



BULLFIGHTERS:

NO Clowning Around



They may wear funny clothes but they don't tell jokes. Rodeo clowns of old used to defend the bull-riders and entertain audiences, but the job has since evolved to just one purpose: to protect the bull-riders.

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And that's no laughing matter when it comes to distracting a two-thousand-pound (900 kg) angry bull.

Cody Strandquist, of Kyle, Saskatchewan, and Tyrone Maines, of Maple Creek, are on the job at the Bob Larson Memorial Rodeo in Val Marie. Theirs is a serious business. They spin, they leap: Their grace and style obscure the danger.

"Bullfighter," however, is a bit of a misnomer; they do not *fight* so much as engage the attention of the bull, diverting it from the bull-rider. Even before the rider is bucked off, the bullfighter moves in to be in the right position at the right time. "We do this to avoid any and all wrecks," says Cody.

What goes through their minds in the moments before the gate opens? "We need to read what the bull's going to do, second by second," says Cody. "Where the rider is positioned on the bull, where the bull is going to turn. We need to think two steps ahead in a short amount of time."

"There's a lot of things that can happen during a ride that changes your plan," says Tyrone. "It depends

on the direction the bull moves, and where the rider lands. We want the bull to spin away from the bull-rider's rope hand—depending on whether the rider is right- or left-handed. If the bull is spinning into the rider's hand, you want to get the bull's attention and get him to move in the other direction so the rider can get off safely."

Once the rider is off, the bullfighter tries to get the bull to follow him instead of looking for the rider. The clown uniform they wear—a loose skirt with colourful flags—is called a baggie, and the motion attracts the bull. The skirt is designed to pull away cleanly, a safety feature. "A bull will pick up his head when he has touched something," he says, "Typically, bulls close their eyes when they hit something, so they don't really know they don't have you when they touch the skirt." Tyrone has had his baggie ripped off twice by a bull.

He started his rodeo career as a bull-rider and a bareback riding competitor. His family raised a few bucking bulls at home and his dad occasionally fought bulls. "I never really did bullfighting as a job, more just for fun in practice pens," he says. After several years of professional rodeo, however, a shoulder injury

◀ Susan Rutherford and her husband stressed self-reliance as they raised five children on a farm just outside Frenchman Butte.

▶ (Top) On school tour days, she's in charge of the laundry demonstration. Here she's showing a washboard.

▶ (Bottom) Marilyn (left) and volunteer Heather Oberhofer demonstrate butter-making on the tea house deck.

from bareback riding changed his plans. The injury didn't prevent him from bullfighting, so he turned to that profession.

He acknowledges that bullfighting can be tough to get into unless you know someone in the business. "You have to get in front of people in order for them to see you. Lots of people submit videos, lots of kids go to bullfighting schools."

Cody, too, has a long history with rodeo. His dad fought bulls professionally for twenty-one years. "One fall in 2015, Dad encouraged me to try," he says, "so I did one rodeo. The following year I did some high school rodeos and then I went to a bullfighting school."

Bullfighting school teaches the young bullfighter how to distract a bull and intervene if a rider gets hung up on the bull. The novice learns how to take a hit from a bull to protect the rider, and how to get the bull to safely exit the arena.

What do you need to be a good bullfighter? "Good cleats," says Cody. Factor in a protective vest and shorts, and clothing that won't impede quick movement—oh, and a whole lot of pluck!

The job is punishing, both mentally and physically, and often results in injuries. "We've both been wiped out hundreds of times," Cody admits, though Tyrone insists he's never been seriously injured as a bullfighter (other than a few "stitches and tears and bumps"). Athleticism is a must in this profession, both to protect themselves and to protect the bull-rider. Tyrone says being able to read cattle is just as important as athleticism. "Being able to read the bull's movements, know what lead they're in, and which way they're going to go, means you can predict a pattern. You can get away with less athleticism if you have good cow knowledge."





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▶ (Top) On school tour days, she's in charge of the laundry demonstration. Here she's showing a washboard.

▶ (Middle) In Big Hill school, retired teacher Eileen Hines explains what school was like. "There were no electric lights. It was either cold or hot. There was no equipment. Big kids helped the little ones."

▶ (Bottom) Marilyn (left) and volunteer Heather Oberhofer demonstrate butter-making on the tea house deck.

That being said, every bull is different, as Cody points out. The bulls performing tonight are Cody's own bulls. He's been raising bucking bulls for rodeos since the age of twelve. But knowing these bulls doesn't necessarily mean they are totally predictable. "As soon as the rider nods his head and the latch cracks on that gate," Cody says, "the job is 99 per cent reaction time."

Outside the arena, the bulls are easy to handle, "but as soon as they walk into that bucking chute and get the bull rope and the flank on," says Cody, "that's when they turn on, and it's game time." The breed originated from a Brahmin cross, but in the last two decades has evolved into its own strain. "They're their own deal now, the American Bucking Bulls. They're for rodeo and nothing but!"

Cody also has bucking cows for breeding, and they come in all sizes, shapes and colours. "About half my herd I've raised myself," he says, "but I'm so busy taking bulls to rodeos, I buy some bulls every year." In his opinion, there is nothing more rewarding than having one of his bulls win an award or seeing a bull he has raised go to the top of the charts.

Watch these bulls perform, you can't help being impressed. Their agility and speed is second to none. "Agility is bred into them," Cody says. "We work to keep them in rodeo shape so they can be their best on the road, away from home." Sometimes the bulls are on the road for almost a week. They learn the game, but Cody still has to do his best for them so they're comfortable. That includes feed, care, vaccination—everything contributes to their performance. "The management piece is big," he says. "You don't want to take a bull and buck him every weekend; they need breaks too."

Bulls also have their performance preferences. Some bulls don't like small arenas, some perform better outdoors. "You bring them up, right from calves," he says, "then you start getting riders on them. You want to manage them the right way so they can be their best."

The bulls live together for their entire lives, and only a few of them will ever be used to breed cows. As a result, they aren't particularly competitive within the



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herd. “They do have their pecking order at home,” Cody says. “In each pen there’s the boss. They figure it out themselves and they respect each other. Sometimes it’s down to seniority; other times, the youngest bull might be the king of the pile.”

One particular bull, a beautiful coffee-coloured brindle, has performed especially well tonight. “That’s Western Wine,” says Cody, “a nine-year-old bull. Usually, at around ten years or so, you slowly retire them. He’s been good for a long time. He’s had as high as 88 points scored on him.”

The judges mark bull-riders based on a number of attributes, including how tough the bull is to ride. A bull with a lot of kick and spin will score higher if he’s ridden for the full eight seconds. “The scores depend on how much time the bull is in the air, and if the rider stays square in the middle, if his legs are in place. The guy who scores the highest points is the guy

who makes it look effortless, even though they’re probably actually working their butts off,” he laughs.

Tyrone and Cody use videos to improve their own performance. Later in the week, they’ll sit down and watch tonight’s show, over and over again. “There are some parts that we do really well, and there are some good parts that people might not even see. The good things give us confidence for the next rodeo. The things that didn’t feel that comfortable? We’ll fix those for next time.”

When asked if bullfighting is a young man’s game, Tyrone replies, “I’m thirty-five, and I think I have plenty of time yet. There are guys older than me that have ridden into their forties and rode good. Bullfighters too.”

“There’s really no cut-off age,” adds Cody. “It’s more or less when we feel we can’t protect the rider to the best of

our ability, and recognize it ourselves. That’s when it’s time to shut it down, whether you’re 22 or 42.”

Cody and Tyrone are independently contracted bullfighters, but they often end up working together. As serious as the job is, they manage to have fun with it. “I know exactly what spot Tyrone is in, and which way he’s going to go,” says Cody, “We don’t even see each other most of the time, and we still flow so well.”

Tyrone grins. “I’m not really thinking of much when that gate opens except the job: to protect the bull-rider.”

“If we have to roll through, and hit the dirt, take the shot for the bull-rider, then we have to,” Cody says simply, and grins. “That’s our job.”

