

Indian National Finals Rodeo

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It's too early for Christmas and its visions of sugar plums, but the cowboys and cowgirls eligible to compete in this year's Indian National Finals Rodeo are already dreaming of their own form of sugar plums --- a winner's circle with gold buckles, saddles, and a stack of cash.

"This year promises to be even bigger and better than last year's very successful event," says INFR General Manager Donna Hoyt. "We've increased contestant entry fees and added another \$35,000 for a total purse of \$550,000 in cash and another \$100,000 in prizes --- the biggest payout in the 39 year history of Indian National Finals Rodeo. With the payout totals now well over the half million dollar mark, more cowboys and cowgirls would like to share in that purse and we have nearly 500 competitors (486) ready to ride this year. And as the popularity of the event continues to grow and more people hear about us, I'm sure we'll be looking at a new record number of fans this year as well."

With more money at stake, the level of competition gets even tougher.

"Veterans who have been here before work hard to sharpen their already-honed skills and the new guys always bring their "A" game because INFR brings out the best in all the competitors," says Nolan Conway of Browning, Montana, who will compete in three events this year (team roping, calf roping, steer wrestling) --- while his wife challenges in the women's breakaway.

"Competition will be tough because the young guys are starting their careers at an earlier age and are so competitive. Everybody wants to win a world championship," says the 9-time INFR contender and steer wrestling champion. Like many of the younger contenders at this year's event, Conway started early and attributes much of his rodeo success to being raised in a rodeo family, learning how to dog steers from his dad.

Another returnee is rural Oklahoma cowboy Casey Stone who also credits family help for his success in winning the 2010 INFR Steer Wrestling World Championships. "I give all the credit to my dad for showing me how to do it," says the 27-year-old who started wrestling steers as a teenager. "My dad says if you don't steer wrestle, you don't belong at our house," he told the *Sequoyah County Times* newspaper.

"Winning not only takes a good coach and a good horse, but lots of practice. Whoever works at it the hardest is gonna' win," says the cowboy who spends months on the road going from rodeo to rodeo.

That philosophy of what it takes to be a winner is exemplified by multiple (8 time) INFR champion and recipient of the 2009 World's Greatest Roper title, Preston Williams (Paiute/Shoshone), now living in California. "You don't learn to rope in the arena," he told *Cowboys & Indians* magazine, "You learn to

rope on the range.” He did so growing up in the tiny town of Schurz, Nevada, on the Walker River Indian Reservation, where his father, Fred, coached him. Wisely, Williams learned from experienced competitors. “Just watching them motivated me to work harder so I could be more of a threat in all the events I worked. You can always learn something. It’s not hard to learn if you pay attention with an open mind.”

At this point, travel plans for the big dance have been made, equipment checked, and psyches prepared for the pinnacle of Indian Country rodeo. Following the 2013 event, reporter Tristan Ahtone of *Al Jazeera America* wrote a story about “The Coolest Cowboys,” reporting that Native Americans give lessons on what a 21st century cowboy looks like. “At its core, the finals are a celebration of Indian Country ranch lifestyle whose competitors are heirs to indigenous peoples legacy of a culture where the horse was key.”

At this year’s INFR, the horse will be one of the key components guided by some very committed and determined cowboys and cowgirls who want to bring home the bling --- and the cash --- as well as bragging rights up till the November 2015 rodeo...when they’ll have to do it all over again.

2014 Indian National Finals Rodeo, November 4-8, South Point Hotel & Equestrian Center, daily performances at 1pm and 7pm. Visit www.southpointarena.com or call INFR at (406) 338 7684 for further information.

Casey Stone, Steer Wrestling at INFR 2013 (please credit Quickshot Photography)

