

GoodWeekend

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SATURDAY AGE

“The bulls
teach you
a lesson
sometimes,
about
losing and
winning”

Tately Spain, 12, rodeo rider

BY *Konrad Marshall*





Well-padded “protection athletes” stand ready to get between rider and bull once the rider is thrown to the ground. “You’ve gotta have plenty of heart,” says Wangi man Darryl Chong, pictured in blue, closest to the rider.

“YOU’VE GOTTA WORK YOUR SELF THROUGH THE FEAR”

Medical staff stand by. Riders are tossed into the air by infuriated beasts with names like Hellraiser. Bones may be broken, brain fluid even leaked. But for those competing in the inaugural Indigenous Rodeo Championships, the threat of injury’s only part of a much bigger story.

STORY BY *Konrad Marshall* PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Josh Robenstone*

WE’RE BEHIND the bucking chutes at the Mount Isa Mines Rodeo, and as the sun sets over a rocky copper ridgeline in this industrial outpost of remote Queensland, the announcers ramp up their enthusiasm. “On the famous red dirt of Buchanan Park, we’re about to go to battle!” they cry. “Jason Craigie! From the Pitta Pitta mob! Is up next!”

I’ve been studying Craigie, a 33-year-old Indigenous man from Darwin, as he readies himself. He’s about to get on a bronc, an untamed horse annoyed to be there. I don’t blame him; the bronc, that is. The huffing beast has been fed here through a mechanical funnel of pens and gates that ends with a slender cage, opening onto a vast arena. He’s basically a bullet in a chamber.

Craigie doesn’t look happy, either. He twists his torso and breathes deeply, sucking in tension and blowing out nerves. Then he sits above the animal, tugging furiously at his rope to make sure it’s tight, looking like he’s trying to start a chainsaw. “Jason Craigie!” cries the caller. “Workin’ his hand into the snug-fittin’ bareback riggin’!”

Craigie is a fencing contractor – a man who spends his days ramming steel posts into the desert and twisting barbed wire with pliers – but he’s also been riding in rodeos since he was 13, growing up in Borroloola in the Northern Territory, about 50 kilometres inland from the Gulf of Carpentaria. “You keep a vision in your head of what it’s gonna look like and what it’s gonna feel like. Muscle memory,” he says, smiling. “If it’s a big atmosphere, it gets your nerves going, pumps you up a bit. Nothing like having 3000 eyes on you. It’s game on. The good stuff.”

This being the inaugural Indigenous Rodeo Championships – a new day-night showcase featuring 85 Aboriginal riders within a wider week-long rodeo held mid-August – definitely qualifies as the good stuff. There are crack ringers and riders here from most mobs – the latest in a long and illustrious line of Indigenous stockmen – now with a chance to connect. “Rodeo’s always been that place,” says Craigie. “When you’re a kid, you look at the other cowboys and think, ‘I just wanna be like him.’ Your father does it, your

uncles do it. You’ve gotta be in it to win it. But you get nervous. You’ve gotta do everything right. Be in timing with the horse. Lay back. Sit back. Jerk and pull. Control your upper body. It has to be tidy.”

Only seconds left now until the mayhem. “We gotta get this horse out!” the callers roar. “And there’s the nod from Craigie! Come on Mount Isa, LET’S MAKE SOME NOISE!!!!” And with that Craigie goes shooting across the dirt, and the horse convulses and turns with the violence of a missile in a death spiral, and ZZ Top is pumping from the stadium speakers, and Craigie holds on for the required eight seconds before tumbling down hard, ready for appraisal and praise. “Oh my word! Ladies and gentlemen! As the numbers come in, talk about putting a smile on the cowboy’s dial! Sixty-seven points! Happy cowboy Jason Craigie in the number one spot! About to walk away with that bareback buckle!”

We chat moments later, and his eyes are wired. No injuries, but his right arm is strapped tightly at all the crucial tension points – wrist, forearm, elbow and bicep – pre-emptively protecting every tendon that was just

jerked and jolted. He’s broken an arm and a leg before, a couple of fingers and a couple of ribs. “It can be hard to get back on – it doesn’t come naturally – but you get your first one done and you’re back into it,” Craigie says. “You’ve got to work yourself through the fear. The heart thumping. Getting tossed around. There’s nothing else like it.”

IT WOULD be nice if the story of black cowboys in Australia began benignly. But it was born in the late 1800s through greed and blood, with white settlers seeing wealth in pastoral pursuits. Frontier violence was still worse than most people appreciate, and coming onto cattle properties to work was a way for Indigenous people to survive while staying on country.

That makes it sound like a pragmatic decision, but in reality they were often forcibly put on stations at the whim of the Protector of Aborigines. “They had no choice,” says Dr Delyna Baxter from Charles Darwin University. “They were told where to go, and taken out there. Then dumped on the edge of town after a stint, where reserves and missions were often created.”

Indigenous workers were virtually bought and bartered. “I’m still shocked by how much went on in terms of forcible kidnappings,” says Professor Ann McGrath from the Australian National University’s School of History. “This is all documented. It’s not like there’s a problem with evidence.”

Such arrangements led to distasteful colonial conventions. The first person I meet at the rodeo is Davin Koolatah, 51, a Kunjin man who’s come from Mareeba

in north Queensland with his son Travis, 17, and whose last name was bestowed upon his grandmother because she worked at a property called Koolatah Station. This was common. The legendary drover Jimmy Wavehill helped spark the Aboriginal land rights movement in 1966 when he walked away from his namesake – the Wave Hill Station in the Northern Territory – protesting alongside Vincent Lingiari, the protagonist of the Paul Kelly song, *From Little Things Big Things Grow*.

YET INDIGENOUS stockmen found a way to excel. Prior to World War II, they comprised 90 per cent of northern cattle-industry labour, and as the 20th century rolled on they became the stars of the show, famed for everything from finding food and water to a particular way of throwing a lasso. “They were indispensable, highly skilled, often head stockmen,” says McGrath. “They saw themselves as born in the cattle.”

Indeed, the most famous Australian stockman of all might well have been Indigenous. Anthony Sharwood, author of *The Brumby Wars*, wrote a chapter that fixates forensically on the Banjo Paterson poem *The Man From Snowy River*, before arriving at a controversial conclusion. Sharwood cites the “pine-clan ridges” and “torn and rugged battlements” of the final stanza, and posits that it could only describe the Byadbo Wilderness, in the rain shadow of the Australian Alps, where many Indigenous stockmen lived in the 1890s. He speaks of a hill there, still known to the native Ngarigo as “Where Dick got frightened”, named for a black drover who carefully followed his cattle over a suicidally steep

slope. “It’s geography and demography and common sense,” says Sharwood. “Banjo took his poet’s wand and made cattle into horses. He made a sensible pursuit into a heroic chase. And he turned a black man white to appease the literary conventions or taste of the day.”

Patrick Cooke, 50, reckons that sounds about right. He’s one of the key people involved in staging this first Indigenous Rodeo Championships event. “We hear the stories about our ancestors working on the stations: you got up and did your job, you were out in the air, out on country,” he says. “But we’ve lost a whole generation of ringers. There aren’t as many uncles out bush any more.”

Cooke, a Kalkadoon man and head of Mount Isa’s Mona Aboriginal Corporation, says that’s why this event is so important. Cooke’s mother Mona died when he was six, and he was put in foster care, ending up with a non-Indigenous family in a Mackay housing commission property. “I was one of those kids in the system,” he says. “It wasn’t all ripe cherries.” He came back to Mount Isa when he was 19, and worked on the cattle station of an aunt, learning a trade. “I went out bush and changed my life forever,” he says. “I went ringin’ – riding horses, working with livestock – and it was the greatest eye-opener. There was freedom but responsibility: do something wrong and you’re going to get hurt.”

The rodeo provides safety equipment for boys and girls – chest plates, chaps, spurs, ropes, helmets, gloves – not just to mitigate mishaps but because they don’t want anyone to feel left out if they don’t have means. Cooke’s company also runs a Youth Justice on Country

program, showing troubled teenagers how to ride a horse and read the landscape. “It’s a little about mustering, and a little about getting up at three o’clock in the morning to work,” he says. “It also gives them a bit of respite from town life, and a sense of pride. A different lifestyle. Maybe a different life.”

The rodeo is undeniably a different lifestyle. The names on the entrants list are pure country. Kade and Cade. Cooper and Nash. Brock and Jace. Jackson (Clark) and Jackson (Gray). There’s one dude named Rope. Rope McPhee from Townsville. Rope competes in both team roping and rope and tie.

I spend four days surrounded by cowboys, and they’re long and lean and leaning back, thumbs in the front pockets of their Wranglers, as if pointing to the glistening belt buckles they wear to signify victorious rides in Widgee and Moree and Myrtleford. They smoke roll-your-own cigarettes, always cupped inwards, sheltered from the wind by gargantuan leathery mitts. How tough are they? Out here, they say, they’re so tough they plant nails and harvest crowbars.

But they’re also peacocks. Their chaps have tassels and flares, and their spurs jangle and glint. Their belts are ornate, fixed with turquoise stones in silver settings, with diamond designs and paisley patterns, and naked women and the ace of spades. Their check shirts are always tucked in tightly, with properties and businesses stitched into the chest, from Destiny Downs and K Ranch to Gulf Western Oil and Sunrise Helicopters.

Their hats are dipped low, and just so, because you’re no one here without a hat. In fact, to enter the chutes you need full western wear. There’s a sign demanding it, and so I dutifully buy some denim and a collared shirt, but I’m most excited by the hat: my choice between Stetsons and Statesmens, Jacarus and Akubras, with specialty names like Ranger and Riverina, Countryman and Cattleman. I opt for an Akubra – the Rough Rider to be exact – made of dark brown wool felt with a centre-creased crown, and braided double horse-tail band. I perch it on my head and feel like a character out of the Kevin Costner ranch drama *Yellowstone*. I kinda look like one, too, at least according to the person handling PR for the event, who calls me “Rip” for the remainder of the rodeo. I may never take off this hat.

IT’S A subculture rich with flavour. Wiradjuri woman and writer Anita Heiss grew up a fan of the singing cowboy Gene Autry, and had always wanted to see rodeo for herself, and finally did in Warwick and Rockhampton. She’s working on a novel titled *Rodeo Dreaming*, and as part of her research bought blinged jeans and check shirts and cowboy boots and a Maverick hat (which she now wears in the city, too). “I think that’s fair. It’s a dress code,” she says. “You want to come on this turf, you wear the gear.”

She saw these events through a lens of pageantry and fascination, but also studied native buckjumpers and bush balladeers, useful background for a scene in which the city-girl protagonist asks the roughneck cowboy why he does what he does. “And he tells her, ‘This has been in our tradition forever,’ and that’s the ever-evolving culture in this country,” Heiss says. “I want to tell both sides of the story. And also how true love knows no boundaries.”

The potential for animal cruelty does give Heiss reason to pause, however. It’s hard to reconcile riding beasts for sport when Indigenous people see animals as such totemic creatures. Animal rights activists maintain, for instance, that a bull’s testicles are manipulated to spur their explosive behaviour. Rodeo organisations



From top: local children prepare for the Welcome To Country ceremony; Jason Craigie (with Rueben Craigie), who has been competing in rodeos since age 13; Tommy Gertz, 58, gets ready to ride a big bronc; stockmen prepare to face the music.

(naturally) maintain this is not the case, claiming their bulls come from bloodlines “bred to buck” – a disposition that’s given a nudge by something called a flank strap: a cotton rope tied around the animal, though not in contact with its genitals.

“Imagine if I wrapped something around your waist, you’d want to get it off,” says Dakota Brandenburg, whose family supplies the vast majority of bulls to the event. “If you tie it just firm enough so they feel it’s there, they want to kick it off.”

MOUNT ISA’S rodeo week isn’t typical. There are small rodeos every week around Australia, but upwards of 30,000 people attend this event every year. It’s the largest of its kind in the southern hemisphere, meaning a roadshow of sideshows tags along, opening with a mardi gras street party in the town centre. Daryl Braithwaite was meant to perform but he tested positive for COVID-19 on arrival, and spent the week quarantined at a hotel. (No matter, Guy Sebastian sang *Horses* for him instead.)

And what is there to say about Fred Brophy’s Boxing Troupe – a tent set up behind a pub, where likely lads and lasses can put their hand to face one of his fighters? Well, if you haven’t sat under a tarp on hay-bale seats, with a can of XXXX Gold, watching a trained boxer wail on a farmer from Cloncurry, while *Boys Light Up* is blaring and a girl stands next to you screaming “F... HIM UP, C...!!!”, have you even lived?

Your answer may be yes, but still, you might concede there’s something in the psyche of regional Australia that’s perhaps not advisable yet certainly visceral and often compelling. (Side note: one of the better fighters is a FIFO miner, with whom I share a meal at the pub. It’s 20 minutes before I mention I’m a journalist. “Shit,” he says. “Thought you were a cowboy.” Like I said, I may never take off this hat.)

This is a genuinely weird place, too. Mount Isa calls itself the “Birthplace of champions” and there are signs boasting as much on the road into town – with pictures of AFL star Simon Black, renegade golfing great Greg Norman, didgeridoo player William Barton, NRL player Scott Prince, actor Deborah Mailman and tennis hero Pat Rafter – but it’s the gigantic mine that dominates all. Smokestacks loom over the town, a catacomb network creeps beneath it, and at 8am and 8pm each day the mine has to detonate the explosives left over from each shift. Stop and listen and you’ll hear the boom and feel the ground shake. It’s not quite *Wake in Fright* but it’s wonderfully unhinged.

It’s worth simply sitting in the shade at the rodeo, paying attention to the schtick of the callers as they assess the stock – “This is a bull that’ll do everything but pull a knife!” – and the competitors: “This cowboy’s busier than Barnaby Joyce on Father’s Day!” Or check out the superhero bronc-riding event, in which riders dress up as Elvis and Superman, while the ladies do an op-shop barrel race, dressed in the rowdiest/dowdiest duds they can find at the Salvos. At the other end of the scale, there’s a black-tie gala held on the arena dirt, which is padded down to resemble brown concrete.

The pinnacle western moment comes on the final day at high noon, when cowboy Fred Osman and his Canadian cowgirl Kyla Dolen – “jackeroo and jillaroo, lovers and accomplices” – are married in front of the crowd. A chestnut stock horse is the ring-bearer, and after the bride throws her bouquet into the crowd, I join two dozen others

in lines on the hallowed turf, holding our hats aloft to form a guard of honour. An hour later, Osman wins his fifth bareback bronc title.

They’re a sentimental lot, and superstitious, paying heed to the rodeo gods. You should never wear green, they say; it’s bad luck. Never ride with money in your pocket, either. And if you put your hat on your table or bed, better burn it. The spiritual side is taken to a quasi-religious level with the public reading of *The Cowboy’s Prayer*, written by another excellently-named cowboy, Clem McSpadden.

The prayer asks not for luck in the chutes, just a chance to compete in a manner that’s pure and clean. “Help us, Lord,” the announcer pleads, “to live our lives here on earth as cowboys, in such a manner that when we make that last inevitable ride to the country up there, where the grass grows lush, green and stirrup-high, and the water runs cool, clear and deep, that you, as our last judge, will take us by the hand and say, ‘Welcome to heaven, cowboy, your entry fees are paid.’ Amen.”

True faith isn’t hard to find. Stafford Swan, 23, has “FAITH” written down the arms of his shirt. Swan is a Wanyi man and horse-breaker at the local Melaleuca Station, and I find him preparing for a bull ride. He rubs rosin into his

rope for grip, then uses a blowtorch to burn off any fraying fibres. He ties his boots tight to his ankles, so they don’t come off him with the force of the ride.

FAITH apparently stands for “Family and Individual Therapeutic Health”, his mum’s business, which works with people who have disability, but he’s also a devout Christian who prays during competition. “Before and after,” he solemnly nods. “You pray for the animal, and over every other cowboy, and everyone in the arena. A quiet word with God.”

Safety is taken seriously. Wanyi man Darryl Chong, 37, has been a “protection athlete” or bullfighter for 18

years. “People hear ‘bullfighter’ and think ‘matador and red rags’, but it’s our job – once a rider gets thrown – to get between the rider and bull. You’ve gotta have plenty of heart, and no fear.” Medical staff are on standby for those moments that treatment or an ambulance or even a medivac helicopter are needed. A rodeo official was killed last year, gored in what was described as a “freak accident” at an event in Tamworth.

The bulls have names and reputations, too. The most infamous was known as Chainsaw. “We don’t really talk about the beasts as much any more,” says Karen Hanna Miller, 52, director of marketing for Isa Rodeo. The Australian Professional Rodeo Association is aware of the bad press surrounding the sport, and prevents outside photography or filming of the action in the arena. “You draw a lot of that negative energy because some people don’t like animal sports. But Chainsaw would buck and then do a lap of the arena, strut around. He was a bull with an ego.”

Chong – who wears padding on his arms and chest, and footy boots for traction – senses every bit of their murderous left, whether they’re named Drag Iron or Hellraiser. He hears them in the chutes, railing against their confinement. They kick the metal bars and sound like something from a scene in *Jurassic Park* where an expert zoologist gravely warns against keeping velociraptors in captivity. “They’re big, they’re bad, they’re mean,” says Chong. “But they’re like humans, too. You don’t know who’s mad and who’s bluffing. Some are quiet, and some of them just want to run you over and horn the hell out of you.”

To my delight there are actual rodeo clowns, too, like “Big Al” Wilson, 58, a former professional bull-rider who won the rodeo here in 1985 and has been proudly clowning for 28 years. “Voted 15 times rodeo comedy clown and specialty action entertainer of the year for Australian rodeos,” he boasts. “We’re a tool for bone-crunchin’ family entertainment!”

A rodeo clown has a few roles. They keep the crowd interested during those slack moments when a bull won’t leave the arena. They also keep the mood light in cases of serious injury. “If someone comes off and breaks a leg – we are talking about the world’s most dangerous sport – then we’re on. Send in the clowns!”

Finally, they’re a last line of defence. Big Al’s worst injury was a bull kick that fractured his skull and saw brain fluid seeping out of his nose: “I’ve got more stitches in me than a corn bag!” His offside, Blue Johnson, 63, once felt a longhorn penetrate his head at the temple, behind his right eye: “I’ve had more bloody broken bones than Evel Knievel!”

Despite the way that sounds, this is a family event. Little kids compete by riding baby bulls called “poddy calves”. At 9.07am on Saturday, a dozen black-shouldered kites circle in the sky as little Ryland Gregory, 8, comes tumbling off his mount. His father, professional bull-rider Pete Gregory from Doomadgee, pats the side of his son’s head and wipes his nose. “Even if you didn’t win,” he whispers, “it’s nothing to be upset about.”

Up next is his 15-year-old boy, “Little Pete”, who stares into the middle distance, past and through everyone. Little Pete’s a little guy with big cowboy energy. His opponent is a beige-and-white-speckled menace with two long loogies of drool dripping down from his lips. “I don’t think there’s any secret,” Little Pete says, after the beast throws him. “To be the best, you gotta ride the best.”

Women compete heavily, too, although mainly in timed events that require trained horses and floats to transport them. Tenisha Erbacher, 27, is a Waluwarra

Right: Stafford Swan, a Wanyi man, horse-breaker and devout Christian, prays during competition. Below: the rodeo offers plenty of less serious entertainment.



Above: Cheryl Thompson drove a bus for eight hours to bring 21 kids to the rodeo. Left: Tately Spain, 12, learnt to ride on a steel drum suspended by ropes and shaken by his mates.

woman who works on Kiana Station, seven hours’ drive from Mount Isa, mustering and checking fences and putting out lick. It’s worth noting that most rodeo events have their roots in such work. Steer-wrestling is sometimes the only way to bring recalcitrant cattle to ground. Roping is the best way to ensnare a runaway cow. Riding a bronc is part of breaking them in. And barrel-racing – powering a horse around a series of drums in a clover-leaf formation – is just a simulation of nimble horsemanship. “You’re on top of this huge horse, it’s a couple of thousand kilos and I’m 65 sopping wet, and you’ve got to steer him around, going a mile a minute,” says Erbacher. “It gets you pumping.”

Erbacher loved the Indigenous event because it honours people like her grandfather, George Ah One, who in 1959 ran a famous stampede of brumbies on a 215-kilometre journey up from Carrandotta, through saltbush plains and spinifex into Mount Isa, for use in the first rodeo ever here. “It gives me pride. And that’s why I do it,” she says. “My granddad was a stockman, my dad was a stockman, and I’m the eldest. The eldest takes the reins.”

THERE’S DEFINITELY a new generation coming through. In between the carnival rides and the eclectic vendors selling overpriced showbags and gaudy fishing shirts is an Indigenous art stall. It’s there I meet Cheryl Thompson, who runs the Alice Riber Student Hostel for low-literacy kids. The boys and girls she helps are from Mount Isa but live with her in Barcaldine, 800 kilometres south-east, and go to high school there.

“They wake up at 6.30am, get their uniforms ready, we serve them breakfast and send them off to the state school, and they do work experience as cabinet-makers and butchers, and find jobs as mechanics and cooks,” she says. She drove 21 such kids here – eight hours in a bus – so that many of them could perform at the rodeo opening ceremony as the Desert Dust Dancers. “For the Aboriginal community, the rodeo is all about family,” she says. “It’s a huge gathering. We meet and we dance

– there’s no stopping us from coming. It’s a modern-day corroboree.”

Yolngu rapper Danzal James Baker, aka Baker Boy, is the headline act for the gathering, and I spot him meeting young competitors like rider Tately Spain. Spain, 12, looks overawed by his encounter with the ARIA winner, and Baker can sense it. “I get really nervous before I jump on stage,” he tells Spain. “But for me, as soon as I get out there, it’s normal, and I’m having fun. Is it the same for you?” They both nod and smile and take a photo.

Later, Spain opens up. He learnt to ride on a steel drum, suspended by ropes and shaken by his mates. He says the bulls are scary. “But they teach you a lesson sometimes,” he says, “about losing and winning.”

I’m told that Spain has natural talent, but is reluctant to ascribe his ability to genetic gifts. Matt Nicholls, 35, is editor of the local *North West Weekly* newspaper, and offers a simile from the nearest AFL side, the Brisbane Lions, where people laud the mercurial Indigenous forward Charlie Cameron for his gifts, while praising white teammate Lachie Neale as the consummate professional. “It’s really important when thinking about riders from Doomadgee and Burketown and Normanton to consider how much time they put in, how they jump on these bulls in bush rodeos,” Nicholls says. “There’s a misconception that our Indigenous athletes are all talent and no hard work, and it shows a real lack of respect. They’re the backbone of rodeo.”

A FULL moon comes into view late on the night of the Indigenous Rodeo Championships, and the evening begins to feel spiritual. The Welcome to Country is moving, and it’s suddenly easy to imagine the wildest dreams of the Mona Aboriginal Corporation’s Patrick Cooke. “It will only get bigger and badder,” he predicts. “My ultimate goal into the future is to have a global First Nations rodeo championship, with Inuit riders, Native American riders, everyone. Come on down.”

There’s one guy who mightn’t be there. It’s Tommy Gertz, 58, a Nudgiji man from Herberton in the Atherton Tablelands region. He talks to me in darkness as a diggeridoo plays, explaining how his ride tonight will be his last. Getting too old. “But we’re in the limelight now,” he says, smiling. “Boys from the north, south, east, west, standing up and riding for their people. No way I was going to miss this.” Gertz used to work mustering cattle, and believes Indigenous people do have a gift: a way of horse-whispering learnt on the stations and then passed down. “It’s hard to explain but there’s knowledge and wisdom,” he says. “When you walk up to a horse, he can see through you. He can look you in the eye and tell if you’re good or not.”

The big bronc he meets tonight tosses him up into the black sky. Maybe it forgot what Gertz had whispered into his ear beforehand. “I talked a little bit of language to him. I always do,” he says. “I say, ‘Ninda wanda mitcha, jilbu mitcha. This is my home. My country. My missus’ country. Give me a good ride.’” ■

Good Weekend visited the event courtesy of Mount Isa Mines Rodeo and Rydges Hotels.

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