

2017 Indian Nationals Final Rodeo

Ready-for-Release Story #3 --- NEW HALL OF FAMERS

by Lee Allen

Athletes in many major sports delight in telling anyone who will listen --- “We’re #1”. Champion Native American cowboys and cowgirls carry their honors with similar pride, but with a bit less public acclaim.

Five more of those quiet heroes have been inducted into the Indian National Finals Rodeo Hall of Fame in ceremonies at the annual INFR event in Las Vegas.

The most recent inductees include Ed Holyan, Traci Vaile, Levi Blackwater Sr., Dee Keener, and Julius Y. Begay. They join 26 previous honorees who have been lauded since the recognition program began in 2011 with the acknowledged purpose being to recognize those who “had the foresight and dedication to create and preserve professional Indian rodeo for future generations.”

Navajo Ed Holyan’s INFR champion biography notes the All-Around Championship Cowboy “is considered by many to be the most talented and versatile cowboy in the world.” Holyan calls himself a dedicated and disciplined cowboy and acknowledges that working hard at his craft has paid off with 4 All-Around titles in his name (1992, 1997, 1999, 2001). “Winning the All-Around title is the ultimate goal of any multi-event competitor,” he says and toward that end he gives his best effort in every run and never does things half way.

Montana cowgirl Traci Vaile (Confederated Salish/Kootenai) started barrel racing when she was about 11 years old and is now a two-time All-Around winner (1995, 1997). “A person doesn’t realize what it means to win this honor until you try to go win another one. Only then does it dawn on you that championships just don’t come easy.”

In addition to the pride of a champion, Vaile says, “INFR rodeo benefits all involved because of the extended rodeo family. You can never be successful without the help of the people around you and I’ve been blessed to have some pretty amazing people in my rodeo life.”

Long-time cowboy Dee Keener (Cherokee) is also being recognized this year for his ability to stick with the long term goal. “Championship recognition is great, but this represents so much more. Being named a Hall of Fame member means that years of hard work and dedication have paid off,” he says. “There were so many times it would have been easy to throw in the towel, but I stuck with it. I hope I can be an inspiration to the youth who are putting in their time now. If it’s truly your passion, don’t give up --- time will reward you.”

For the Oklahoman who learned to ride when he was 9 and began to rodeo at age 11, Keener followed in the footsteps of his Dad, his Grandpa, and his Great Grandpa, all of them steer ropers --- which led Dee to be known for his roping skills as a header and a calf roper before he quit rodeo roping at age 40

to become a 4-time recipient of the Nation's Leading American Paint Horse Trainer title. He has 6 INFR World Champion titles as he dominated the field of team roping in the 1990s.

New Hall of Famer Julius Y. Begay (Navajo) says the recognition “means everything to me because it is a reflection of my entire rodeo life --- recognizing, preserving, and promoting the heritage of Indian Rodeo with all Native Americans of all ages.”

And while it represents the height of his career to date, he still competes in the INFR as well as the Canadian Pro Rodeo Association and the National Senior Pro Rodeo Association. Asked if he had it all to do over again, would he do it differently, Begay replied: “I'd have won even more INFR World Titles.”

BELOW: Champion bull rider Julius Y. Begay busts the chute and hopes to hang on for 8 seconds

