

USU Eastern Rodeo Team Brought Back After More than Two Decades

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Adrenaline always climbs in the bull riding competition.

The buzzer sounds, a horse and its rider stampede from the chute. Mud flies, hearts pound and crowds cheer. It is difficult to find adrenaline-packed seconds like in rodeo. A minuscule space of time stretches on for minutes, and then it is over. Whether it's steer wrestling, barrel racing or riding bulls, rodeo competitors spend hundreds of hours training, traveling and warming up to test skills for few short ticks of the clock. Each competitor gets one attempt to show what they are made of. There are no "redos" in this sport.

Rodeo teammates spend 15-20 hours practicing during the rodeo season, so that when they are under pressure, they can perform. They ride their horses nearly every day to keep them in shape and have to get to the point where the animal and rider automatically know what to do when the heat is on.

Even with the severely lopsided performance versus practice time, competitors love their few seconds in the arena.

"It's an addiction. There is a rush when I nod my head and get a good time, there's not a better feeling in the whole world," Tyler Olsen said, a sophomore on the team who transferred from Snow College.

Utah State University Eastern's fledgling rodeo team is midway through their third season and things are looking bright. Several members of the team are ranked in the Rocky Mountain Region and Morgan Jensen, one of the team's barrel racers, is in first place overall.

"My dream is to go to the National Finals Rodeo... I know that everyone says that, but I really do want to get there," Morgan said. With her excitement and drive, the possibilities are real - it's not a pipe dream.

Hard luck helped Morgan out this year. In barrel racing, the rider and racer become one in movement, purpose and will. A strong relationship between cowgirl and her horse is what wins races. Her veteran horse she raced on consistently over the past few years, became shockingly ill when he laid down one day without warning. She took it to the emergency veterinarian and found he ran with a hole in his diaphragm causing him to use only one lung.

"He gave me his best all this time on one lung," she said. Without her stellar horse, Morgan had to switch to a novice horse she had hardly practiced on.

"I've owned her since she was 3, but she was kind of the horse I left on the back burner. I hadn't worked with her much," she said.

Something clicked between Morgan and her new horse. Together, they placed first or second at every college rodeo this semester. There is a break in the winter, and rodeo resumes spring semester. During the break, she plans to compete in pro rodeos to keep in shape - she will be ready for the college circuit in a few months.

Dejavu - success returns

Morgan is a part of a growing number of students drawn to Eastern's rodeo program. The program was on hiatus for a decade because in 1994, it came to an unexpected end. Leon McEleprang and Monte Jensen were both members of the College of Eastern Utah team when they were students in the '90s, and they did not get to finish their years of eligibility when the team ended mid-way through their college careers.

Three years ago, they noticed seven high school students from Carbon and Emery counties went to the National

High School Rodeo Finals in 2014. They watched helplessly as local students were recruited to join college teams in Texas and Arizona.

The idea of giving Castle Country students the opportunity to attend USUE and compete in rodeo was welcomed by Vice Chancellor of Enrollment Management, Greg Dart. He wholeheartedly supported bringing the team back. McElprang and Jensen acted quickly and a rodeo team rolled into motion.

The team is growing

Last year, Eastern's team had two members. This year, the coaches built their scholarship offers to recruit four men and three women. Two of the students are from out-of-state.

"It is exciting to see our growth the last couple of years, and we have had some success early at fall rodeos this year. We have more students coming to tour the school and see what we have to offer. I really think we are becoming contenders to go the college nationals finals this year," Monte said.

Two of this year's students were on rodeo teams at other colleges. They chose to transfer to USUE when they saw the school's small program as an advantage.

Tailon Crane was competing for Eastern Wyoming College in Torrington, Wyoming. When she came to Eastern's rodeo in Price to watch her sister compete; she was impressed. "I really liked the school, its atmosphere and how small it is - so I contacted the coaches about coming here," she said.

She hasn't looked back, "The team is small enough that members can get the help they need from the coaches. The situation makes it possible for rodeo competitors to reach their full potential." With three more years of eligibility, Crane is excited to see where the program takes her. Eventually, she plans on becoming a pharmacist.

Organizing and running a college-level team is not an easy business. USUE competes in the Rocky Mountain Region against 10 colleges and universities. Competitors load their horses into trailers and drive to rodeos throughout Utah, Colorado and Idaho.

One of last year's competitors, Zach Jensen, said, visiting new places is one of his favorite parts of the sport, "I like the travel. I have enjoyed meeting new people and becoming good friends with my competitors from all

over the West because we see each other every weekend at rodeos."

"It is really nerve racking. A lot of people don't get nerves, but I do when I rodeo. A few minutes before I rope, it's almost like my brain blacks out. My mind goes completely blank and I rely on muscle memory pretty much," Zach said.

Roping a degree

Rodeo is about more than riding and roping. For Zach, competing on the USUE rodeo team will change his future. "I always wanted to go to college, but when it came down to it, I wasn't sure if I would go or just get a job. The rodeo scholarship at USU Eastern made all of the difference. It made the decision clear about going to college. Rodeo has helped me get an education, and make myself better. I want to push my friends to compete in college rodeo, and get college educations. It is really worth it. I'm so glad that I did it."

"It has taught me to work hard for my dreams, they're not just going to come to me," Lacey McElprang, a roper who graduated spring 2107, added.

The team's goal is to produce a winning-rodeo team and support students through the educational process. "It's the most expensive bad habit to have, but it is sure a great way to raise kids and teach them to have responsibility. We get a lot of support from the community with many volunteers that came out to our rodeo and gave us a hand. We couldn't do it without them," Monte said.

~ Renee Banasky