October 2002

It Took Some Balls

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CODY RUBENDALL COULD HAVE GONE TO IOWA STATE. INSTEAD HE RIDES BULLS. THIS IS HIS STORY.

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A
nd so here comes this cowboy, ambling up and back, up and back, along the grass that parts the pen of bulls to the south from the chutes the bulls are stuffed in to the north. Up and back he goes through this soft September night at the Iowa Rodeo Cowboy's Association in Osceola, where only the top 15 cowboys in the state are invited. Up and back, up and back ... He says he's never nervous before riding a bull. He's ridden since he was 13 or 14. He's 21 now. Been riding and farming since he was 18.

Cody Rubendall could have gone to college, could have gone to Iowa State, planned on it in fact, but didn't. "I didn't like studyin'. Figured I'd get too carried away with partyin'," he says.

"I think kids need all the education they can get these days," his mother Liz says. "But he was going to do what he wanted to do regardless ... He's never been much for school."

"I kind of wanted him to go his own road," Cody's father Don says. "But it has its ups and downs like anything else,"

Since choosing bull riding over Iowa State, Rubendall's finished in the top 20 of the Professional Rodeo Cowboy's Association Great Lakes Circuit, hurt his shoulder and missed basically a year and ridden all but two bulls this summer. (Which says a lot because only three of Iowa's top 15 riders will ride a bull all three days this weekend. Also, one needs to realize there are two or three rodeos a week in the summer and five or six during "Cowboy Christmas" in July.)

Next month, Rubendall turns pro. It's benefited him, he says, to not go to school. This is his life without it.

Rubendall ambles along this grass, grabs his crotch a couple of times, yawns, rolls his neck, walks over to a group of cowboys, walks away from the group of cowboys, de-roots some grass, but ultimately fails to notice Tony Grieser standing on a wooden plank closest to the announcing booth.

Grieser is the ISU Rodeo Team's captain. He didn't win enough money to compete in the finals like Rubendall did, but he came tonight to Osceola nevertheless. "It's tough," Grieser says. "When school starts, you really gotta have a balance ... You miss a lot of Thursdays and Mondays. You gotta wanna go to school."

At 9:39, with Rubendall's boots on each side of the chute's railing, he peers at the 1,800-pound bull beneath him, his black hat pulled low on his dark forehead. Rubendall's about 5'10" with boots on, his build slightly larger than slight.

And there is a calm anger to this creature Rubendall now sits on.

To say it takes courage to ride bulls doesn't really do bull riding justice. The problem is the word. "Courage" seems
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too pristine, too genteel for this sport. No, one needs for this sport a word that smells like smoke, perhaps a word that’s been on the winning end of a bar fight. A word like “balls.” Yes, that’s it — it takes balls to be a bull rider. Because death is less than eight seconds and a properly placed horn away.

But Rubendall can’t think about that. “‘Kay, boy,” he says, and the gate flies open. The bull releases his anger on the world and on Rubendall, bucking his head to and fro. But it is not a well-disciplined anger. The bull mostly bucks as he runs straight out, not spinning in the tight circles that throw off cowboys. Rubendall stays in the middle of the bull’s back through his short sprint. Then stays in the middle through his languid turns to the right. The buzzer sounds, Rubendall crashes to the dirt that seems to be sown with rocks, and listens as the announcer says “A 72! For Cody Rubendall.”

Bull riders get SO points for their performance and SO for the performance of the bull. So it is not cocky bravado when Rubendall says “I want the ones they say can’t be rode,” but a game plan for victory. As Rubendall takes off his chaps on the grass between pen and chute, he says, “I did my part. That’s all I can do. He didn’t do much.”

No bull seems to. That’s why he’s turning pro. Despite only two incomplete rides this summer, Rubendall is currently sixth on the IRCA’s money list. Tonight, after the $137.25 check from his third place finish settled in, Rubendall said, as he sat in his truck, “I’m better than fuckin’ 90 percent of the riders on this circuit.” And that may be. But his earnings this summer — a little over $1,000 — don’t support that claim. This visibly bothers him. It could be argued that Rubendall’s turning pro is as much a test of faith in himself as it is a chance at a healthier payday.

“We just wanna be consistent this weekend,” Rubendall’s girlfriend Lindsey Twedt says. Twedt is 19, goes to Ellsworth Community College in Iowa Falls, and is staying at the Super 8 near Interstate-35 with Rubendall for the finals. He spends his time away from the rodeo gazing and touching and directing all his attention toward her.

On Sunday, after one rider rode a bull that hadn’t been ridden this year, and another, after his complete ride, mistook a popped blood vessel for a broken leg. Twedt sat on the bleachers, watching all the riders, but no longer writing scores down because Rubendall steadied himself over another beast.

This one would ride mostly as last night’s did, with an awkward sprint and wide right turns. Rubendall stayed in the middle of the back, and Twedt cheered as she had done the two previous days when it was over. “A 72!” the announcer said. “You wanna talk about consistency, Cody Rubendall…” But Rubendall was hardly listening.

He finishes third overall. With paychecks around him, Rubendall and Twedt stand about his truck. He takes out a calculator to figure his final sums for the season. “Cody, if you went to school, you could do that in your head,” Twedt says. “Yeah, but fuck it.” And the calculator tells him he earned $1,355.41 this season in the IRCA. And he did not — does not, still — regret skipping out on ISU.