-8 at South Point Equestrian Center in Las Vegas for the annual INFR race for the gold buckles.



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