

EQUINE WELFARE - RODEOS

CHAPTER 1

RODEOS IN AUSTRALIA

Introduction

1.1 According to proponents of the sports, rodeo and campdraft competitions originated in the outback mustering camps where stockmen would display their skills in handling horses and mustering stock. Rodeo events and campdrafting became part of bushmen's carnivals and these have been held in various parts of the country since the 1920s. After World War II, rodeos became more popular and tended to take on a more American character. Professional rodeos are now conducted in all Australian States and the Northern Territory.

1.2 Up to 4,000 rodeo stock, including bucking horses and bulls, are used in almost 600 rodeos held each year. Most of these animals are owned by about 50 stock contractors, who are engaged by local rodeo committees to supply bucking stock for their rodeo. In addition to the bucking animals, an unknown number of calves, steers and bullocks is used each year for campdrafting as well as calf roping and steer wrestling.¹

1.3 In the following section of the report, the Committee addresses general aspects of Campdrafting and Rodeos.

Campdrafting

1.4 Campdrafting originated on outback cattle stations where cattleyards were few and fences almost non-existent. Stockmen would hold a large mob of cattle together, while the senior stockmen on "camp horses", would "cut out", or separate, certain beasts and move them into another mob. The skill of the "camp horses" became the subject of some rivalry, resulting in impromptu competitions. Gradually these competitions developed a set form and in the 1920s and 1930s large-scale competitions began.²

1.5 In campdrafting events, a horse and rider "cut out" a steer or bullock from a mob without disturbing the rest of the stock in a yard. The steer is "worked" backwards and forwards in front of the mob for about 10-20 seconds, and then is manoeuvred around two pegs and through a gate. In campdrafting, points are awarded for the skill of the horse and

rider in "working" the bullock. Although whips are not used in this sport, suitable spurs are allowed. Campdrafting is sometimes held in conjunction with rodeo events and, at other times, is held as a separate competition.

1.6 The campdraft horse is a stock horse bred for station or property work with cattle. Usually, the horse is not initiated into the sport until it is 5 or 6 years of age. Training, however, may begin at the age of 3 years when the horse is used for less demanding stock work.

1.7 Stock used in campdrafting are usually hereford-cross steers, bullocks or heifers. Some other beef breeds are also used. The ideal stock animal for campdrafting is a 2 to 4 year old bullock with a weight of less than 200 kilograms (440 lb).³

1.8 During the Committee's inquiry, animal welfare organisations did not identify any major problems with campdrafting. For example, Ms Amanda Large, Assistant Director, Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, New South Wales, (RSPCA, NSW), noted that it was "one of the purest events in rodeo in that it is closest to normal husbandry procedures".⁴ Dr John Auty, Honorary Technical Adviser, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies (ANZFAS), also told the Committee that if cattle are handled properly this event is "acceptable" from an animal welfare point of view.⁵

Conclusion

1.9 On the basis of evidence presented during the inquiry, the Committee is satisfied that there are no major animal welfare problems associated with campdrafting.

Rodeo Events

1.10 Rodeos consist of a series of events in which competitors attempt to ride bucking horses and cattle or capture and subdue cattle. These events include:

- saddle bronc riding;
- bare back riding;
- bull riding;
- steer wrestling; and
- calf roping.

Saddle Bronc Riding

1.11 Saddle bronc riding, formerly known as buckjumping, is the oldest rodeo event and evolved from the need to tame or "break" horses for use as saddle or pack mounts.

1.12 The bucking horse is equipped with a head collar and rope lead, a saddle and a flank or kicking strap around its flanks. The equipment is placed on the horse in the chute prior to the event. The rider mounts the horse in the chute and the horse is subsequently released into the arena where the bucking performance takes place.⁶ In this event, the competitor attempts to ride a bucking horse for eight seconds, before being plucked from the saddle by mounted "pick-up" men. The competitor is judged on the ability to keep in rhythm with the bucking action of the horse. The rider must maintain a controlled style but not inhibit the horse's free action.

1.13 The rider wears blunt or dulled spurs that are free running, enabling riders to move their legs along the body of the horse without cutting into the flesh of the animal.⁷

Bare Back Riding

1.14 An extension of the saddle bronc contest, bare back riding was introduced into rodeos in the post-war period. The event evolved from the practice of riding horses without a saddle. This event extends the skill of the rider because the bucking horse is being ridden without a saddle or head reins.

1.15 In this event, the rider attempts to ride a bucking horse for eight seconds. Unlike saddle bronc riding, the rider does not have the use of a saddle or rope lead. Instead, the rider, with one hand, holds on to what is commonly termed "rigging", a type of wooden hand-hold or pommel set on a small padded base. This "rigging" is strapped around the girth of the horse. A flank strap is also applied. As with saddle bronc riding, blunt spurs are permitted.

Bull Riding

1.16 This event evolved from the practice of riding bullocks and steers in the early 1900s, and was introduced into rodeos in the early 1950s. In this event the rider attempts to ride a bull for eight seconds holding onto

a bull rope. The bull rope, a flat plaited rope, is fitted around the girth of the bull. A flank strap, which is usually a braided rope placed around the abdomen of the animal slightly forward of the hip, is also applied. As in other rodeo events, the rider of the bull wears blunt or dull spurs.⁸

Steer Wrestling

1.17 Steer wrestling was introduced into rodeos in the 1930s. In this event, a steer is released from a chute and pursued by two riders. One of these riders alights from the horse, grasps the steer by the horns and wrestles the animal to the ground.

1.18 The Committee was advised by rodeo organisations that horses used in this event need to be highly trained and responsive. Cattle used in these events may perform 30-40 times a year. The competitive life of an animal is dependent on its weight and once an animal becomes too heavy it is usually sold. The ideal weight for an animal is between 180 kilograms (396 lb) and 230 kilograms (506 lb). The animals are only used once in any competition.⁹

Calf Roping

1.19 In this event, a calf is released from a chute and pursued by a rider who attempts to throw a lasso around the calf's neck. When the calf is caught, the rider dismounts and immobilises the calf by tying three of its legs together with a piece of rope.

1.20 According to the Rodeo Associations, this event displays a co-ordinated effort of horse and rider. Horses used are required to be highly trained and responsive. The favoured breed used is the Quarter horse, a breed noted for its great speed over short distances.¹⁰

Incidence of Injuries

1.21 All witnesses who appeared before the Committee recognised that injuries to animals do occur during rodeo events. The nature and extent of these injuries, however, were disputed.

1.22 Mr John Gill, Stock Contractors' Representative with the Australian Professional Rodeo Association (APRA), told the Committee that horses can pull muscles and suffer skin abrasions and minor leg injuries.¹¹ Occasionally, a bucking horse may break a leg. Mr Gill advised the

Committee that injury levels have declined in recent years, because more contract stock are used, arena surfaces are safer and transport facilities have been improved.¹²

1.23 This evidence was questioned by some animal welfare organisations. They maintain that injuries sustained in rodeo events may be quite severe. For example, ANZFAS cited an incident at a rodeo in the Derwent Entertainment Centre in Hobart, Tasmania, in October 1990, when a horse emerged from a chute, collided with a steel fence and broke its neck.¹³ The Federation also claims that horses used in bucking events suffer severe abrasions and may receive open wounds. These are sometimes left untreated.¹⁴ According to ANZFAS, calves in roping events often break legs, suffer injuries to the neck structure and receive severe bruising.¹⁵

1.24 The Committee was interested to receive data on the extent and nature of injuries sustained by stock during rodeo events. The Committee, however, was advised that the Rodeo Associations do not collect this information.

1.25 Under the Victorian permit system, veterinarians are required to report on serious injuries suffered by stock at rodeos conducted in that State. The Victorian Bureau of Animal Welfare has collated the following information on injuries:

Table 1.1: Number of Rodeos held in Victoria 1986-90 and Number of Serious Animal Injuries

YEAR	1990 (to Sept.)	1989	1988	1987	1986
NUMBER OF RODEOS	21	24	27	19	16
NUMBER OF SERIOUS INJURIES	3	8	11	6	1

Source: Victorian Bureau of Animal Welfare.

Table 1.2: Classification and Outcome of Serious Injuries Reported

YEAR	INJURY	RESULT
1990	Bull - fractured spine Horse - wound from horn Bull - fractured spine	destroyed treated destroyed
1989	Horse - fractured neck Steer - fractured hock Bull - laceration Steer - lame Horse - laceration Horse - laceration Horse - laceration Horse - laceration	destroyed destroyed treated treated treated treated treated treated
1988	Bull - fractured leg Horse - girth injury Horse - wound from horn Horse - laceration Horse - laceration Steer - fractured leg Horse - laceration Steer - fractured leg Steer - fractured leg Steer - fractured leg Bull - laceration	destroyed treated treated treated treated destroyed treated destroyed destroyed destroyed treated
1987	Calf - stressed Bull - laceration Steer - fractured leg Bull - laceration Horse - fractured neck Horse - lame	treated treated destroyed treated died treated
1986	Horse - fractured spine	destroyed

Source: Victorian Bureau of Animal Welfare.

1.26 Of the 29 serious injuries, including mortalities reported from 1986 to 1990, 15 related to cattle and 14 to horses. A further breakdown of this information indicates that of the twelve deaths reported, nine were cattle and three horses.

1.27 The Australian Federation for the Welfare of Animals (AFWA), also referred the Committee to a study commissioned by the American Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association in 1985. This study was compiled by veterinarians engaged by local rodeo committees and covered 4,247 animal performances at six major rodeos. Twelve injuries were recorded, three resulting in death.¹⁶ According to AFWA, rodeo stock at these rodeos had a 0.28 per cent chance of injury during events. AFWA maintains that the risk of injury to rodeo stock is no greater than that to on-farm stock.

1.28 The Committee was also interested to obtain data on long-term physical damage to animals involved in rodeos. It seems that this information is not collected. AFWA, however, commented on this matter. The Federation drew the Committee's attention to the general good health and physical condition of most contractors' bucking stock. It also indicated that many bucking horses have long rodeo careers sometimes for as long as twenty years. The Federation added that this is "remarkable", especially when compared with thoroughbred horses, where few horses race beyond five years of age.¹⁷

1.29 The Federation observed:

The reasons for such prolonged fitness of some bucking horses are not obvious, but they may involve the robust conformation of the average rodeo horse, the relatively short performance times expected of them (8 seconds) or commencement of rodeo careers when fully matured. In any case, it is clear that they suffer little or no long term damage from their activities. Bulls have a shorter life span than horses but many bucking bulls continue to perform beyond ten years of age, and the same general remarks apply to them.¹⁸

1.30 Stock used in rodeos may also be subject to stress. ANZFAS argued that frequently rodeo animals are subject to stress due to unfamiliar surroundings, noise and other sensations.¹⁹ Dr Ian Gollan of

AFWA told the Committee that stress symptoms would likely be greater in non-contract stock unfamiliar with rodeos.²⁰

Conclusions

1.31 The Committee welcomes recent initiatives in Victoria requiring reports on serious injuries to rodeo animals to be lodged with the State Bureau of Animal Welfare.

1.32 The Committee, however, is concerned about the lack of data on the nature and extent of injuries sustained at rodeos in other States and Territories. In the Committee's view, statistics should be collected so that injuries to these animals can be monitored and assessed.

1.33 *The Committee recommends that State and Territory Governments, in consultation with rodeo associations, develop procedures in order to collect statistics and information on major injuries and fatalities of animals during rodeo events.*

Rodeo Associations

1.34 There are three main organisations conducting rodeos in Australia. These are the Australian Bushmen's Campdraft and Rodeo Association (ABCRA), the Australian Professional Rodeo Association and the National Rodeo Association.

1.35 The Australian Bushmen's Campdraft and Rodeo Association, formerly known as the Australian Bushmen's Carnival Association, was formed in 1946 and is the largest rodeo association in Australia.²¹ At the present time, it has 218 affiliated committees operating in NSW, Queensland and Victoria.²² In 1990, there were 3,578 competing members in the Association, comprising 2,492 senior members and 1,086 junior members, under the age of 17 years. There were 2,193 members involved in campdrafting and 1,284 involved in rodeos.²³

1.36 The Australian Professional Rodeo Association, or the Australian Rough Riders' Association as it was formerly known, was established in 1944. The Association conducts approximately 128 rodeos annually throughout Australia.²⁴ These are held in all States and the Northern Territory. The Association has 1,400 members and is affiliated with rodeo

associations in the United States of America, Canada and New Zealand.²⁵

1.37 The National Rodeo Association, which was founded in 1969, conducts rodeos in Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia.²⁶ It has 400 members and 60 affiliated committees.²⁷

Views on Rodeos

1.38 Rodeo associations maintain that rodeos are not cruel or inhumane to the animals used in events. The Associations argue that animal welfare is a major consideration of all those involved in the sport. The Australian Bushmen's Campdraft and Rodeo Association, in its submission to the Committee, noted that rodeos are "conducted with strict rules regarding the handling of animals" and that these controls "promote animal welfare practices".²⁸ Mr Mervyn Button, Chief Executive Officer of the Association, explained:

The Association has always been quite aware of the importance of the welfare of the animals used. Fortunately, most of our committee members, and also our competitors, are domiciled in rural areas and are quite aware of looking after animals because, in the main, it is their livelihood.²⁹

1.39 The Rodeo Associations also informed the Committee that they are concerned about rodeos that are not conducted under the auspices and standards of conduct set by the associations. Mr William Urquhart, President of the National Rodeo Association, told the Committee that this matter was "an area of consistent concern to us".³⁰

1.40 The associations also expressed a willingness to introduce any changes that would promote the welfare of animals in rodeos. Mr Urquhart noted:

We want to see the sport survive... If we need to clean up our act, let us do it straight away.³¹

1.41 The Association also noted that it has built up a good rapport with the RSPCA in Queensland and the NSW Animal Welfare Advisory Council. Regarding its relationship with the Council, Mr Urquhart noted

that it had "adopted anything" the Council suggested "with regard to the welfare of animals at rodeos".³²

1.42 Additionally, the Associations maintain that rodeo events simulate skills and practices that are part and parcel of the Australian pioneering heritage. APRA, in its submission to the Committee, made the following observations:

Rodeos remain the only sport born of the founding and pioneering of our great nation. A definite parallel exists between our own heritage and the North American legend. Terminology merely differs e.g.: the Ranch Cowboy to the Australian Drover; the Outlaw to our Bushranger; and the Ranch to our Station.³³

1.43 Mr Gill, a member of APRA and a stock contractor for rodeos, has been involved in the sport all of his life. During the Committee's visit to his property at Wagga Wagga, Mr Gill emphasised the "family nature" of the sport and the concern that he and many others associated with the sport have for the animals. He also told the Committee that the welfare of his stock was important to him from an economic point of view. He also offered the following comment on the care of his stock:

If you have been in the sport all your life you will have had horses with you for up to 20 years, and a certain amount of sentiment comes in there as well.³⁴

1.44 During the inquiry, the Committee received considerable evidence from several organisations and individuals opposed to rodeos. Some animal welfare organisations, including RSPCA Australia and ANZFAS, argued that rodeos should be banned.

1.45 For example, Dr Hugh Wirth, President of RSPCA Australia, told the Committee that the national policy of the Society is to "implacably oppose rodeos".³⁵ In its submission to the inquiry, RSPCA Australia stated:

The RSPCA is opposed to rodeos as these events pose unacceptable risks to the animals involved purely for human pleasure. There is nothing in the Australian ethos that requires the conduct of rodeos whether to celebrate the skills of the Australian stockman, or to provide a training ground for stockworkers.³⁶

1.46 When appearing before the Committee at a public hearing, representatives of RSPCA (NSW) confirmed the Society's opposition to rodeos. Ms Amanda Large, Assistant Director of RSPCA (NSW), emphasised that rodeos pose "enormous potential animal welfare problems".³⁷ The New South Wales branch of the Society, however, recognised that rodeos are unlikely to be banned or phased out in the near future. The Society, therefore, accepts continuation of rodeos but only under stringent controls.³⁸

1.47 In its evidence to the Committee, the Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies recommended that rodeos be banned immediately. Ms Glenys Oogjes, Director of ANZFAS, told the Committee that rodeos, by their very nature, are cruel.³⁹ In support of this view, ANZFAS made the following statement to the Committee:

Rodeo is an exploitation of animals directly through cruelty. Its supporters, organisers and practitioners are all influenced by this cruelty and it grows on itself. ... Competitive rodeo is based on cruel practice and cannot be conducted in any form other than by the use of cruelty.⁴⁰

1.48 The Federation indicated, however, that if its recommendation to ban rodeos was not accepted, rodeos should be phased out over a fixed period. During this period, several reforms to the conduct of rodeos should be implemented. These reforms include the following:

- only rodeos conducted under the auspices of one of the three major organisations should be permitted;
- all rodeo operators should be subject to a national code of practice;
- spurs, goads and electric prods should be banned;
- the use of animals other than cattle or horses should be banned;
- calf roping should be banned; and
- a registered veterinarian should be present during rodeos.⁴¹

1.49 The Committee questioned the Federation on the banning or phasing out of rodeos. Ms Oogjes replied:

We want them banned for the ethical reasons that I have outlined. If that is not going to be an immediate recommendation of [the Select] Committee, then we have what could be called a fall-back position, that is, that they should be phased-out and while that is occurring that there should be a number of dramatic improvements in the conduct of those events.⁴²

1.50 When questioned on whether this position indicated a tacit acceptance of rodeos, Ms Oogjes responded:

No, not at all. We are just living in a practical world and we do not expect that rodeo will be stopped tomorrow, although it is our belief that it should be.⁴³

1.51 The Committee also questioned representatives of the Federation on the likely effect of the proposed reforms and, in particular, their implications for animal welfare. Ms Oogjes responded that the reforms proposed by ANZFAS may make rodeos more acceptable to the community. She, however, expressed the following reservation:

It would not make it more acceptable to us. We believe that because there is and always will remain the risk of injury and even death to animals, and because the only justification for rodeo as we see it is as an entertainment or a spectacle, then it cannot be justified and it should be stopped tomorrow.⁴⁴

1.52 In contrast to the views of other major animal welfare organisations noted above, the Australian Federation for the Welfare of Animals is not opposed to rodeos. In its submission to the inquiry, AFWA noted:

It appears that most bodies responsible for the organisation and running of modern rodeos are making genuine efforts to police themselves and prevent unnecessary cruelty to the animals involved. With the present safeguards and with continuing public vigilance at rodeos, the sport is a legitimate recreational use of horses and cattle.⁴⁵

1.53 While recognising that animals in rodeos are exploited for recreational purposes, Dr Gollan, a member of AFWA, questioned whether this was detrimental to the welfare of animals in rodeos. He observed:

It is very difficult to quantify psychological or emotional distress or stress in rodeo animals - or any animals for that matter - but their physical wellbeing can be fairly accurately assessed. The rodeo is something that on the whole is being actively and adequately addressed by the people charged with the conduct of rodeos in Australia at present.⁴⁶

1.54 The Australian Equine Veterinary Association (AEVA) expressed concerns about rodeos. In its submission, the Association argued that rodeos "are a major concern as the welfare of the animals involved is often of secondary importance".⁴⁷ Dr Colin Bassett, President of AEVA, recognised that, although rodeos remain a "potential source of concern" to the Association, "movements over the last 10 years to bring in stricter rules for the conduct of rodeos have improved the situation significantly".⁴⁸

Conclusions

1.55 During the inquiry, members of the Committee took the opportunity to inspect the conduct of rodeos at the National Championships in Tamworth in January 1991 and the Royal Easter Show in Sydney in March 1991. At these rodeos, members of the Committee also spoke to officials, competitors, stock owners, an RSPCA inspector and members of the general public.

1.56 The Committee was impressed with the attention given to the welfare of animals and, in particular, horses at these events. However, given the status and profile of these competitions, the Committee would not have expected anything less.

1.57 Unfortunately, the Committee's program for the inquiry did not allow inspections of smaller, local rodeos. Specific evidence presented at public hearings and anecdotal comments indicate that there are genuine concerns about the welfare of animals used at some of these venues.

1.58 The Committee considers that the nature of rodeos demands that the welfare of animals be given paramount importance by all those involved in the sport. The Committee is aware that recent improvements to protect the welfare of animals have been made by Rodeo Associations.

1.59 On the basis of evidence presented during the inquiry, the Committee is of the view that rodeos need not be banned or phased out, providing significant improvements in their conduct are introduced.

1.60 It is the Committee's view that when implemented, these improvements will make rodeos more acceptable to the general community and will also alleviate many of the concerns held by animal welfare organisations. Most importantly, these improvements will safeguard the welfare of animals used in rodeos.

ENDNOTES

1. *Evidence*, Australian Federation for the Welfare of Animals, p. 378.
2. *Submission*, Australian Bushmen's Campdraft and Rodeo Association, (1984), p. 9.
3. *ibid.*, p. 10.
4. *Evidence*, RSPCA New South Wales, p. 360.
5. *Evidence*, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies, p. 171.
6. *Evidence*, Australian Professional Rodeo Association, p. 188.
Evidence, Australian Federation for the Welfare of Animals, p. 378.
7. *Submission*, Australian Bushmen's Campdraft and Rodeo Association, (1984), p. 15.
8. *ibid.*, p. 18.
9. *ibid.*, pp. 22-23.
10. *ibid.*, pp. 24-5.
11. *Evidence*, Australian Professional Rodeo Association, p. 229.
12. *ibid.*, pp. 216-17.
13. *Evidence*, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies, p. 160.
14. *ibid.*
15. *ibid.*, p. 156.
16. *Evidence*, Australian Federation for the Welfare of Animals, p. 382.
17. *ibid.*
18. *ibid.*
19. *Evidence*, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies, p. 160.
20. *Evidence*, Australian Federation for the Welfare of Animals, p. 392.

21. *Evidence*, Australian Bushmen's Campdraft and Rodeo Association, p. 98.
22. *ibid.*, pp. 96-97.
23. *ibid.*, p. 97.
24. *Evidence*, Australian Professional Rodeo Association, p. 216.
25. *ibid.*
26. *Evidence*, National Rodeo Association, p. 486.
27. Personal communication with the Committee, 2 May 1991.
28. *Submission*, Australian Bushmen's Campdraft and Rodeo Association, (1984), p. 37.
29. *Evidence*, Australian Professional Rodeo Association, p. 95.
30. *Evidence*, National Rodeo Association, p. 488.
31. *ibid.*, p. 501.
32. *ibid.*, p. 487.
33. *Evidence*, Australian Professional Rodeo Association, p. 187.
34. *ibid.*, p. 216.
35. *Evidence*, RSPCA Australia, p. 136.
36. *ibid.*, p. 129.
37. *Evidence*, RSPCA New South Wales, p. 342.
38. *ibid.*, p. 131.
39. *Evidence*, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies, p. 178.
40. *ibid.*, pp. 161-2.
41. *ibid.*, p. 150.
42. *ibid.*, p. 168.
43. *ibid.*
44. *ibid.*, pp. 168-9.

45. *Evidence*, Australian Federation for the Welfare of Animals, p. 383.
46. *ibid.*, p. 384.
47. *Evidence*, Australian Equine Veterinary Association, p. 4.
48. *ibid.*, p. 11.

