

Horseback heroes: Pickup men are cowboys' best friends

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They are known as ghosts of the rodeo arena.

They glide in and rescue roughstock riders from twisting fury on the hoof, usher bulls and broncs to the exit and vanish into the background.

They are rodeo pickup men.

Anything can happen. Competitors can get hung up in rigging or stirrups or find themselves on the dirt eyeballing a set of deadly, flying hooves. Getting roughstock riders to safety is a delicate dance without choreography, just plenty of intuition and quick reactions.

One of rodeo's finest pickup men, Gary Rempel, works his ghostly magic each year at the Pendleton Round-Up and other rodeos across North America. The Montana pickup man is intimately aware of the intrinsic unpredictability of his chosen profession.

At the 2010 Canadian Finals Rodeo, Rempel lassoed a bull just as it leaped into the stands, creating mayhem. The out-of-control bull broke one woman's collarbone, but the veteran pickup man is credited with keeping injuries to a minimum.

Everything turned to slow motion, Rempel said. He and his horse pulled the raging animal against a panel until his fellow pickup men could add their muscle.

"You never know what will happen in the arena," said Rempel. A 35-year veteran pickup man, he's worked the National Finals Rodeo eight times.

No pickup man does it alone. It takes a finely tuned team. At most rodeos, two pickup men work together. At the Pendleton Round-Up, because of its larger, grass-covered arena, it takes six.

Two of Rempel's colleagues, Billy Ward and Bobby Marriott, agree that an essential skill is the ability to read each other's minds.

"There's no time to be talking," said Marriott, 49, of Utah. "You just have to know what to do. A lot of different minds — man and horse — have to be thinking the same things."

All three men grew up with horses. Rempel and Ward's fathers were pickup men. Marriott got the fever from a family friend.

Riding horses is so second-nature for these guys, like slipping on a pair of dusty old boots, that they had to pause and consider before articulating out loud the qualities of a first-rate pickup man.

"You have to have a lot of stockmanship," said Ward, who trains horses in Utah when not saving bronc riders' lives. "Roping ability plays a big part."

Each pickup man brings multiple horses. Ward, 45, packs eight.

“They get winded,” he said. “I use two horses in each event.”

Good horses are strong and speedy.

“They have to be fast,” Rempel said. “Speed covers up so many mistakes.”

“They’ve got to be pretty tough,” Ward said. “They get banged around quite a bit.”

Pickup men get banged up too on occasion. A couple of months ago, a horse latched on to Ward.

“She bit my fingers and almost pulled me off the horse,” he said. “She broke a couple of fingers.”

Rempel broke his leg in 1985. A bucking horse kicked Marriott and fractured his knee, but he didn’t blame the animal.

“The idea is to do it right and not be in the wrong spot,” he said.

Rempel, Ward and Marriott work together in Pendleton. The Round-Up, they say, is distinctive.

“The arena is 10 times bigger than most and it’s on grass,” Marriott said. “If you turn sharp, you’ll go sliding.”

Pendleton is different, “but different in a great way,” Ward said. “It’s unique from every other rodeo we go to.”

“Pendleton is a whole different ball game,” Rempel said.

But, wherever they are, they have the same goal — getting the cowboys to safety and keeping the action moving seamlessly. While some hail rodeo pickup men as heroes on horseback, Rempel said good pickup men are almost invisible.

“The better we do our job in the arena,” he said, “the quicker the rodeo runs.”

Dave O’Neill, livestock director at the Pendleton Round-Up, marvels at the abilities of rodeo pickup men.

“They’re strong, natural athletes,” he said. “They change speed and direction constantly. They have such a keen ability to recognize trouble before it happens.”

According to O’Neill, the pickup man is a rodeo rider’s best friend, waiting in the background to perform with athleticism and grace.

“These guys are pure cowboy,” he said.