



BEHIND THE BUCKING CHUTES: IT'S MORE THAN JUST AN EIGHT SECOND RIDE

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“You might just have to jump over the pen there and walk through the bulls,” Marc said to me from across three rows of green cattle fences. “They’re fine though, they won’t bother you.”

Marc Dorendorf is a bull rider and I was meeting him at the Bozeman Stampede to get a behind the scenes look at America’s original extreme sport. Following his recommendation but with some hesitation, I scrambled over the rails and dropped down into the pen. As Marc walked to meet me halfway, casually brushing his hand over a bull, some of his words from our interview an hour prior came to mind. Most bulls, he said, are just like oversized dogs, similar in demeanor. This didn’t apply to all bulls though. “Some of them are kind of mean, you can’t really get around them much.” But Marc didn’t seem to be bothered by those that were in the pen with us and I was willing to follow the lead of a guy who’s been around these animals since he was in elementary school.

My path to meeting Marc started five years by working at a dude ranch in Wyoming. That summer was my first introduction to both the sport of rodeo and ranching culture as a whole. Being from a small town in New Hampshire, I stepped into a whole new world and I was instantly enamored. The more I continued to watch and photograph rodeos in following summers, the more I was baffled by what seemed to be an extreme imbalance between effort and reward -- particularly in the rough stock events like bull riding. I could only imagine how much energy went into practicing, how much time went into traveling, how much risk was present for every rodeo event, and it was all for an average performance time of eight seconds. Those who ascend to the top of the sport make it easy to see the allure. They are regarded with rockstar status and can pull in six figure salaries. But I wanted to know about the ones who hadn’t reached stardom -- the young men who were just barely scraping by, that limped out of the arena, unwrapped bandaged limbs, and dragged themselves into a car to head for the next rodeo with empty pockets. They seemed to make their rides for the sheer love of the sport, and as a spectator I just couldn’t understand it.



Marc casually touches a bull as we meet at the Bozeman Stampede.

But I wanted to. Enter, Marc Dorendorf.

Marc is somewhat atypical for a rodeo cowboy in the sense that the sport is not part of family tradition -- the way many competitors are brought into the arena. As he puts it, he is first-generation cowboy. Born and raised in Columbus, MT -- a small grid of streets in central Montana along the south side of Interstate 90 -- he first witnessed the sport on a TV broadcast his dad was watching. Mark's interest was instantly piqued. His parents helped him onto his first bull around the age of six or seven, thinking it would take just a buck-off or two to quell the interest. The result was quite the opposite. Marc recalled the memory with a chuckle and a smile: "I don't even remember how long it took [for me to come off] but I remember getting up and thinking 'Holy cow, I want to do this again!'"

Fast forward 14 years, a few injuries, many hospital trips, countless buck-offs, and an even greater number of successful rides later, Marc is now pursuing his dream of making a living rodeo-by-rodeo. He typically still works four days a week with fence installation to help make ends meet and pay his rodeo entry fees, as this is his first full season competing on the professional circuit. "Next year I'll go out a little further [than Montana] and try and make a run for the National Finals Rodeo," he said. But for now, he punches the clock on Thursday and heads off to rodeo through the weekend. This stop in Bozeman was just one of many he's made while making laps around Montana since starting up back in January. "It's been quite the ride," he concluded. No pun intended.

Bull riding (and rodeo as a whole) is a sport of no second chances and no participation medals. A bull ride requires riders to stay on the animal's back for eight seconds to make a qualified ride. There are no extra points awarded for staying on any longer; if you come off early there are no points awarded at all. Typically, the top three riders split the winnings and everyone else goes on to the next rodeo with empty pockets. The score that riders are chasing is 100 points. It's generated from two judges who each award 25 points to the bull and 25 points to the rider. Most of the time, riders draw their bulls at random for each rodeo in order to make it as fair as possible. But in some championship rodeos of the professional circuits, riders actually have the chance to pick the bull they want. This is where rider strategy comes in to play. If a rider draws a bull that's less challenging, the likelihood of making the ride and their personal performance score will be higher. The bull's score, however, will be low and pull the total down. Were the rider to choose the most difficult bull in the pen, they can almost guarantee to secure half of their one hundred points right off the bat, but their chance of claiming those points with a qualified ride is diminished greatly. Bull riders also deal with their event being saved for last at every rodeo (aside from the Professional Bull Riding circuit that exclusively features bull riding), which means if they don't roll up to the arena right before their ride there is a significant amount of downtime to fill.

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It was interesting to watch riders handle that downtime differently as the minutes crept closer and closer to unleashing the chute gates. Some preferred solitude in the time before their ride. I watched one cowboy sit in a trance, his focus intent on some indescribable point far off in the distance. Unfazed by the flurry of movement all around him, I imagined he was breaking down in his mind every split second of the ride he would have. Others seemed to use physicality as a means of stimulation: explosive squat jumps, repeated slapping of thighs and chests, and forceful exhales like a powerlifter moving a weight.

Others, Marc included, didn't appear to be the least bit daunted by the impending ride. "A guy can get into his head a lot if he's just sittin' there not talkin'. That's the worst thing a guy can do is think about it." Marc opts to spend his time keeping his mind distracted. That comes in the form of helping out buddies in other rough stock events, catching up with friends he hasn't seen in a long time, or even having a group game of hacky sack. I was surprised to hear this because it flies in the face of the stoic, Lone Ranger persona of the Hollywood Cowboy. "When you're having fun, you're not worried about anything, you're not thinking about anything. That's what helps a guy out a lot," he said. That way, when it comes time to ride, "You just gotta remember you've done it one



Clockwise from left: Marc takes a quick moment before his ride to thank God for this lifestyle he feels blessed to live. Marc stands over the bull he has drawn for the night. Using his free hand, Marc cements his grip on the bull rope.

thousand times before. You just gotta believe in yourself.” This speaks to a larger family ethos ingrained in the rodeo culture that Marc referenced time and time again. It’s an ethos that was clearly visible, to me, too. Firm handshakes and hearty back thumps were standard greetings. I could feel the warmth and genuine care that was exchanged between riders. It felt like a glimpse into the elusive draw of the sport.

It’s not until the last ride before his when Marc allows himself to become immersed in the moment. He dons his vest and helmet. He says

a quick prayer thanking God for his lifestyle and friends. He spends time with the bull rubbing down its back letting it know that Marc is there to ride. He rubs rosin down his rope. His world shrinks to the few feet in front of him and he is completely in the zone. “When I’m in the right state of mind, I don’t hear nothin’ but my buddies on the back of the bucking chutes yelling.” I stood over the bucking chute and the rippling muscled mass of a 2,000 pound animal as Marc lowered himself down. Nerves began to twist into knots in my stomach and my pulse quickened -- and I wasn’t even the one getting on the bull.

I could see the intensity on his face as Marc wrapped his hand with meticulous practice. Every wrap was intentional down to the finger-by-finger closure to lock in a vice-tight grip. Three punches from his free hand cemented his tied fingers in place and he slid his groin right up onto the rope to get a good position. He placed a steady hand on the chute gate. It now came down to a head nod -- just a slight motion of Marc’s chin to the cowboy manning the gate, and one ton of bucking fury would explode out into the arena.

Marc gave the nod. A flurry of motion followed that was hard to process as I tracked it through the viewfinder of my camera. It was hard to imagine Marc in the zen-like mental state he had described. While it seemed to fly by in a matter of a few bucks to me, I knew that Marc felt the seconds stretched out as his mind subconsciously responded to every jump, slip, and twist of the bull’s body.

Right out of the gate, Marc said the goal for a rider is to keep their knees buried in the bull and find the rhythm in its jumps as quickly as possible. Once that rhythm is established, a cowboy’s moves can become crisp and intentional; it’s a violent, erratic tango where the bull leads the rider in perfect sync. At least, that’s the idea.

But Marc has seen time and time again that when a rider gets too confident in those last few seconds, feeling he has the bull’s moves down to a science, he can lose focus, instinctively clamp down, and end the ride short. Marc described an invisible, vertical plane that runs from the middle of the bull’s back up behind the rider. That plane is the balance point and the key to a rider keeping their position during a ride. As soon as an arm -- and consequently a rider’s torso -- breaks that plane, the rider’s center of gravity is ripped away from being straight over their wrapped hand and is moved further back onto the bull’s back. It is from there that Marc said the majority

of a bull's bucking power is generated. When a rider gets slid back into that area, they are essentially pulling the ejection handle on themselves. But if a rider can keep their center of gravity right over their hand and move with the motion of the bull, Marc said that the bull rope might as well be a strand of bailing twine; "It's no different than riding a cloud. No different." I was skeptical.

Marc didn't make the eight seconds for a qualified ride that night. It looked as though he wasn't quite able to find that rhythm and, just as he described, was bucked loose after having his hip position ripped away from his hand. It frustrated him, for sure. But true to what he had said about riders supporting each other, he was climbing back up on those bucking chutes to support and encourage the next rider. Above the din of the announcer and the crowds, two cowboys began shouting for their friend, the next rider, as he launched into the arena. Their voices grew louder as the scoreboard timer closed in on eight seconds. "Go on! Go on! Go on!" they yelled to the point of their voices breaking into a partial scream. They yelled with an intensity that bordered on begging the rider to make it to eight seconds. It sent goosebumps rippling down my skin. There I was, just a spectator with a camera who has never sat on a bull, yet I could feel how badly they wanted that ride for their friend. It resonated through every word of encouragement.

These riders are family. This is brotherhood. There is a unique connection that exists between bull riders that only they truly know. The draw to the sport was again starting to seem less elusive.

Marc's buck-off meant no pay-out for him and added to a lengthening run of no scores. But I was quickly learning that there's more to the sport than just those eight seconds. There's the joy these men get simply from moving atop the back of pure, wild energy -- qualified ride or not. There's the mental victory they win every time they lower themselves down into those bucking chutes. There's a lifestyle that these cowboys enjoy living: one that's intentional, humbling, and rewarding. But above all, Marc spoke again of the family atmosphere that's there to help each other along. "We don't look at each other [other bull riders] as competition or anything like that. You else is gonna do: you're going against all travel together, and we all help chutes; we all want to see everyone riding -- when guys step out and ride, the bucking chutes. They're like 'Ah

After hearing the hair-raising cheers there was a plea that I could discern bucking chutes were there to motivate the cowboy was riding to motivate his from a genuine desire to see that cow-

I racked my brain for a long time sport that operated in a similar and shared bonds between competitors. Traditional team sports were instant-competitor sports wouldn't qualify, as against another. But all competitors bull? A climbing competition was the

In a similar manner, it is all climbers against the wall and fans cheer wildly for all competitors. But even then, the wall is a known variable. Climbers can look at the holds, plan their moves, and work from there. It's not a shape shifting wall that moves erratically and tries to throw climbers off. Add on to that the itinerant nature of a bull rider's lifestyle, the immense amount of mental fortitude that forges deep bonds between competitors, and the high risk of injury, bull riding a completely unique sport.



Unable to find the rhythm of the bull, Marc didn't make the eight seconds.

at each other [other bull riders] as competition. We can't really determine how somebody that bull. That's your competition. We each other in the back of the bucking do good. That's what I think makes bull it fuels the fire for everyone else back in yeah, it's bull ridin', lets go!"

from behind the chutes, it made sense. in their voices. The friends behind the the cowboy on the bull just as much as friends. The fanatical cheers stemmed boy make his ride and beat the bull.

afterward trying to think of any other manner -- one where the camaraderie outweighs the competition aspect. ly out the window. Even most single it typically comes down to one person against an unknown variable like a most analogous event I could think of.

As the spectators emptied the stands at a slow trickle, Marc packed his bag and thought ahead to the next rodeo. While Marc failed to make an eight second ride that night, he had gained small victories that came from the mental hurdles, the lifestyle, and the five seconds he was on the bull. With no option to ask for a second shot, it was fruitless to focus on the loss. He knew he could make the ride; next time he'd just have to ride better. So, it was on to the next one. On to the next challenge fueled by the energy of riders and spectators alike.

For myself, I left this rodeo humbled, in awe, and with more of an appreciation for why these cowboys do what they do. But I think the only way to ever fully understand would be to lower myself down into those chutes, take a ride, and then get back up to do it again.

It's easy to look at a sport like bull riding and see it as stupid, reckless, just a bunch of cowboys looking for an adrenaline rush. There were probably a few drinks involved the first time somebody said "Hey, watch me ride this bull." But beneath that surface impression, there's much more: grit and toughness; community and family; humility and respect; a desire to pursue a life that they love regardless of any challenges that are placed in their path, including something as seemingly indomitable as a bull.