

OF CONVICTS AND COWBOYS: THE ANGOLA PRISON RODEO

A Louisiana lockup's prisoners—many of them lifers—seek redemption in the ring.

by Chris Opfer

"The key to surviving prison is respect," says Tom Miller, a prison consultant and ex-meth dealer who spent more than a year in the clink. "A prisoner spends every second behind bars trying not to lose respect among other inmates."

For the prisoners at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola—a 5,000 inmate facility once dubbed America's "bloodiest prison"—respect isn't earned with shanks or an extra helping of chow hall grits. It's earned by swiping a \$500 chip off an angry bull and claiming an iron belt buckle engraved "All Around Cowboy."

On April 17 and 18, the prison welcomed 20,000-plus fans to the Angola Rodeo, a southern-style gladiator games in which prisoners-turned-cowboys battle raging bulls, wild horses and carnage thirsty fans. A former slave plantation named for its inhabitants' African birthplace, the prison sits on 18,000 acres of rolling farmland about 140 miles northwest of New Orleans. The rodeo is the crux of the penitentiary's unusual prisoner rehabilitation program, which includes daily shifts on the prison farm and perks like an inmate radio station, magazine and Toastmasters club. Convict cowboys compete for the coveted belt buckle, awarded following a month-long rodeo series in October.

Saturday's events ranged from traditional bull riding to bulldogging (calf wrestling) and wild cow milking. It's this breathtakingly bizarre lineup that's brought fans from all over the South to the rodeo for 46 years.

"Last year, a guy got his head stomped on!"



says Bridget Martin, 25, who drove almost three hours from Bogalusa, La. with her fiancé and kids. "I've been to a real rodeo, and this is just crazy. The prisoners out there are much braver."

It's not just the prisoners who put themselves in harm's way. In the Wild Horse Race, inmates scrambled to corral and mount six bareback horses released into the ring simultaneously. During the melee, rodeo announcer Robbie Thomas was thrown from his horse, breaking his clavicle as he hit the ground.

After a prayer for Thomas' speedy recovery, another announcer declared "the show must go on." That meant it was time for Convict Poker, a test of nerves in which four inmates took seats at a flimsy card table waiting for the "dealer"—a 2,000-pound wild bull—to be released into the ring. The last man seated would be crowned the winner.

The snorting brute that entered the ring seemed uninterested in playing cards. That is until a set of rodeo clowns began to jump and flail around the poker table. The dealer took his cue and barreled toward the action, lowering his head as it connected with the back of one contestant's chair, sending the table, chairs and card players into the air like cannon fodder. The men hobbled as they picked themselves up from the dirt, hightailing it over a fence while the bull circled back for another hand.

Despite these brushes with danger, prisoners who sign up for the competition months in advance relish the taste of freedom the rodeo provides, according to former inmate Billy Wayne Sinclair: "For a few hours they're not inmates. They're cowboys."

A sign just beyond Angola's main gate greets visitors and arriving inmates: "You are entering the land of new beginnings." For most prisoners, the road to Angola is the beginning of the end. Approximately 75 percent of the

prison's inmates are serving life sentences.

Josh Brown, a 37-year-old convicted murderer set to spend the rest of his life at Angola, has competed in the rodeo in each of his 10 years on the farm. "We don't have many people in society pulling for us, but when they come here, they see us as rodeo contestants. Most are cheering."

To pull for these cowboys is to suspend the reality that they're hardened criminals. While the Saturday afternoon crowd drew an equally divided line in favor of man and beast, moral reservations did not keep them from loading on the smorgasbord of inmate-crafted furniture, ironwork and Cajun cooking.

Crowd buzz crescendoed for Guts & Glory, the rodeo's signature and final contest, featuring a field of 30 some inmates tasked with snatching a round red chip worth \$500 tied between the horns of an angry Brahma bull.

A swarm of black-and-white-striped cowboys tracked the red horned beast, waiting for an opening. Finally, Marlon Brown—serving life for second-degree murder—stepped into an inmate semicircle closing around the bull. Sensing his doom, the beast lunged horns first at Brown's knees sending him somersaulting in a cloud of dirt. Amid gasps, the bull turned his sight on other prey. Brown sprang to his feet, clutching the shiny red disc, and the crowd erupted.

The defeated bull was led out of the ring to fading cheers. Sunburned children and their weary parents filed out of the stadium where Robbie Thomas laughed and chatted with fans, his arm in a sling. Some folks stocked up on rodeo t-shirts or wandered the prison museum, others hopped in trucks loaded down with new furniture. Five hundred dollars richer, Marlon Brown and the other cowboys went back to jail. ●

Brewing Behind Bars: *The coffee-can liquor stills on display in Angola's museum are relics of the past, but prisoners are still thirsty. Prison consultant Tom Miller offered up this standard recipe for prison hooch, made with common mess hall ingredients.*

- 20 pieces quartered fruit (apples, pears and/or oranges)
- 32 ounces warm water
- 16 ounces fruit cocktail
- 4 cups sugar
- ½ cup tomato puree
- 2 teaspoons baking yeast

• Combine assorted fruit, fruit cocktail, yeast and

warm water in a large plastic garbage bag, mashing contents together. Yeast is often under lock and key, so brewers may substitute bread slices to aid the fermentation process.

• Shake the bag thoroughly, allowing air pressure to build before it is released.

• Wrap the bag in towels and store it for 24 hours in a warm place, preferably somewhere outside the cell where it can't be tied to the brewer if found by security.

• Add the tomato puree and sugar, and heat the bag under running water (from a sink or shower)

for 15 minutes.

• Store for another 48 hours, occasionally running the bag under hot water.

• Skim the oozy layer of mold and sludge from the top of the hooch and stir. Serve over ice. Hold your nose and drink—and don't drop the soap.