

**The Rural Roots of College Rodeo**  
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### **Introduction**

Over the past 85 years, college rodeo has evolved from small, single-campus fundraisers, celebrations, and/or competitions held primarily at land-grant institutions throughout the west and southwest into an internationally recognized North American collegiate sport. The earliest college cowboys and cowgirls were, in almost all respects, the sons and daughters of rural families (Mahoney 2004). While preparing for careers in fields such as farming and ranching at the various agricultural and mechanical institutions of higher learning, college students from rural areas began in the 1920s to hone their roping and riding skills at campus rodeos and rodeo-related competitions, and soon afterwards at organized intercollegiate rodeos. By the middle of the twentieth century, popular press articles had perpetuated, rightly or wrongly, the notion of rodeo as being the preferred and/or natural sport of college students from rural America (Bruce 1949; Mahoney 2004; Muir 1951; O'Neil 1955).

Throughout its history, college rodeo has received virtually no attention in the rural sociological literature and the literature conveys limited information about the sport. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the reader to the collegiate sport which, either justly or unjustly, was once viewed as the favored extracurricular activity of students from rural areas. Specifically, in this paper I provide an overview of the institutionalization of the collegiate rodeo and offer a description of the current organization of the sport. Data collected from secondary sources, primarily the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association's rulebook, Constitution and By-Laws (National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association [NIRA] 2003) were used to illustrate the organizational arrangement.

### **Institutionalization of Collegiate Rodeo: An Overview**

The genesis of college rodeo is commonly traced to a fund-raising event held at Texas A&M University (then known as the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas) on November 5, 1920 (Mahoney 2004). The first campus rodeo competition at Texas A&M was held to raise money for the school's livestock judging team to travel to the International Livestock Show in Chicago. The competition consisted of bronco busting, goat roping, saddle racing, mounted wrestling, polo, a greased pig contest, and country music. Two years later, in 1922, Colorado A&M (now known as Colorado State University) produced a campus rodeo to raise travel funds for its livestock judging team. The campus rodeo was called the "Kow College Carnival" and included events such as bronc riding, greased pig catching, wild cow milking, and dancing (Mahoney 2004).

Campus rodeo competitions flourished at Texas A&M and Colorado A&M throughout the 1920s. During the 1930s, the idea of hosting rodeo competitions and/or integrating rodeo-related activities into campus functions spread rapidly, especially at land-grant schools throughout the West and Southwest. For example, the University of Arizona staged its first college rodeo on April 30, 1938. Also, in the late 1930s at the University of Nebraska, a student agricultural organization sponsored a campus-wide celebration called the "Farmers' Fair." The Fair included such activities as a beard growing contest, a livestock show, inter-sorority riding contests, donkey polo, flour-dough rassling, and also a few rodeo events (Ranney 1960).

On April 8, 1939, forty-four men and eighteen women from eleven colleges and universities in California and Arizona competed in an intercollegiate rodeo (Mahoney 2004). The intercollegiate rodeo was produced by Cal Godshall, a California entrepreneur, and held at his ranch near Victorville, California. College cowboys competed in wild steer riding, calf roping, wild cow milking, saddle bronc riding, and team tying; cowgirls competed in the rescue race, potato race, bareback and saddling race, wild cow milking, and pipe and needle race (Mahoney 2004).

The concept of intercollegiate rodeo soon spread to college campuses across the western United States. Approximately one year after the Godshall rodeo, on March 20, 1940, the University of Arizona staged its first intercollegiate rodeo. Contestants entered from the University of Arizona and four other colleges – Arizona State, Flagstaff State Teachers College, Colorado A&M, and the University of New Mexico (Mahoney 2004). Two years later, the University of Arizona’s annual intercollegiate rodeo included steer riding, calf roping, bronc riding, team tying, wild cow milking, and a wild mule race, and drew contestants from Texas A&M, New Mexico A&M, Colorado State, University of New Mexico, California Polytechnic, and the University of Wyoming (Menchinger 1942). In March of 1947, the University of Arizona held its eighth annual intercollegiate rodeo. Cowboys and cowgirls from the University of Arizona competed against contestants from Arizona State College at Flagstaff, Arizona State College at Tempe, University of California at Davis, California Polytechnic University at San Luis Obispo, New Mexico A&M, University of New Mexico, Texas A&M, University of Utah, and University of Wyoming (Mahoney 2004). Other colleges and universities to embrace early the notion of intercollegiate rodeo included: Colorado State University, which held its first intercollegiate rodeo in 1940, followed by the University of Wyoming (in 1941), Hardin-Simmons University (in 1947), the University of Nebraska (in 1947), Montana State University (in 1948), and Washington State University (in 1950) (Friedman 1953; Mahoney 2004; Ranney 1960).

As the number of intercollegiate rodeos grew, so did the desire among the contestants to establish an organization to standardize rules, set eligibility criteria, and determine event champions. Realizing the need for a national governing body, representatives from twelve schools throughout Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Colorado assembled during the first intercollegiate rodeo at Sul Ross State Teacher’s College (now known as Sul Ross State University) in Alpine, Texas, in November, 1948, to discuss the problems plaguing the sport (Mahoney 2004; Nelson 1979). Shortly thereafter, in January, 1949, thirty-three representatives from thirteen schools in Texas, Wyoming, Colorado, Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico met in Dallas and wrote a Constitution officially organizing the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association (NIRA). Charlie Rankin of Texas A&M University was appointed acting president. The main purposes of the newly formed association were “to promote intercollegiate rodeoing on a national scale, and work toward this by bringing national recognition to this activity as an organized and standard college activity; to promote the highest type of conduct and sportsmanship at the various rodeos by setting up standards to be met; and to increase and maintain interest of the college students in rodeos and other functions of the West” (Bruce 1949: 21).

The first national finals intercollegiate rodeo was held from April 9 to 11, 1949, in conjunction with the Grand National Junior Livestock Exposition at the San Francisco Cow Palace. Fourteen schools from nine Western states fielded rodeo teams and competed in bareback bronc riding, saddle bronc riding, bull riding, calf roping, steer wrestling, and wild cow milking events. The championship team was Sul Ross State, which had accumulated a total of 345 points over the three-day period. Following Sul Ross was California Polytechnic (300 points), the University of Wyoming (235 points), New Mexico A&M (225 points), the University of New Mexico (190 points), Colorado A&M (165 points), and Texas A&M (110 points). The remaining schools in the scoring included: Oklahoma A&M, Montana State, Texas Tech, Fresno State, Kansas State, Arizona State, and Pierce College (“Intercollegiate Rodeo,” 1949)

Following the finals, an NIRA convention was held on April 15 and 16, 1949, in Denver to revise the Constitution and elect national officers. At the meeting, Texas A&M University's Charlie Rankin was elected president, and the western states were organized into three regions — the Southern, the Rocky Mountain, and the Pacific Northwest. The Southern Region included affiliated rodeo clubs at schools in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, and Louisiana; the Rocky Mountain Region included those in Colorado, Kansas, Utah, Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska; and the Pacific Northwest Region included those in California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Nevada (Bruce 1949).

### Organizational Arrangement of Contemporary Collegiate Rodeo

With the exception of a short-lived organization in 1959 and 1960 known as the American College Rodeo Association (ARCA), the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association has been the sole organizer of intercollegiate rodeo on the national level and since 2003, with the addition of the Canadian Region, on an international level.<sup>1</sup> Over the past five and a half decades, the stated purposes of the NIRA have remained almost unchanged. They are to:

- promote intercollegiate rodeo on a national scale as an organized, standard collegiate sport;
- establish and maintain an operating code for intercollegiate competition;
- promote college rodeo as a collegiate sport representing an educational institution on individual campuses throughout the nation; and
- encourage prospective college students to enroll in the various institutions of higher education represented in the membership of the NIRA (NIRA 2003: 1).

At present, the NIRA is divided into 12 regions (see Table 1). During the fall 2003 semester, individual student membership in the NIRA totaled 3,233, among 206 participating collegiate rodeo clubs at both member and non-member schools. Member schools are fully accredited institutions of post-secondary education that have petitioned for NIRA membership. Member schools must have at least five student rodeo athletes competing. They also must pay NIRA school membership dues. During the 2003 – 2004 academic year, NIRA member school dues were \$200 (\$92 dues, \$8 for subscription to the NIRA publication *Collegiate Arena*, \$50 Rawhide program fund, \$50 National Intercollegiate Rodeo Foundation, Inc.). Only member schools can sponsor a NIRA rodeo and receive NIRA team points. Another privilege of being a member school includes access to certain NIRA scholarships.

A National Board of Directors supervises the business and affairs of the NIRA. Constitutional provisions provide procedures to guide the Board, which has the power to amend the association's Constitution and By-Laws, as well as to make, adopt, and/or alter the rules of the NIRA as necessary to carry out the purposes of the organization. Another responsibility of the Board is to appoint a chief executive officer of the NIRA. This individual, known as the NIRA Commissioner, serves a four year term and his/her appointment must be unanimously approved by the Board.

The Board is composed of one faculty director and one student director from each NIRA region. Regional faculty directors are elected for two year terms by and from faculty advisors of member schools. Terms are renewable. Included among the duties of regional faculty directors are tasks such as: presiding at meetings of faculty advisors of members institutions of their respective regions; coordinating the NIRA Constitution, By-Laws, and operating code with university and college administrations; and, working with the regional student director to approve rodeo dates and judges. To be eligible to serve on the Board, the elected person must have a college degree (in any discipline; not just in an agriculture-related field) and be a full-time faculty or staff with his/her institution of higher learning.

**Table 1. Regions of the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association<sup>a</sup>**

Regions	Recognized rodeo clubs at colleges and universities in
Big Sky Region	Montana; Northwest Community College, Powell, Wyoming
Canadian Region	Canada
Central Plains Region	Kansas; Oklahoma; the northwest corner of Missouri (west of Inter-
Central Rocky Mountain Region	Wyoming; Colorado; Chadron State College, Chadron, Nebraska
Grand Canyon Region	Arizona; New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico; San Juan College, Farmington, New Mexico; Western New Mexico University, Silver City, New Mexico
Great Plains Region	North Dakota; South Dakota; Nebraska; Iowa; Minnesota; Wiscon-
Northwest Region	Oregon; Washington; the northern panhandle of Idaho bound by the Salmon River to the south; that part of southern Idaho within the boundaries of Canyon County; College of Idaho, Caldwell, Idaho
Ozark Region	Arkansas; eastern Louisiana; that part of Louisiana north of the Red River and the Mississippi River; Missouri; Tennessee; Kentucky; Mississippi; Alabama; Michigan; Georgia; Indiana; Ohio; Illinois
Rocky Mountain Region	Utah; Idaho south of the Salmon River
Southern Region	East Texas (all member schools east of Interstate 35, Denton, Fort Worth, Waco, Austin, Uvalde, and down Eagle Pass); that part of Louisiana south of the Red River and the Mississippi River
Southwest Region	New Mexico; west Texas (all member schools west of Interstate 35,
West Coast Region	California; Nevada

<sup>a</sup> Colleges and universities in states other than the states listed in established regions shall be placed in the nearest region to them.

Regional student directors are elected by the students in their respective regions and serve two year terms. The student director keeps student members in the region informed, works with student event directors on complaints, disputes, or controversial matters at regional rodeos, presides at regional meetings, and with the regional faculty director, approves rodeo dates and judges. Each student director receives a fifth year of rodeo eligibility providing he/she completes the entire two year term. Annually, one regional faculty director and one regional student director are elected to serve a one year term as National Faculty President and National Student Director, respectively.

At present, there are nine standard events in NIRA rodeo competition for which points are awarded — five men's events, three women's events, and one men's/women's event. Men's events include: bare-back bronc riding (8 second ride), saddle bronc riding (8 second ride), bull riding (8 second ride), calf roping, and steer wrestling. Women's events include: barrel racing, breakaway calf roping, and goat tying. Team roping is the one event in which men and women can compete together. At the end of the school year, qualifying teams and individuals meet at the College National Finals Rodeo (CNFR) to determine the national champions. Team champions and individual champions are determined by points won at the CNFR.

Both undergraduate and graduate students are eligible to join the NIRA. Students are eligible to purchase four NIRA membership cards over a six-year period from the date of their high school graduation.<sup>2</sup> At the undergraduate level, basic membership requirements include: being a high school gradu-

ate or having obtained a general education degree, attending an accredited institution of post secondary education, enrollment in at least 12 academic credit hours each semester, and maintaining at least a 2.0 grade point average. Graduate students must carry a full academic load as defined by the graduate or professional school in which the student is enrolled. All students must pay NIRA individual membership dues. At the start of the 2003 – 2004 academic year, individual membership fees were \$205 (\$80 dues, \$105 mandatory medical insurance for coverage at all NIRA sanctioned practices and all NIRA sanctioned rodeo, \$2 premium, \$8 subscription to the NIRA publication Collegiate Arena, \$10 National Intercollegiate Rodeo Foundation, Inc.).

In addition to paying individual membership dues to the NIRA, college rodeo athletes must pay fees to enter each collegiate rodeo and cover their own expenses associated with travel to and from every competition. Scholarships and other monetary awards help defray some of the costs. Because collegiate rodeo is not sanctioned by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), college rodeo contestants can and do receive monetary winnings and are eligible to compete simultaneously at the professional level.

### Concluding Comments

Over the past eight decades, college rodeo has undergone a dramatic sociocultural evolution. Throughout its storied history, the sport has received limited attention in the extant academic literature. My purpose in this paper was to provide an overview of the current organizational structure of collegiate rodeo, along with a synopsis of the institutionalization of the sport which was once touted as the favored extracurricular activity of students from rural areas. To date, no published sociological studies exist that describes the organizational framework of college rodeo in terms of its structure, participants, and activities. Moreover, no empirical research has been conducted on the extent to which rodeo is, or ever was, the preferred and/or natural sport of college students from rural America.

Today, over 3,000 students from roughly 200 institutions of higher learning in the United States and Canada participate in college rodeo while furthering their education. Like competitors in the more mainstream college athletics (i.e., football, baseball, basketball, and soccer), student rodeo athletes have to balance sport and school if they want to be successful in both areas of life. In addition to long hours of practice and going “on down the road,” they must maintain a minimum grade point average and adhere to additional academic requirements. Concomitantly, unlike other college athletes, the campus cowboys and cowgirls pay to play.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The ARCA was comprised of rodeo clubs from North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Utah, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, and the eastern half of Oregon that had split from the NIRA, and vowed to dismantle only after immediate changes were made in the NIRA (see Porter 1960).

<sup>2</sup> If a prospective NIRA member did not graduate from high school, but competed his/her general education degree, he/she will have six consecutive years from the date of his/her eighteenth birthday to complete four years of NIRA eligibility.

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