

# little yellow who?



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**m**y favorite bucking bull of all time was Little Yellow Jacket—I never met him in person, but there was something about him (beyond his athleticism, accolades, and awards) that made him special. So special, in fact, that Dr. Kent Ames took the opportunity to sit on him, momentarily, while in the bucking chute.

Bull riding is an event that pits two athletes for eight seconds (or less). The cowboys' goal is to ride the bull for eight seconds and get a score of 90 or more; the bulls' goal is to get the cowboy off in less than eight seconds. The maximum score for the cowboy is 100—each athlete contributes a maximum of 50 points. The highest score ever recorded was 96.5.

Little Yellow Jacket (LYJ to fans), called “the Michael Jordan of bull riding,” was a

big red Brangus bull with one horn up and one horn down. He was born in North Dakota in 1996 and died in 2011 at the age of 15. His last natural calf crop was born the year after he died. During his career he bucked off 76 of 90 riders with an average buck off time of 2.6 seconds. For the 14 cowboys who rode LYJ, the average score was 93, and he tied for high score of 96.5. He is the only three-time World Champion Bull\*, the first recipient of the Badge of Honor, and was inducted into North Dakota Cowboy Hall of Fame. He retired from bucking in 2005, after bucking professionally for less than six minutes.

Bucking bulls are born and bred to be athletes. They are trained, have exercise programs and special diets. While the performance lasts a maximum of eight seconds, like other athletes the preparation time is

much longer. Their “job” requires they load easily into a trailer (air ride suspension), travel calmly, unload with no fuss, and “hang out” in a pen until the time of their performance. The cowboy gets on the bull in the bucking chute and wraps one hand in the bull strap. A flank strap has been placed around the flank (or as Temple Grandin says “around his waist and not around his privates”) to encourage a more uniform, less erratic bucking performance. The gate is opened and the performance begins.

What I liked most about LYJ was that he seemed to enjoy his life and was a gentleman bull—he exploded out of the bucking chute with ever changing jumps, spins, turns, and the hop-skip—most cowboys were off in less than three seconds and the bull stopped bucking, looked at the crowd, and walked off. It seemed as if he knew his job, enjoyed his job, and that he felt that the fans deserved to view him standing and then walking off. His breeder Joe Bergher said of him “he is a great bull, not mean, you could walk right up to him and pet him.” He certainly appeared to have a life worth living.

The Calgary Stampede boasts one of the largest rodeos in the world. The 10-day event in Calgary, Alberta, is billed as “The Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth.” Annually, more than 7,500 animals take part in Stampede exhibitions, educational programs, and competitions. Rodeo, an integral part of western Canada’s culture, has been targeted by animal rights groups claiming rodeo animals are mistreated. The Stampede is the first major rodeo to take a proactive approach to animal care and welfare. (See <http://corporate.calgarystampede.com/animal-care/>) In addition to an independent Animal Care Advisory Panel and an independent auditor, the Stampede has taken a disciplined approach to animal care focusing on meeting three distinct standards: (1) the regulations set out in Alberta’s Animal Protection Act (monitored by the Calgary Humane Society and Alberta SPCA year-round); (2) the codes of best practices for each animal species as recommended by Canada’s industry experts and our Animal Care Advisory Panel; and (3) the Stampede’s own animal care code of practice.

The Stampede’s strict adherence to Alberta’s Animal Protection Act means the

Humane Society and Alberta SPCA have all-access privilege. A full-time team of veterinarians is on site 24/7 and examines each animal every day. Working toward continuous improvement, changes and refinements have been made in response to suggestions from the Humane Society, Alberta SPCA, the independent auditor Jennifer Wood and the Animal Care Advisory Panel.

But they didn’t stop there—a partnership between the University of Calgary and the Stampede has resulted in ongoing and interesting real-world research assessing animal behavior and welfare at the event. There are divergent opinions about rodeo animals, with critics claiming the animals are mishandled and the rodeo world insisting they like to perform. Dr. Ed Pajor has been working at the Stampede to measure animal behavior and stress. Pajor believes that scientific data, especially data reflecting the animal’s perspective, should be included in these discussions and his goal is to provide that data.

In 2011, Pajor’s team observed the animals in the chutes and recorded various arousal behaviors, some associated with fear and stress, including eye white, tail swishing, defecation, kicking, and other behaviors. They found the majority of bulls were calm and showed little arousal prior to leaving the chute; novice animals were more likely to show stress in the chute. The following year Pajor refined his behavioral ethogram, adding additional behaviors, and increased observations to include those

observed before and during loading. This was the first study to quantify rodeo animal handling as well as behavior, prior to and during loading into chutes.

Last year, Drs. Pajor and Christy Goldhawk started using Infrared Thermography (IRT) to physically measure stress. While there are multiple invasive ways to assess stress and fear in a laboratory setting, measuring stress in a real-world rodeo must be done noninvasively. IRT measures the heat response. When an animal reacts (fear, stress, arousal), it takes mental and physical energy which both result in heat. IRT can measure the heat. IRT involves taking a picture of the animal’s eye with a specialized camera that detects physiological response. Pajor’s hypothesis is that IRT will detect the physiologic differences between the novice and experienced animals that correspond with their behavior. The technology has been used with horses at other events such as jumping or racing, but never with rodeo animals. IRT shows promise as a non-invasive method to measure the physiological arousal of performance animals at rodeos. This is pioneering research, and it is impressive that the Calgary Stampede has encouraged such basic research.

\* After this article was written, October 26, 2014, Bushwacker was named World Champion Bull at the PBR finals in Los Vegas. This was the third time Bushwacker was named World Champion bull.

Lana Kaiser MD, DVM has a beef practice, raises Maine Anjou and Red Angus, and is a member of the MVMA Animal Welfare, Food Animal Practice, and Legislative Advisory Committees.

