

RANCHO MISSION VIEJO RODEO

Cowboy Fun in the California Sun

BY KENDRA SANTOS

I'd heard the top 30 in the world migrate to San Juan Capistrano for the Rancho Mission Viejo Rodeo each fall, just before the town's world-famous swallows skip town to winter 6,000 miles away in Argentina. My cowboy friends have been telling me this one's something special all along. So, I ventured six hours south of my native California Central Coast to see the magic of this eighth annual event for myself.

Since they're the experts on this subject, I'm going to let the cowboys do most of the talking here. And for the sake of full disclosure, I should probably let you know up front that this won't be your typical "who done it and who won it" rodeo wrap-up story featuring all the winners. Instead, it's a gathering of guys from all aspects of the rodeo business sharing with you what, in their eyes, makes this event unique. My goal is that, thanks to them, you'll feel a little like you were there with me.

Oh, and one more thing. It's easy to get excited about something when you just took the victory lap. So, I didn't hand-pluck happy guys here. In fact, I talked to all but one of them before they ever backed in the box or climbed down in the chute. These are their uncut comments on this year's Rancho Mission Viejo Rodeo, held Aug. 23-24.

The first cowboy I spoke with was our host, Gilbert Aguirre. You can tell by the crease in his hat and the crow's feet at the corners of his eyes that he's spent the better part of his life under the sun in the saddle. Gilbert gave me a little history lesson on the ranch behind the rodeo.



PHOTO BY RICHARD LEVINE

Kaycee Feild racked up 85 points aboard Calgary Stampede's superstar stud Grated Coconut to win the 2008 Rancho Mission Viejo bareback riding title. The son of ProRodeo Hall of Famer Lewis Feild won the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association title in June and will ride at his first Wrangler National Finals Rodeo in December.

Southern California is congested now. But way back when, Rancho Mission Viejo was 230,000 acres of wide-open wilderness. The Department of the Navy bought 180,000 acres of it in 1942 to establish what is now Camp Pendleton, according to Aguirre, and today's Rancho Mission Viejo is a 23,000-acre cattle operation.

"This was an original land grant, and the O'Neill family has owned it since 1882," explained Aguirre, who's worked the Southeast Orange County ranch for 41 years. "We have a tremendous Western heritage that's disappearing here in Orange County."

Chairman Aguirre and his committee of six started this rodeo to keep the region's historic cowboy culture alive. At this point, it looks like a draw to me when it comes to who's happier with the concept—the cowboys or the sellout crowds.

"This is a way to show people in this part of the country what the Western way of life is all about," Aguirre said. "We've made rodeo fans out of Southern California socialites. We've expanded rodeo's fan base by bringing in the best of the best—cowboys and stock. These people are now going to the NFR (Wrangler National Finals Rodeo). And I enjoy that we're giving the cowboys an opportunity to make some money."

"Back in the day, they got 100,000 people to come watch the rodeo in the Los Angeles Coliseum, which was a one-header. I had that in the back of my mind all along. The old cowboys loved coming to L.A. to win a lot of money."

The green-grass Oaks Blenheim/Rancho Mission Viejo Riding Park has been home to the Olympic Trials in various equestrian events, including Grand Prix jumping and dressage. Sand is hauled onto the arena floor for the rodeo, providing a dust-free, country-club environment.

A covered grandstand, which was jam-packed both days, spans one length of the arena. The other side has tent-covered tables of eight that sell for \$10,000 a round in the front row, and \$5,000 a pop in row two. Capistrano community companies entertain their VIPs at the rodeo. Everybody loves a cold Coke and a rodeo dog. But how does fine wine and a slab of prime rib, served on white china atop a pressed white-linen tablecloth, grab you? The best part is that the cowboys eat right alongside the socialites.

"This is a social event," said Aguirre, who works the other 363 days of the year as Rancho Mission Viejo's executive vice president of ranch operations. "And we now give about \$150,000 a year to charity. (More than \$850,000 in eight years, he said.) This year it was \$50,000 each to the R.H. Dana School, where the rodeo last year bought playground equipment that's accessible to kids in wheelchairs; the Camino Health Center, where doctors donate their time in an emergency room for underprivileged families with no insurance; and the Shea Therapeutic Riding School for handicapped children. The point is, we give all the money away."

ProRodeo Hall of Fame stock contractor Cotton Rosser's the consummate showman, and he's been right there with Aguirre since the start to help make it happen.



PHOTO BY RICHARD LEVINE

There's something more than the cool coastal breeze in the air that gives the rodeo in San Juan Capistrano an atmosphere of its own. It's a unique combination the cowboys describe as "fun," "laid back" and "ritzy."

"The first year we were here, Gilbert wanted to know why all the world champs—the Joe Beavers and Fred Whitfields—were up in the slack on Friday," Rosser remembers. "I told him they asked for Friday, so they could get to other rodeos. He asked, 'How do you fix that?' I said, 'Put up \$100,000.' So he did. And now it's \$140,000. The second year, we went to the top 30 cowboys, no slack. Everybody loves this thing. Ninety percent of these sponsors are back for their eighth year."

It's all about cowboys and community in San Juan Capistrano. With bucking chutes at both ends, and by running the team roping and bulldogging from one end and the tie-down roping from the other, everyone in the packed house has a front-row seat for some of it. And the committee goes out of its way to level this literal playing field by bringing in a calf and a steer for everyone. Rosser also rallies other stock contractors to bring in the best buckers. It's just so much better for all involved when the luck-of-the-draw factor is minimized.

"You have Cotton's best 20 bucking horses, our best 20 and Calgary's best 20," explained Binion Cervi. "All the wolves are here, and our best horses let us showcase the best cowboys' talent. This rodeo started from scratch and has come to the top in eight years."

NFR pickup man Gary Rempel has worked for the Calgary Stampede for 24 years. He travels with the bucking horses and picks up. "The worst part of this rodeo for us is getting here," Rempel said. "It's a long, long ways. We came here from Caldwell (Idaho), which is 950 miles, and we're headed to Ellensburg (Wash.), which is 1,150 miles. But once you get here, it's as good as it gets."

"We all bring our best buckers, and the cowboys are of the same caliber as the horses. (The bulls are Rosser's, Julio Moreno's and a few of Cervi's.) That makes it fun for all of us. This is one of my favorite rodeos. It's beautiful, and you can't beat this breeze. Too bad it's only two days. It'd be nice if it ran for a week."

Announcers Bob Tallman and Bob Feist have fun making connections between the cowboys and the crowd. They took up an impromptu collection

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of \$100 bills from the tables set on Sunday, and handed it over the arena wall to young bull rider Josh Verburg after his 6.51-second knife fight with the renowned Reindeer Dippin'.

"This is what rodeo's coming to, a mini NFR in two days," Tallman said. "Committee/economy is the business control that rodeo must have. Those who spend the money deserve to make the money, and contestants are paid as they should be."

"It's an announcer's dream to have the cream of the crop to sell," added Feist. "The best thing about this rodeo is the timing. The 16th to 30th guys need this big shot to get into the Top 15. You have to earn the right to be here, and there's a big incentive to get that done."

True. As Fred Whitfield put it, "The only person who's going to say anything bad about this rodeo is the 31st guy. We need to have at least 20 of these a year."

You never know who you might see spectating at this one.

Roy Cooper was there with his baby boy, Tuf, who's suddenly 18. Think déjà vu 1976, when Daddy Roy revolutionized the tie-down roping and won his first world title as a rookie. "This is it," said eight-time World Champion Super Looper Roy. "I wish I could still rope. I'd love to rope here. A rodeo like this is what makes it fun."

When I wasn't visiting back behind the chutes, I had the privilege of sharing a table with the iconic Phil Lyne and his wife, Sarah, who with her open-bag generosity tried to founder me on Kettle Korn. Phil quietly won five gold buckles, two in the all-around and two in the tie-down roping (1971 and 1972), then one way down the road in steer roping in 1990.

My favorite feat of Phil's was his winning the bull riding and tie-down roping averages at the 1972 NFR. How's that for handy? And, amazingly enough, Ace Berry struck at both ends of the arena at that same NFR in the bareback riding and team roping. The Lynes were there to visit Aguirre and see their son-in-law, bullfighter Shorty Gotham, in action.

"I've been to a lot of rodeos, but I've never seen anything like this," Phil said. "Everything is just so nice, and it's all at ease. The quality of the stock and the contestants—it's all here. This rodeo is something special. The arena conditions are perfect, and so is the weather. It's just about as good as you can get."

Cooper's fellow eight-time World Champion Joe Beaver called it a year after Caldwell earlier in August, when he pulled up to tend to family business. But he took a timeout and made the trek West for this one. "I wouldn't miss this for anything," Beaver said. "This is how it's supposed to be. We should have one of these a month. I came out for this one, and I'm going home from here. That's what I think of it. Gilbert's done what everybody wants to do. He's got the best guys, the best money for a two-day event, the best stock and the best seats—covered grandstands or a table under a tent—take your pick."

The sight of reigning Cowboy King Trevor Brazile galloping his horses across the green grass before he roped looked like a post card. In 2007, Trevor was the first guy since Super Looper Cooper in 1983 to win rodeo's Triple Crown. In San Juan, Brazile jolted my brain with the thought that a Quadruple Crown is absolutely not out of the question for this roping phenom in 2008.

Trevor and his partner, Patrick Smith, won this year's Rancho Mission Viejo team roping title with a snappy 4.5-second run. Trevor also placed second to Tuf Cooper in the tie-down roping. After San Juan, Trevor was way out in the lead in the world all-around race, second in the tie-down

and steer roping, and third in the world among team roping headers.

"This is kind of a different rodeo atmosphere," Brazile said. "The limos are dropping off the fans. It's a laid-back atmosphere, which is how it should be, and it's one of the biggest rodeos of the summer. They pay the price to get the best guys, and a third of the field wins a check. This is a season-changing rodeo this time of year. The best guys in the world are here, so you've got to bring your A-Game. But winning this rodeo is like winning two two-headers. It has a big impact."

"We go to 70 rodeos a year, and this one's special," Smith added. "They give us Haagen-Dazs ice cream here."

Tuf Cooper and Kaycee Feild top my list of San Juan young guns who are obviously taking aim at making me feel old, among a long list of much more important goals. It's impossible to think that it's already time to interview my friends' kids. My beaten-up ego aside, if you don't know these kids, it's time. They have arrived, and they are headliners, just like their dads.

You can throw a rock over the fence from Roy's arena to Trevor's. And Trevor's wife, Shada, is Tuf, Clif and Clint's stepsister. So, Tuf and Trevor's 8-flat and 8.1 kept the San Juan one-two punch all in the family.

"I love one-headers, because I don't like to hold anything back," Tuf said. "Sometimes you've got to safety up a little in an average. I'm 18, so I have to take as many chances as I can. I try to win first every time. It's won me a lot of money this year, but running at the barrier, reaching, and wrap and a hooeys have cost me too. But I'm not changing anything. It's gotten me this far."

Interestingly, it was Trevor who put a wrap and a hooey on one in San Juan. But he was up on Saturday, so he had to figure the risk was worth the reward. And hey, this is a one-header. In a veteran move, Tuf used a clutch extra wrap on Sunday to close the deal. His internal clock told him he had that extra tick of time to make sure.

Tuf Cooper is headed for his first Finals in December. So is Lewis and Veronica Feild's baby, Kaycee, who in June creamed the competition for the 2008 National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association bareback riding crown while rodeoing for Coach Lewis' Utah Valley State College in Orem. Like Phil's, Lewis' full-time cowboy career was short but very sweet, and in Feild's case complete with world all-around and bareback riding championships.

The junior Feild took the San Juan Capistrano victory lap with 85 points aboard Calgary Stampede's legendary stud Grated Coconut.

"I was really excited to have him for the first time, but I knew I had my hands full," Feild said of the 2003, 2004, 2006 and 2007 Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association Bareback Horse of the Year. "I knew he was going to be a lot of work. But it was fun after it was over. It makes a big difference when a few stock contractors bring in their best buckers. It's not a drawing contest before you get here. This is a ritzy, high-class rodeo."

World Bareback Riding leader Steven Dent and three-time World Champ Will Lowe split second and third in the event, and were just one point off the winning pace. "We all get to fly into this

one and see some different country," Dent said. "I grew up in Nebraska. I'd never seen a palm tree except on TV until I started rodeoing."

"We're all here to relax and enjoy ourselves," added the Lowe Rider. "We're not worried about a thing when we get to this one. The sun's shining, and the horses are bucking. These people work hard to make it fun for us. It's top notch across the board."

Like Lowe, Royce Ford is breathing down the back of Dent's neck in the



Tuf Cooper brings to mind a "second coming" of his ProRodeo Hall of Fame Dad "Super Looper" Roy Cooper. Baby brother Cooper boarded a horse they call Boo to win the tie-down roping event in San Juan Capistrano in 8-flat.

bareback riding race. And like Cooper and Feild, Ford is riding for Generation Next. He follows in the footsteps of his Hall of Fame Daddy Bruce Ford, who won it all five times. Bruce and Joe Alexander co-own the record.

"It's all about the atmosphere at this rodeo," Royce said. "It's just relaxed here. The hospitality's great, they add a whole lot of money and everybody has a chance. They work hard to make this a good rodeo for us, and we appreciate it."

As you can see, this rodeo has a way of uniting guys from both ends of the arena. They're all in agreement on this one. "I wish more rodeos made you feel like San Juan does," said eight-time World Champion Team Roper Speed Williams. "The cowboys eat right with the people who are paying \$10,000 a table. We rub elbows with a different class of people here, kind of like we do in Dallas. We don't see so many limos at other rodeos. Gilbert was one of the first guys who limited his rodeo to a small number of contestants. He wanted two perfs, the top 30 in the world and no slack. He wanted a show, and he got one."

At 45, five-time World Champion Saddle Bronc Rider Billy Etbauer will this year break his own NFR saddle bronc riding qualifications record when he heads to his 20th straight Finals. The goal is a sixth gold buckle in the event, which would match the mark of Casey Tibbs and Dan Mortensen.

"This is what you want to do—come ride one horse for big money," Etbauer said. "The crowd's great, and the big money's up. When you can get on one horse for this kind of money, it's awesome. They take care of the fans and the cowboys at this rodeo." Cody Wright won San Juan with 86 points aboard Rosser's Black Wasp, and Etbauer split eighth. They were one-two in the world at rodeo's end.

Dean Gorsuch, the 2006 world champ, won the 2008 San Juan steer wrestling championship in 3.7 seconds. Reigning Champ of the World Jason Miller didn't cash any chips this round, but still likes the odds. "Ten guys win money here, so every third guy gets a check," Miller mentioned. "And every dollar counts right now. They do a good job of putting 30 steers together so they're even, and we appreciate that."

Zack Oakes came out king among the bull riders at San Juan this year with 88 points on Rosser's Jack & Water. But no one needed a shot more than bubble-boy bull rider Spud Jones, who was 16th in the world before San Juan and took a three-spot hike up to 13th, thanks to a fourth-place finish.

"This is sweet," Jones said, while loading up a plate before the rodeo. "You can't beat this scenery. It's pretty awesome to be right by the ocean when you live in New Mexico. I want to achieve my goal of my first NFR, so this is really fun and exciting."

Other rodeo committeemen come to Capistrano to join in the fun. Mike Lucke is the Reno Rodeo's second vice president now, and will serve as president in 2011. This was his third year to take it all in. "I come down here to help Cotton and see a good rodeo," Lucke said. "You have the top 30 cowboys and all-star NFR stock. This is a very successful event. It's coveted for these guys to qualify to be here. It's a good deal for everyone."

The Justin SportsMedicine Program's Dr. Tandy Freeman might be the friendliest face in the crowd to a hurt cowboy. Thankfully, there were no major incidents as far as injuries go, so he got to enjoy the weekend with everyone else.

"This is good watching," said Freeman, who's a dedicated and respected member of the cowboy community. "For two days you've got the top guys going at each other for big money. Great stock levels the playing field, so it's not a drawing contest. And we're seeing the top 30 guys at the time of year when only 15 get to go to the NFR. The top 1-10 guys are trying to defend their positions, and the 11th to 30th guys are trying to fill those last five spots. This is a small-town rodeo with a big-time emphasis on how it all ends up. A guy can really make a move at this one, and that makes it really fun for the fans."



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