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HOT

'Man versus beast': Bullride Mania bucks its way through the Frederick County Fair

By MOLLY WILLIAMS The Winchester Star
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Millbrook High School senior Braydon Smith, 17, is thrown from a bull during Bullride Mania on Monday evening at Frederick County Fair.

Jeff Taylor/The Winchest

CLEAR BROOK — The sun hung low Monday evening, the thick, late July heat dissipating as the grandstand at the Frederick County Fair filled with spectators.

The couture du jour was belt buckles, boots, flare jeans and cowboy hats — all appropriate attire for the main event.

Between the smell of kettle corn, the sound of country music and the promise of some honest to goodness entertainment, the atmosphere was undeniably Americana.

The rodeo had, once again, come to Frederick County.

"[M]an versus beast, it's what everyone talks about," said 24-year-old Ryan Badillo, a novice bull rider who lives here in Winchester. "It's a good time, and the rush keeps you hooked."

Badillo was one of four novice riders to take on the rodeo, run by Pennsylvania-based Bullride Mania, along with 12 professional open competition riders. He stayed on his bull for eight seconds, meeting the sport's scoring requirement and notching a 68-point ride.

A native of Lovettsville, Badillo says bull riding has always been a dream. Now, he's pretty much doing it full time, though he sometimes works other jobs since "this don't always pay the bills."

"I've wanted to do it since I was a little kid," he said. "It wasn't in my family. Football and baseball is what I did all growing up. And once I was done with that out of college, I got bored. So I said no better time to start than now."

Badillo's journey to the rodeo is not unlike that of his fellow "bull fighters," as the announcer called them. Many expressed holding a lifelong interest in the sport before diving into it as competitors.

Zack Oberholzer, a 20-year-old, Fredonia, Pennsylvania-based cowboy, said he grew up watching rodeos. At 14, he attended a bull riding clinic, and he's been hooked ever since.

Six years later, Oberholzer says he's "heating up," so to speak. A full-time bull rider, he won \$7,000 at rodeos just this week.

"I've just started figuring it out," he said. "And I'm just following God's plan he has for me ... and just taking it one bull at a time."

Oberholzer made an impressive ride Monday night, holding strong as a bull named Last Ride tried to buck him from its back. When the eight-second buzzer sounded, he sprang off the bull as if launched from a cannon. The stands erupted with cheers and applause.

But it was too good to be true. Oberholzer touched the bull with his free hand, meaning his ride didn't qualify for a score. An upset for sure, but a crowd-pleaser nonetheless.

Local student Brayden Smith, a rising senior at Millbrook High School, walked away without a score Monday night as well. His novice ride didn't make it to that eight-second benchmark. After his time in the arena, though, Smith was in relatively good spirits.

"I didn't get to cover my bull, but I'm glad that I'm breathing and alive," he said. "But it's always fun. Even if you don't make eight seconds, it's always fun getting out there and doing what you love."

Bull riding is as much a competition between human riders as it is between, as Badillo put it, man and beast. In fact, the bull's performance — measured by strength, force and consistent high kicking of the hind legs, according to the website Rodeo All-Star — accounts for 50 of the 100 possible points a rider can receive.

Bri Holland, who runs the stock contract company DC Cattle with her husband, Dixon, says she believes that many of the bulls, like their human counterparts, enjoy participating in the sport.

"Dixon's and my mentality is when we start off a bull, if they bellow and ... they're just not happy, they're not enjoying it. And so we pull them, we just, we take them off the trailer," Holland said.

Some bulls, though, know how to bring on the competition.

"We have a bull named Stonewall who will lay down and take a nap before each show, and all the guys love him," Holland said. "He'll be sprawled out just snoozing, and you have to literally wake Stonewall up, and he'll go right into the chute. But as soon as that gate opens, he kicks it on and he'll be an 88-and-a-half-point ride."

Another bull on Holland's roster, Spur Bait, gets "really angry with the rider if he gets covered (the rider stays on for the minimum time) the first night."

"And so he'll completely switch it the second night and do a completely different trip," she said. "So I believe that some of the bulls enjoy it. They're athletes, for sure."

Aside from the adrenaline rush, the pride and the primal satisfaction of conquering an animal weighing close to a ton, the contestants at the fair Monday night cited the deep sense of community among their fellow riders as one of the things they most love about the rodeo.

“Your buddies behind the chute hyping you up when you get sat down (on the bull), it’s, like, one of the best feelings in the world, and there’s no other feeling to compare to it, to the family environment,” said Smith, who hopes to go pro after his high school graduation next year.

“The people you meet, all the guys that I ride with are just as close as my family is, and it’s just a brotherhood, basically,” said Oberholzer, “and I really enjoy being as close as I am with everybody.”

With his 68-point ride, Badillo pulled out a win against Wyatt Clarke’s 65 points in the novice category. Pro-riders Melvin Beyler and Evan Pack finished the initial “long round” in the top two slots with 77 and 62 points, respectively. They went head-to-head in a “short round” where Pack came out on top with 84 points.

As the evening wound down, the western sky wore a pleasant pink hue, a dusty haze lingering over the grandstand as the festivities drew to a close.

And while this year’s rodeo has come and gone, there’s always hope that the event will return the next time the fair is held.

After all, as the saying goes, a cowboy never says goodbye.

— Contact Molly Williams at mwilliams@winchesterstar.com

Molly Williams