



LASTING CHANGES

BY MARY MCCASHIN

MATT BRIGHT

One thing is certain, there has always been and will always be rodeo. However, since rodeo became a professional sport in 1936 growth within the industry has been slow. Thousands of cowboys have come and gone, gold buckles won, and money lost, but at what cost to the cowboy? Cowboys have no set salary, do not pay into a retirement plan, do not have association-supported health insurance, and once they retire they are generally forgotten about. They retire from rodeo and head out into the world to find a way to make a living, cover medical costs, and take care of their families, all without the help of an association that would be nothing without its members. It is a sad, abet true, situation.

Recently, the National Basketball Players Association (NBPA) announced that its player representatives voted to fund health insurance for all retired players with at least three years of service in the league. The program will use a tier-based program based on number of playing years. The program is the first of its kind in North American professional sports. Unfortunately, nothing similar is available to active or retired cowboys.

Three-time NFR qualifier, bareback rider Matt Bright was forced to retire in 2015 at 32 years old. During his career, Bright has broken his back, leg, wrist, fingers, toes, ribs, and foot. He has torn both groin muscles, his MCL, had elbow surgery for bone spurs, and has lost consciousness numerous times. Bright was thrust into a world without rodeo, nothing on his resume but a Bachelors Degree and rodeo, and no idea how to pay his medical bills and support his family.

Bright continues, "If the PRCA would charge your \$5-\$10 more to enter and put that in an account that you never saw until you retired – that would make a difference. I was trying to save money, but I'd end up using it for medical bills or entries in hopes to make an even larger pay out. They also need a placement program to help point guys in a direction toward employment. Having a Bachelors Degree, which some guys don't even have, just isn't enough."

Additionally, in today's rodeo circuits cowboys are spending more money traveling to rodeos than they can feasibly earn. Sponsorships and their financial support are reserved for the Top 25 cowboys in the standings, and even then only so many can be promoted or displayed on a cowboy's gear at a time. "I don't think it's any business of the PRCA, or whatever organization it may be, to say who we can be sponsored by. We're just trying to make a living on the road and sponsors are a huge part of that", explains Bright.



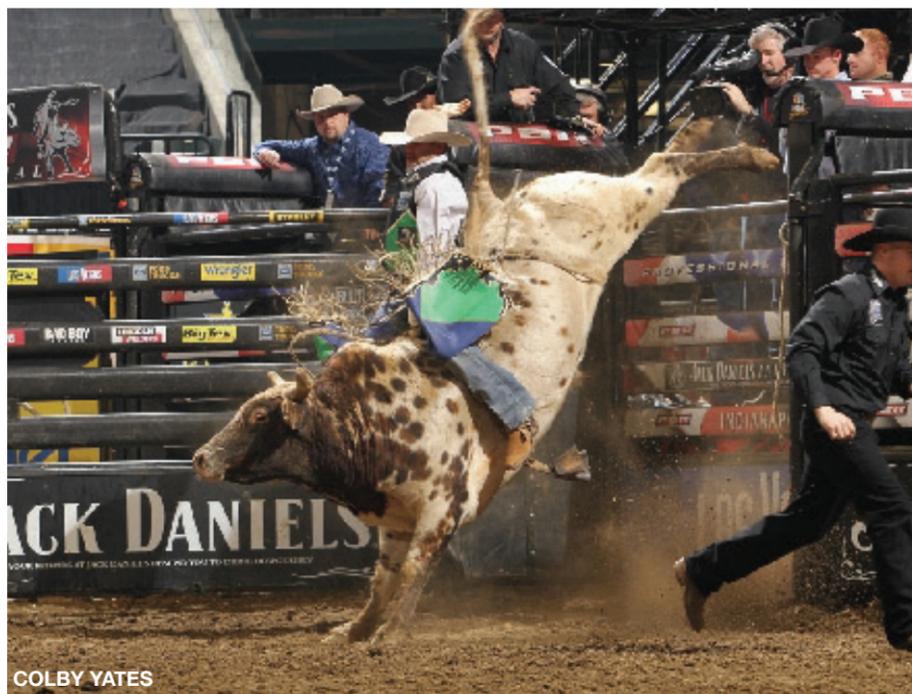
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Today there is no active program in rodeo that teaches kids, teens, or rookies about finances. No program to educate them about savings accounts, investments, or budgeting their finances.

Professional Bull Riders' Ring of Honor member Mike White retired in 2010. Six years later he still has sponsors that support him and his ranch, Big Tex Trailers, Fast Back Ropes, and Cooper Tires. "I'm glad they're still with me. They help me, and in turn I'm good to them. If one of my sponsors calls me up and needs me, I'm there. I have a lot of respect for them sticking with me so I'm there for them when

they call." Today, White lives in Texas with his wife and their two sons. He trains roping horses and they hold Mike White's Pasture Roping & Benefit annually.

Some people say rodeo is a dying sport, and to a degree that is true. However, when every other major professional sport is televised and rodeo is not, it's hard to build a fan base. Fans recognize major names and follow them on social media if possible, but the overall lack of coverage has hurt the sport. If it were not for TV, Tim Tebow would just be a quarterback and LeBron James would just be a basketball player in Ohio.



COLBY YATES

But when millions of fans tune into a network to see these players, networks make money off of advertisements, and the sport makes money due to merchandise sales, ticket sales, and so on. In 2001-2002 the NBA grossed 2.6 billion

favorites and they'd watch two hours of bull riding just to see our (hopefully) 8-second ride. They'd come to signings and know who you were, who your sponsors were, and the name of the bull you'd drawn. Without that TV coverage

the sport would not have grown like it has."

When the PBR began 21 years ago, 20 cowboys invested \$1,000 to help it get on its feet. As of 2013, that initial pay-in was worth \$4 million dollars. According to Forbes, no U.S sport has produced compound annual return close to the PBR's over a similar time period. Imagine the difference regularly televised rodeo could make to the sport as a whole.

In sports, and all businesses, growth takes change. An association cannot grow internally and externally without annual changes. These changes are often based on member votes. After all, the cowboys that are competing in the sport probably have the best idea of changes that need to occur.

Six-time World Champion Saddle Bronc rider Dan Mortensen can account for the amount of change that has occurred in the past 26 years. Mortensen joined the PRCA in 1990 and retired in 2008. "You're body takes a beating day in and day out when you're competing...the fact that I did last as long as I did kind of surprises me."

Mortensen continues, "The sport needs to do a lot to catch up to what other sports have done, and then you can look at more progression. If we got into the position where the sport of rodeo is financially a little more along the lines of pro-football or pro-basketball then you could maybe incorporate a type of health insurance. For a short time the PRCA did have a retirement plan program, but it only lasted a couple of years. There's no support for guys once they retire. You make friends in the sport, and suddenly you're not seeing those guys day in and day out. You're totally removed from that scenario. I had friends who retired before me and you can kind of lean on them for support, but as far as any kind of support deal there's none. It's hard on any professional athlete when you retire. You just wake up one morning and it's done. It's a huge adjustment to make."



DAN MORTENSEN
PHOTO COURTESY OF MIKE COPEMAN

dollars, by 2015 they grossed almost 6 billion dollars. According to Forbes, "NBA franchise values have tripled over the past four years thanks to soaring sponsorship and TV deals (both local and national)". As of January 2016, the New York Knicks were valued at \$3 billion dollars. From another angle, in October 2015 the National Hockey League's New York Rangers were worth \$1.2 billion. What is the current value of professional rodeo?

PBR's Colby Yates knows firsthand about the power of televised events, "I think that's the reason the PBR built such a fan base so fast. We were on TV almost every weekend. Fans had



SID STEINER
PHOTO COURTESY OF MIKE COPEMAN

"The PRCA is just so huge, they have over 7,000 members. Every time they run into financial trouble, which it has several times, their answer has always been to go out and get more members, more fines, more dues - just make the whole thing bigger instead of making the whole sport better." Mortensen believes that working on the quality of your product and making it competitive with similar associations is key, "We're competing against the NBA and the NFL. You need to have a really good product that's televised, and you need to have sponsors. If you can get to that point where the sponsorship dollar pays for everything, that's the tipping point to taking the sport to the next level."

Today Mortensen sticks close to home with his family. He has gone into business for himself and helps teach a few rodeo schools and clinics on every year. Mortensen also helps Northwest College's rodeo team.

But not every cowboy goes into the sport of rodeo not knowing what their outcome will be on the other side; 2002 PRCA World Champion

Steer Wrestler Sid Steiner knew that a career in his family's business back in Austin would be his "retirement". That didn't stop "the bad boy of rodeo" from challenging the rules, "Man, they sure loved to fine me. I never really understood that. Some of those rules just didn't make any sense to me so I didn't mind breaking them. That was one thing about rodeo, I could be different; I could almost play the character that I wanted to be. A lot of it was truly me, and some of it was amplified." Sid brought a personality and a rebellious edge to the sport that helped secure him a fan base in and out of the arena.

"You always wish it would've paid more and the travel would've been easier, but we knew what we were getting into. You knew what you could make (financially). When you're competing you're so wrapped up in that you're not thinking about your money - all that money isn't yours, you owe a lot of that to the government. You have to learn to invest it wisely, buy land and buy cows. Most guys who are in the top eight or top ten can make comfortable money, but almost every guy after that struggles. It's super sad when you think of guys who have multiple

World Championship titles and rodeo was all they really had. When it's all said and done they don't really know what to do outside of that. Unfortunately, that doesn't just apply to rodeo - it applies to the NFL to. Not everybody makes Tom Brady money." The money also varies from association to association. According to the New York Times, in 2015 PBR's number one bull rider, JB Mauney, had official earnings of \$1.54 million. Sage Kimzey, the PRCA's number one bull rider, had official earnings of \$318, 631.

However, when Steiner walked away from rodeo, he walked away for good. Steiner taught a few clinics and schools, but only for a few years. His wife and daughter barrel race, but his involvement in rodeo today does not go beyond that, "I think were I was different is that when I competed I wanted those experiences to be part of my life, not my whole life. I didn't want to look up one day and have my kids be grown and have missed out on spending time with them."

In comparison, bull rider B.J. Schumacher retired at age 29 and went to work for several

of his mentors, "I figured they could teach me better than anyone before I went into the business for myself." Schumacher was conscientious about saving money during his career so that he could start a ranch of his own after retirement, "I was kind out of touch with everything while I was competing so I came home and worked with a few seasoned ranchers so I could get back in the swing of things. I just needed the experience before I did it myself."

Schumacher had invested his money wisely, buying property in both his home state of Wisconsin and a ranch in Hugo, Oklahoma. "I knew I had to set some money aside for savings and set some aside for taxes. I tried to invest what I could back into my land, cattle, and horses. I tried to put everything back into things that would be my future." Schumacher notes that upon retirement, losing his sponsors was the hardest part, "I really liked the people that sponsored me and I took pride in doing things for them and representing them." Not only do cowboys lose a steady income when they retire, they generally lose the money and support from their sponsors as well.

As for rodeo's future, Schumacher notes that during his time with the PRCA, CBR, and PBR, there were often meetings where promises were made to competitors and those promises never came to fruition, "It seemed like they should have discussed things more or planned them more before they told us about them. People always had big hopes for things getting a whole lot better, and maybe they tried, but we never saw the results." Schumacher notes that why cowboys do know rodeo is a business with its up and downs, it was hard to not count on promised money, and even harder when that money didn't come together.

"I was just riding. I wasn't the one renting buildings and finding sponsors and stock contractors. It's so hard because there are so many options they could do. I think TV time is huge with rodeo. Instead of paying a network for airtime, there seemed to be stations that would pay the rodeo to have the rodeo on their network. If I knew where to go watch pro rodeo every week I would do it, even if I had to buy another channel. It doesn't have to be the biggest rodeos, but getting any rodeo on TV on a more regular basis would help the sport more than anything. That exposure is priceless. I don't know the financial end of any of that so it's easy for me to say, it might be more challenging to make that come together."

Schumacher is right about rodeo associations paying for airtime versus the option to make money with a smaller network. In December 2013 RFD-TV offered the PRCA \$1 million for the television rights for the Wrangler National



SCOTT MENDES
PHOTO COURTESY OF JENNINGS PHOTOGRAPHY

Finals. The PRCA turned down the offer and instead chose to pay CBS Sports to air the event. It begs the question, why did an association that was \$3.6 million in debt in 2003 bypass the opportunity to make \$1 million?

1997 PRCA World Champion Bull Rider Scott Mendes believes there is still great hope for the sport and encourages today's competitors to represent the sport to the best of the abilities. He also encourages riders to think about their future, even in the present. "While you're riding you have to be thinking about the future. We knew when we were riding bulls that everyday could literally be our last to compete or our last on Earth. You had to think about what if today was the day something happened and you could never ride again. And on a greater scale, at the end of the day you needed to be proud of the efforts you were putting forward for yourself and for the sport. If you want the sport to go, you have to represent it well." Mendes notes that many guys rodeo to own ranches, be in the agricultural industry, or go into a number of different vocations.

"In 1996 we all stood together with the barrel racers and the team ropers for them to receive

equal money. They had skin in the game just like the rest of us. We believed that was the right thing so we united and stood together", explains Mendes, "I don't want to say rodeo is all negative, because it's really not. It's where we've all come from, and we learned a lot that can carry over into any aspect of life."

The voices of the veterans are clear and the numbers don't lie - things have to change for rodeo to not only fulfill its title of being a professional sport, but also to listen and help the athletes that keep the sport alive. An increase in television coverage, a form of post-retirement healthcare, an increase in quality over quantity; there are multiple factors that could not only improve professional rodeo at its current level, but help the sport grow so that it can stand alongside other professional sports. These ideas are not generated from the veterans' of the sport - the cowboys who know about life with the sport, and life without it. They are changes that are crucial, changes that are valuable. The question remains though, who is willing to make them?



SID STEINER
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