

# THE PICKUP MEN



*They say the best cowboy in the rodeo is almost invisible. If all goes smoothly, you might not even notice him. He's the lifeline for the competitors in the rough stock events—the bull, bronc and bareback riders. He will catch and carry, rope runaways, and herd stock—all from the back of a swift horse.*



Story and Photos by  
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In a small-town arena in southwest Saskatchewan, the spark of rodeo fever is about to catch fire. Seasoned pickup men Wade Rempel and Luke Ellingson are in position. The first event of the evening is bareback riding, one of the toughest rodeo sports—likened to riding a jackhammer with one hand. To stay on board, the bareback rider grips a leather rigging cinched above the horse's withers. When the gate flies open, there's nothing between the rider and horse but the rider's sticking skills.

After the requisite eight seconds and the timer's whistle, the pickup men burst from the sidelines. They tear alongside the bucking bronc and pick up the rider, which looks more like a mid-air catch. The two pickup men then work in tandem to flip off the bronc's flank strap and get the horse back to the catch pen. It all happens in a matter of seconds. You can watch it again and again, and be none the wiser about how it's done.

Before you know it, the evening's second rough stock event is up: bronc riding, which is similar to bareback riding, but this time the rider is screwed down tight in a bronc saddle. The pickup men go through similar moves: picking up the rider, grabbing the shank, removing the flank strap and now, in addition, opening the saddle's back cinch before circling back to the catch pen.

To see a man, moving at breakneck speed, reach under a wildly bucking horse is to feel your heart in your mouth. And since it's not easy to see just what's happening in these highspeed chases, I later sat down with Rempel and Ellingson, away from the dust and commotion of the arena, to learn about the job. Wade Rempel, from Kyle, has ridden pickup for forty-two years, and Luke Ellingson, a former bull-rider from Wynyard, has been on the job for ten years.

Speaking of the bareback riding event, Luke says, "The rider uses the bucking momentum to flip him over the rump of my horse. He reaches for the back of my saddle. Sometimes he grabs you around the waist, sometimes it doesn't work as planned. You get hold of them, or they get hold of anything they can grab."

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Wade says, “We try to get that buck shank—the halter-shank the riders hang on to—and dally it up right away, so we have control of the horse.” Dallying is securing the rope or shank around the saddle horn. “Next, we go for the flank strap.” This usually makes the bronc stop bucking.

What the audience can’t see is the bareback rider’s hand, stuffed in a rawhide hand-hold that’s shaped like a suitcase handle. A bind is created inside the glove to keep the hand locked to the rigging. “If the rider rides right-handed and goes off the left-hand side of the horse,” says Luke, “that causes the bind to grip tighter. Then the rider has to get up higher, above their rigging, to get loose, so we try to push them up straight.” If the rider is already off and dragging, the first priority is to

get the horse stopped quickly so the rider isn’t hurt.

The truth is that no two rides are the same. “It’s a learning job, for sure” says Luke, “and you never stop learning.” After ten years, he still considers himself a rookie. He does about a dozen rodeos a year, 20 performances, mostly in Saskatchewan, and works full time as the Monet community pasture manager. Wade, semi-retired, averages about 25 rodeos in a season—that’s 75 or 80 performances. Wade travels as far west as Armstrong, B.C. and has been as far east as the Toronto Royal Winter Fair. His rodeos routinely include the Calgary Stampede. Formerly, he picked up as far south as Texas.

The two men share a number of similarities despite different

backgrounds. Wade grew up on a big ranch near Kyle, a 76,000 acre (106 section) spread. His dad ran the Matador for 46 years, and Wade worked there for 30. Wade also participated in the rough stock events at rodeos and started picking up with his brother, Gary, also a top pickup man. Luke grew up in Weyburn; his granddad was a farmer and his dad a mechanic. Luke was in 4H as a kid, and his friend’s dad rode bulls. “I was eleven when we started riding steers,” Luke says, “and I just went on from there.”

Luke rode bulls in amateur and professional rodeos for 22 years before becoming a pickup man. He went to a rodeo school in Wood Mountain, where Wades’ brother Gary ran a pickup course. Wade, too, started as a rodeo competitor.



Wade first picked up at a jackpot rodeo at home, where he and his brother were spotted by a stock contractor, Gerry Myers, who supplied bucking horses to rodeos. Gerry liked the job they did, and later Calgary Stampede Ranch Manager Winston Bruce got them picking up at the Calgary Stampede.

Unlike rodeo competitors, pickup men have a guaranteed paycheck at the end of the day. But dangers and expenses come with the job. Each pickup man has a string of horses used for different events. Pickup horses are critical to getting the job done. Luke says when he started out, he bought an old pickup horse, and it was the best thing he ever did. "The horse knew what he was doing, so I could worry about what I had to do."

Wade agrees. Good horses are a key to the job. The pickup man's first qualification is attitude—you can't do this job alone. The second qualification is stock-brains—understanding stock behaviour and seeing things two jumps ahead. The third, and perhaps the most important, is good horses.

"Some guys are good," says Wade, "but they've got nothing for horses. They get out-run. After you pick up, when you're going for that flank, you're going wide open. The broncs run a lot faster empty—with nobody on them, that is."

Horses are individuals with individual work preferences. Though a good horseman can make a horse work, the wise stockman uses a horse selectively. "They've all got their positives and

◀ Bronc riding is a rough stock event requiring eight seconds in the saddle.

➤ (Top) Up close and personal, a young spectator pats Wade Rempel's palomino, a veteran pickup horse.

➤ (Bottom) Luke Ellingson (back) and Wade Rempel (fore) escort a bronc to the catch pen. The bronc's blue shank is dallied to Wade's saddle.



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◀ Bronc rider in full flight at the Beechy Western Days rodeo.

◀ (Bottom) Pickup man Wade Rempel leans forward to grab the bronc's shank while partner pickup man Travis Erickson reaches back for the flank strap.

➤ Rodeo competitors prepare for the bronc riding event.

negatives," says Wade. "I have a roan horse that doesn't like saddle broncs, but he's probably the best bareback horse I've owned. After eight seconds you go in to get the rider with maybe one or two jumps. There's no pushing and shoving, because once you get the flank and the rider off, they're clean, so it's just a matter of chasing them out. But with bronc-riding, there's a lot more bumping and grinding against the saddle, and my roan horse just doesn't care for it."

Some horses don't like bulls, and it's easy to see why, especially if they've ever been hooked by the bull's horns. During the bull riding and other timed events such as steer roping and steer wrestling, the pickup man's job is to escort cattle to the catch pen. But sometimes bulls have to be roped. "If you have a horse that's been hooked by a bull, it's hard to get him close enough to rope the bull," Wade says. "That horse knows what he's up against."

Pickup horses, like other rodeo horses, perform to strength, and those strengths can vary. In calf-roping, for example, the horse needs to be quick off the start, run hard and stop quickly. A dogging horse—a steer-wrestling horse—must run hard past the steer. In team roping, the heading horse—to rope the steer's head—is bigger and stronger, while the heel horse is smaller and can stop short and dig in. "Barrel horses are run, run, run, plus agility," says Wade. "Some guys use the same horse in different events and some horses can handle it, but most of the time a horse is used in only one event."

Pickup horses, like good rodeo competition horses, don't come cheap. A good pickup horse may sell for \$25,000 or \$30,000. Recently, at an Alberta horse sale, a pickup horse went for \$50,000. Luke and Wade each bring a string of three or four horses to a rodeo. Luke says he looks for a versatile working horse that he can use across events. "I'm looking for conformation—a well-put-together horse—good bones, somewhat bold, but not aggressive. They need to be able to handle the noise, the music and commotion."

Training a pickup horse often starts with getting the horse used to chasing and roping steers, but quickly moves to bucking horses. "It's easier if you



## CANADIAN COWBOYS ASSOCIATION 2023 SASKATCHEWAN SCHEDULE

LOCATION & RODEO NAME	DATES
Tisdale, Rambler Rodeo	Apr 13 & 15
North Battleford Kinsmen Rodeo	Apr 28, 29 & 30
Lancer, Sandhills Rodeo	Jun 10 & 11
Pilot Butte, Pilot Butte Rodeo	Jun 16, 17 & 18
Radville, Long Creek Rodeo	Jun 17 & 18
Mankota, Dean Anthony Memorial	Jun 23, 24 & 25
Weyburn, Souris River Rodeo	Jul 6 & 7
Elbow, Lakeshore Stampede	Jul 21 & 22
Outlook, Riverbank Rodeo	Aug 11 & 12
Kyle Community Rodeo	Aug 12 & 13
Whitewood, Chacachas Rodeo	Aug 18 & 19
Val Marie, 57th Annual Bob Larson Memorial	Sep 15 & 16
Beechy Western Days	Sept 22, 23 & 24

For more rodeos and updates see <https://canadiancowboys.ca/rodeo-information/>

can get in with some veteran broncs," says Wade, "ones that aren't ducking and diving away from you. If you are riding a younger horse, you might just go in and get the bronc dallied up. The experienced horse goes to get the rider. That way you get the young horse used to going in, and to bumping and shoving, until eventually you can be confident he will stay there while you get a rider off."

Getting the rider off quickly and safely is one of the tricks of the trade. Luke takes a horse-in-training to an arena where dummy bucking is practiced. Bucking horses are gradually and humanely trained to buck. "The first time you go after a bronc, you're not trying to catch the rider; it's just a remote-controlled dummy. Once the horse gets used to that action, you can generally work together with someone experienced, and maybe just go get loose horses after someone has been bucked off."

The risks on the job are substantial. "There's a danger of getting kicked

or run over," says Wade, "or you can get pulled off. Most riders are really good, or try to be, but when they're in trouble they can grab you high or in the wrong position, and you can get pulled off."

And as for bull-riding—you never know. "It's a matter of experience," says Wade. "With bulls, you have to get in close enough to rope them. Lots of times you think, 'I only need one more step to make sure I can reach him.' That's the bull's protective zone. If you're caught in the wrong position, where your horse can't get going, the bull will see that and they'll hook you."

Even picking a rider off a stationary horse can be dangerous. "You never know when that bucking horse is going to take off," says Luke. "If it jumps or kicks, and you're sitting at a stand-still, it can get bad real fast."

That being said, the pickup man's purpose is to protect the rider. "You're paid to look after those guys," says

Wade. "You have to take the lumps with it." Luke would rather get kicked himself than have one of the other riders get hurt or have something happen that he could have prevented. A worse-case scenario is when a rider can't get free of a bronc, or gets dragged and stepped on. A rider may find himself between the horse and the fence and get rubbed along the fence or the wall. "I've seen some bad injuries over the years," says Luke, "not so much since I've been picking up, but when I rode bulls."

But both men love rodeo. "I enjoy watching bucking horses and I enjoy what I do," says Wade. "Guys appreciate it when you do a good job—and I have the best seat in the house for watching bucking horses." Luke enjoys the work and enjoys getting a string of good horses polished. "I enjoy rodeo itself, the camaraderie in rodeo as a sport. The biggest thing I enjoy is being part of it all." Luke grins. "I always wanted to be a cowboy. That's all I ever wanted to be."

