



*By Dean Houghton*

# RODEO HIGH

*The National High School Rodeo Association selects its national champions each year during the world's largest rodeo*

**N**ational High School Rodeo Association founder Claude Mullins had a dream. This Texas educator and rodeo contestant thought it would be a great idea for high school kids to have their own national finals rodeo, a nationwide contest to determine champions in such events as calf roping and bronc riding. "It is the inherent desire of every American youth to play cowboy," Mullins once said. "It is our responsibility to provide for them the chance to participate in a clean American sport."

Mullins spurred the NHSRA into action, holding the first finals in Hallettsville, Texas in 1949. It was the start of something big.

In fact, it was the birth of what has become the world's largest rodeo. The NHSRA's 57th summer spectacular, held in July 2005 at Gillette, Wyo., attracted competitors from 40 U.S. states, some traveling from as far away as Alaska and Hawaii. Five

**Top:** The 2005 National High School Rodeo Association finals drew more than 1,500 competitors. **Left:** Michelle Schade represented Alaska in the queen contest.



**Top:** Announcers Reed Flake and Loni Ekins call nonstop action in two adjacent arenas. **Above:** Any place will do for a nap between events.

Canadian provinces were represented, along with a national team from Australia.

The annual event is so big that its numbers nearly numb the mind. More than 1,500 contestants found their way to the Cam-Plex facility at the edge of Gillette, along with their 1,850 horses. The sprawling 1,100-acre compound housed approximately 5,000 people camping in everything from deluxe RVs to tents. In order to zip around from stalls to grandstands to campground, some families rented golf carts. More than 350 of these carts, many decorated with state flags, signs, or words of encouragement, droned along paths from daylight until dark.

And most significantly, more than 800 adult volunteers handled every detail, from checking in horses to directing traffic, so that the whole event went off smoothly.

**N**umbers in each event were staggering as well. There were 182 cowgirls in the barrel racing event, for example, while 175 cowboys came to town for calf roping. The number of contestants is so large that it takes six days, from Monday through Saturday, and twelve performances (morning and evening) just to complete the first two go-rounds of the rodeo. The top 20 contestants then compete in a Sunday short-go to determine the national champions.

The pace of activity during the week makes a beehive look like a retirement home. Contestants rise before dawn to handle chores and get lined up at practice arenas. Between rodeo sessions are all kinds of activities, from volleyball competitions to a knowledge bowl to a rifle shooting competition at a target range. Many contestants also are campaigning for a spot in the organization's student government. And after each evening session



is a dance that draws a thousand or so of the contestants who still have enough energy to keep up with the beat. By week's end, kids (and parents) are taking advantage of any opportunity to catch a quick nap.

**Three-ring circus.** Each rodeo session is a blur of activity as well. A timed-event arena operates adjacent to a roughstock arena. Cowboys and cowgirls participating in the cutting horse event, where competitors use their skills to sort a cow from a herd, hold their competition in a nearby indoor arena.

The two outdoor arenas operate simultaneously while two rodeo announcers share time calling the action. Reed Flake may be describing bull riding action, for example, then hand off to Loni Ekins for a call on a barrel racer. The duo work at an amazing pace, working in details about the competitor while also describing the action. With a packed house of 3,000 spectators and a

**Top:** Breakaway roping is one of seven events open for cowgirl competitors. **Right:** Many saddles tell a silent tale about generations of previous rodeo champions.

bank of television news cameras rolling, each cowboy or cowgirl gets a chance for 15 seconds of fame. "Each young person, as well as Mom and Dad, has invested a lot in getting to this point," Ekins says. "We want to make sure that we do a good job as announcers so the family can savor those moments."

What may get lost in the commotion is the fact that these rodeo contestants really are the best of the best among their peers. Only the top four kids in each event from each state or province are qualified to attend the national finals. That's based on a grueling season of statewide rodeos. The NHSRA sanctions more than 1,100 such events each year.

While LeBron James caused a sensation by jumping from high school to the National Basketball Association, it's not uncommon





**Above:** Capacity crowds of 3,000 spectators pack 13 performances. **Right:** State pride shows in golf carts that shuttle competitors from campgrounds.



to see high school rodeo stars jump to the pro ranks. All eyes at the 2005 national finals were on a budding star from Wisconsin, Tommy Waldera. This 18-year-old senior qualified in all seven boys events: team roping, bull riding, saddle bronc riding, bareback riding, steer wrestling, calf roping, and boy's cattle cutting. It's the first time in NHSRA history that a competitor qualified in seven different events.

Cowgirls competed in barrel racing, breakaway calf roping, cattle cutting, goat



**Left:** Young and old get a good look at the action from arena-side seats. **Below:** The large trade show at the event displays everything from shiny jewelry to saddles.

tying, pole bending, team roping, and the queen contest. This is no ordinary queen contest. These young ladies are judged on horsemanship and scores from a written test along with their personality and poise. And they are treated as royalty, followed by autograph-seekers throughout the week.

The young ladies also teamed up with special-needs kids, helping them learn some basic rodeo skills. "I think horses can be great therapy," says Kansas queen contestant Kate Barker, who was voted Miss Congeniality at the 2005 finals. "It was fun watching everyone interact with the kids. Just giving a couple of hours of your time can really make a difference." Judging by the hugs and misty eyes at the end of the event, these special kids made a lasting impact on the 46 queen candidates as well.

**Building better kids.** Most competitors, of course, find a career path other than pro rodeo. A trip to the national finals can help here, as well, since the NHSRA handed out

nearly a quarter of a million dollars in college scholarships at the 2005 event.

Encouraging academic pursuit and helping kids reach their potential is an important part of the association's mission. By promoting the sport of rodeo, NHSRA also preserves western heritage while offering an activity that can be shared by the family. The experience is often shared through generations of family rodeo performers.

Sharing memories of his association with NHSRA takes Bob Russell all the way back to the first national finals event. As a Texas high school student, he competed in the finals in 1949. Russell also was elected as the organization's first student president.

Over the following years he watched his children, then grandchildren, become involved with the NHSRA. Russell, who later moved to Missouri, also served as a volunteer national director from that state for 23 years. He was honored by NHSRA for that service at the conclusion of the 2005 national



finals event. "I believe in this organization so much," he says. "I also believe in the young people who are part of this. We bring more than 1,500 kids together from all over the U.S. and other countries, and they conduct themselves like champions."

He credits the organization's discipline, always sticking to the rules, for the strength of today's NHSRA, with more than 10,000 student members. "We don't have a very thick rule book, and we expect the kids to read it cover to cover," he says. "The kids are ex-

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*"We bring more than 1,500 kids together and they conduct themselves like champions."*  
—Bob Russell



**Above:** Too young to compete in high school rodeo, these young men practice for the future. **Left:** Duty calls as competitors chore each morning.



of their own needs, while a basketball player only has to worry about taking care of himself and his sneakers. After the rodeo is over, these kids are out there after dark cleaning stalls and feeding and watering horses.”

There’s also quite an investment at stake, as evidenced by the trade show at the national finals event. Vendors in more than 200 booths offered everything from silver hat pins to saddles and tack. Of course, you can browse the outdoor displays where the latest in combo RV and horse trailers, equipped with the latest creature comforts in both sections, demand \$100,000 or more. And notices on bulletin boards offer the best prospects in cutting horses for a cool \$25,000 on up. “You can invest a lot of money in this sport real quick,” says one rodeo dad.

**G**etting young people interested in rodeo seems to be no problem. Younger brothers and sisters of competitors spent many hours swinging ropes and warming up horses, waiting for their turn in the national spotlight.

In fact, NHSRA now has a Wrangler Division for junior high school students. The first Wrangler Junior High School Finals Rodeo was held in July 2005 in Gallup, N.M. More than 600 sixth- through eight-grade youngsters took part in that event.

With those younger kids getting a lot of practice in the fundamentals, it looks like competition at the National High School Finals Rodeo will keep getting better. But what do you expect? As founder Claude Mullins said, every kid wants to play cowboy. **H**

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*“Rodeo kids have a sense of responsibility you don’t find in other athletes.”*  
 —Loni Ekins

pected to follow the rules, and the rules are enforced without exceptions. And like kids participating in other sports, these young people have to keep their grades up in order to compete as well.”

Developing that sense of personal responsibility is what sets the high-school rodeo participant apart from the athlete participating in typical varsity athletics. “Rodeo kids have a sense of responsibility that you don’t find in most other athletes,” says rodeo announcer Ekins, herself a former NHSRA participant and national rodeo queen. “These kids put the care of their horse and livestock ahead