

The Pick-Up Man

Story and photography
by RYAN T. BELL

A three-decade career has made Gary Rempel one of the most familiar and reliable men in the rodeo arena. A behind-the-scenes look at the Canadian Finals Rodeo reveals what has made him so successful.

ON MOST WINTER NIGHTS IN EDMONTON, ALBERTA, Rexall Place hosts an ice hockey game. History looms large over the 16,800-seat arena, home to the Edmonton Oilers. A 15-foot statue of Wayne Gretzky—the National Hockey League’s all-time leading scorer, who played here for a decade—greet visitors at the southeast entrance. In the rafters hangs a string of championship banners from the Oilers’ dynasty years in the 1980s.

But during the first week in November of 2014, Rexall Place is host to the 41st Annual Canadian Finals Rodeo. The arena floor is buried in dirt. And where the Zamboni usually parks, pick-up rider Gary Rempel saddles his horses.





ABOVE: Last year, Rempel traveled 40,000 miles, picking up in 170 performances. "I left home in the middle of May and didn't get home until the end of September. Well, I shouldn't say that. I stopped at home for two hours one day. Long enough for me to drop some clothes off, and switch a couple horses around."

LEFT: During the regular rodeo season, Rempel works on contract for Calgary Stampede at the rodeos they supply as a stock contractor.



It's one hour until showtime on Saturday night. A stream of cowboys walks by, many of them stopping to greet Rempel. He's a mainstay in professional rodeo, with a career spanning 30 years and appearances at most major rodeos in North America. At the CFR, where the rodeo cowboys vote on pick-up riders, Rempel has appeared a record 17 times. He's also been voted to pick up at the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas, Nevada, eight times—another record. He has picked up at the Calgary Stampede for 30 years. And he's been

inducted into the halls of fame at the Pendleton Round-Up in Oregon and the Ellensburg Rodeo in Washington.

"You know what you're getting with Gary," says Dan Morgan, a board member for the Ellensburg Rodeo. "He's like one with his horse, coming in at the right speed, in the right place, at the right time."

Rempel's partner is Jeff Resch, who's appearing in his first CFR. Resch says that part of the honor is getting to ride with Rempel.

"He's an icon," Resch says. "It's pretty special to do a rodeo like this with a guy like that."

The typical pick-up man comes to the profession by way of rodeo. Not Rempel. He's a talented enough roper to have made a fair go, but he knew from a young age that he wanted to be a pick-up man.

Rempel grew up on the Matador Ranch, a 140,000-acre community pasture in southwest Saskatchewan. His dad, John Rempel, was the manager. Gary learned to ride and rope, helping out at summer brandings that would see 4,000 calves dragged to the fire. His father moonlighted as a pick-up rider on the weekends. While he was gone, the Matador cowboys would ride broncs and Gary got his first taste of pick-up riding.

Eventually, Rempel caught the attention of Gerald Shockey, a renowned pick-up rider who was partners with Wayne Vold at the Calgary Stampede. In 1985, Shockey developed a brain tumor. Before his death, he mentioned Rempel's name to the Calgary Stampede manager.

Vold remembers the day Rempel rode with him into the arena.

"They had me trying different guys the whole Stampede. In 10 days, I rode with six partners," Vold says. "But Gary and I fit like a glove. It seemed like we'd picked up together before. At the end of the day, I rode over to [manager] Winston Bruce and told him, 'Don't send anymore guys, because Gary's who I want.'"

He was impressed with Rempel's unselfish approach to the job.

"For a lot of pick-up men, it's like they get a dollar for every cowboy they pick up. It doesn't work like that," Vold says. "When Gary first came along, to make us look good, I would haze horses over for him to pick up. Gary figured out the deal and started hazing them back to me, too. Pretty soon, we both looked good. If a rodeo goes smooth, nobody should notice the pick-up men."

Having good pick-up riders is the secret to a well run rodeo.

"Nothing looks worse than a pick-up man running around the arena for two or three laps to get the job done," says Tyler Kraft, ranch manager for Calgary Stampede. "Watch Gary ride and you'll see how well a pick-up can go. When eight seconds are up, he's in the right spot. He dallies the bucking rein, catches the guy jumping off, gets the back cinch off and he's out in 15 seconds."

Rempel is at the apogee of his career. He's a role model for both experienced and aspiring pick-up men.

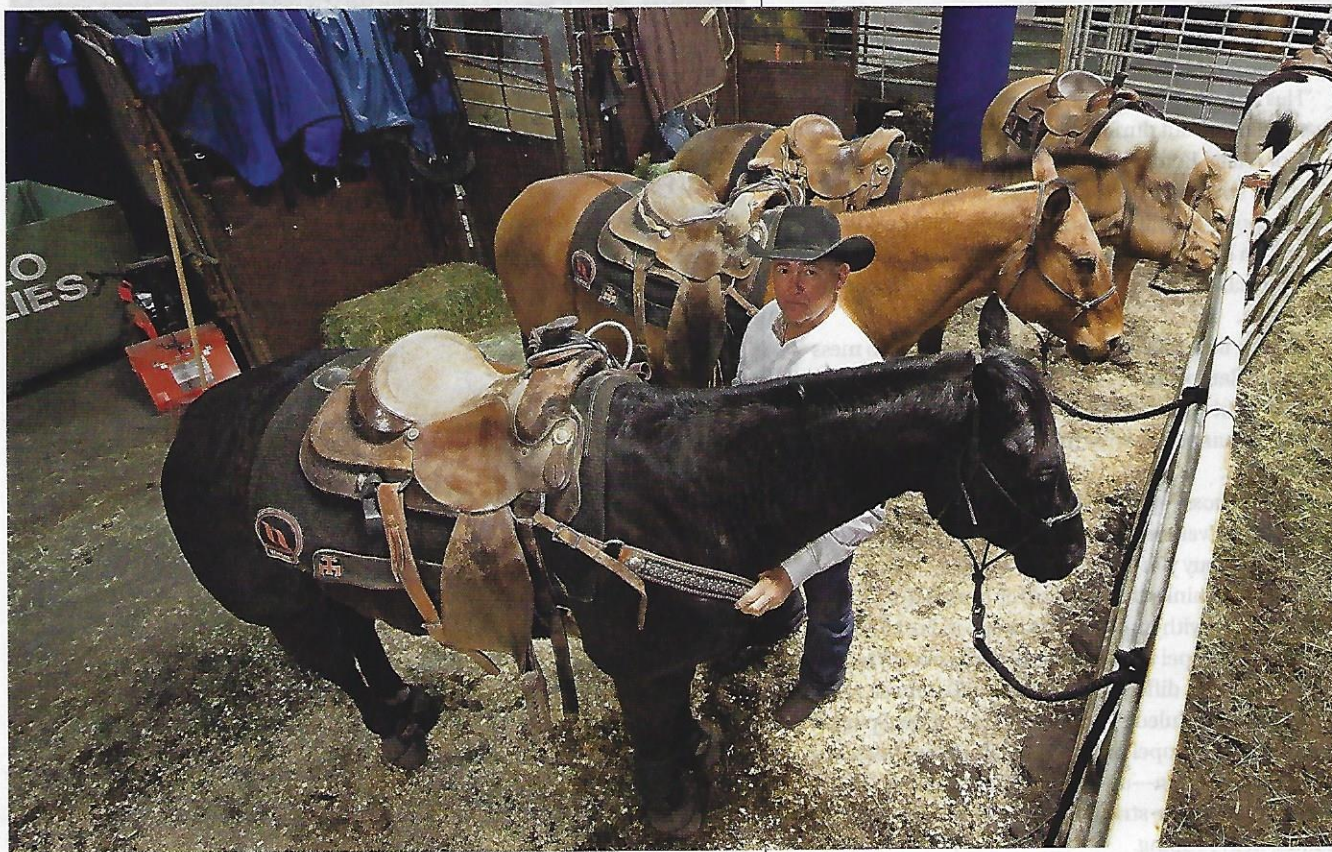
RIGHT: Rempel's spur straps are emblazoned with his "starburst" brand. The name is borrowed from a favorite bucking horse, Starburst, owned by Kesler Rodeo. Rempel's horses wear a Starburst freeze brand on the left jaw. "When I'm sitting on the fence, people in the audience will stick their cameras through the bars to take a picture of it," he says.

BELOW: "I usually travel with six horses," Rempel says. "I don't come home very often. It's not that I use all six of them at a rodeo. But since I'm not coming home, I take enough to keep switching them out."

"Gary has respect from the highest committee member down to the 16-year old kid getting on broncs," Kraft says. "He gets the good rodeos, he rides nice horses and he's smooth on the pick-up."

REMPEL ADMITS TO FEELING ANXIOUS before most rodeos. Tonight, it doesn't help that something he ate at a lunch buffet isn't settling well. He pulls two medicine bottles from his duffel bag.

"Tools of the trade: Aleve and antacids," he says. "Never leave home without them."





ABOVE: "We're out there to get the job done and keep the rodeo running smooth and safe," Rempel says. "The name of the game is to pick them up and set them down so they don't get hurt."

RIGHT: "Most bucking horses will come to a pick-up horse," Rempel says. "They want to come to something friendly."

He and Resch are tying on matching neckerchiefs when the chute boss walks up.

"Has anyone told you about the Spanish fighting bull that will come out during the grand entry?" he asks.

"Not really," Rempel says.

At the start of the show, the arena lights will go out. A spotlight will open on a rodeo clown taking on a Spanish bull. The pick-up riders are supposed to be ready in case of a disaster, and to get the bull out of the arena.

"Do you lie awake at night thinking up ways to mess with us?" Rempel asks.

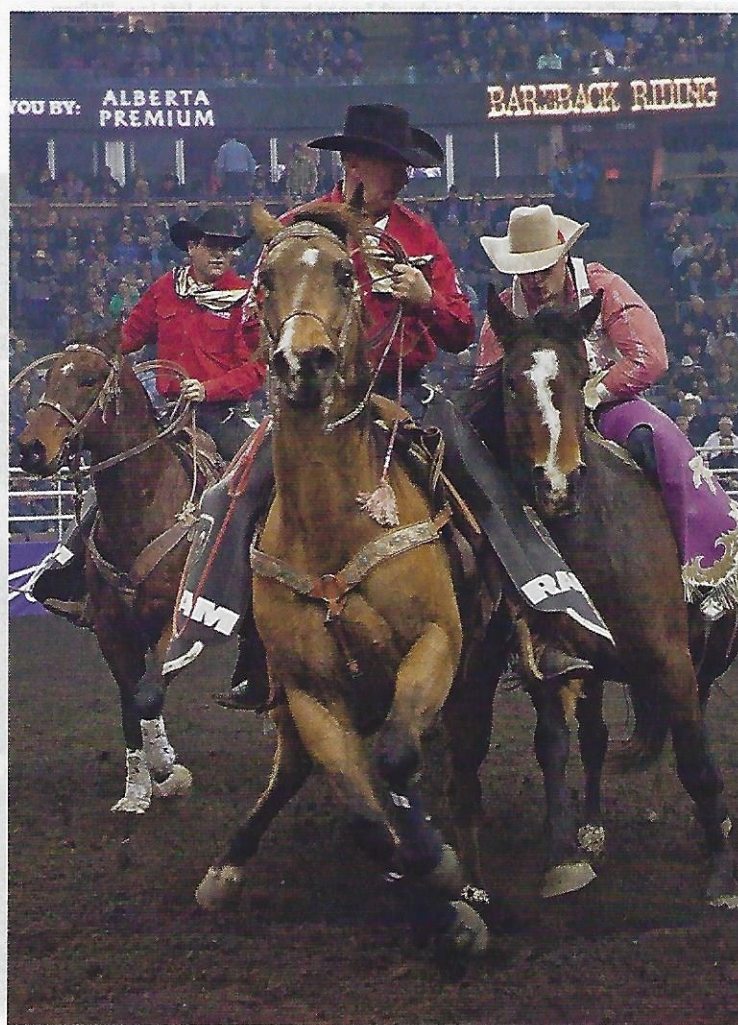
"We've got cover for you," the chute boss says.

"Like a panel or something to hide behind?"

Resch asks.

"No," the boss replies. "A highlight video on the Jumbotron. Everyone will watch it while you're getting the bull. It'll buy you a minute or two."

Rempel rethinks the order of his horses. He's brought four with him from his home in Fort Shaw, Montana. Rempel trains his own, each specialized in picking up for a different rodeo event. Bareback riding is the first scheduled event, but in light of the Spanish fighting bull, Rempel moves his bullfighting horse—a big, calm buckskin—up in the rotation. He isn't the fastest horse in the string, but he's brave and can handle heavy roping.



"They probably think it's cool," Rempel says. "But they're not the one roping a fighting bull in the dark. That's not funny. We're putting our horses on the line."

BACKSTAGE, THE SPANISH FIGHTING BULL is a popular topic of conversation, mentioned at the refreshment table, in the restroom and at the sports bar. The same thought is on a lot of peoples' minds: Rempel has been in a similar situation before.

It happened during the Friday night show of the 2010 CFR. Alberta-based bull rider Tanner Giretz was up on a bull named Rewind. The bull kept rearing in the bucking chute, making it hard for Giretz to get on. Rewind was the kind of bull that could transform a cowboy into a champion or a rag doll. The gate swung open, and Rewind leapt and spun left, dumping Giretz in a few seconds. But the bull's dander was up and he ran the length of the arena. When a bull delays a rodeo, it's standard practice for the pick-up riders to rope him. The show must go on. Rempel circled in behind Rewind, riding his veteran pick-up horse Rainbow, and made a routine lariat throw.

"When I moved to Montana, I worked on a ranch where they told me to have a look at this horse," Rempel says. "They weren't using him because he was bucking everyone off. I could see he wasn't really broncy. Bucking people off wasn't the first thing on his mind. But he was spooky and wide awake. I got him for a thousand dollars and was picking up off him the next spring. I spent a lot of time on him, and he's the best horse I've ever had."

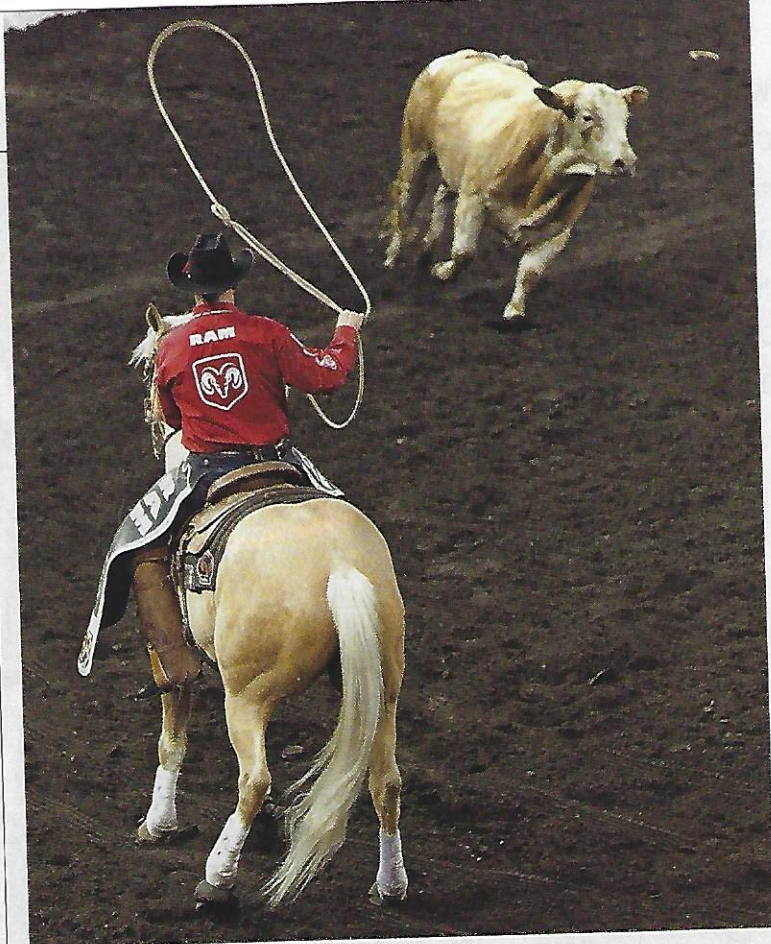
What happened next was caught on video by a woman in the audience. Posted on Youtube, it's been watched more than 330,000 times. The footage is shaky and the picture grainy, but you see that just as Rempel threw his loop, Rewind jumped the arena fence into the audience.

"I didn't realize it was going to happen," Rempel says. "But I had him dallied before he hit the ground. The story went around that I had roped him in mid-air. Makes a good story."

Rewind landed in the front row. One woman got trampled, suffering a fractured pelvis, cheekbone and eye socket. Several others got cuts and bruises. The announcer, in what must be the greatest understatement in the history of rodeo, told the crowd:

"We have a situation now. I suggest you get high, really fast."

The front rows emptied out. A mother lobbed her daughter to a stranger in the row above. More people would've been hurt had Rewind not been pinned against the panel by Rempel's lariat. The arena staff came running to help. Bullfighter Jesse Byrne leapt into the stands to get between the bull and the injured woman, while his partner Dave Sandilands pulled on Rempel's lariat to immobilize the bull's head. CrAsh Cooper, the rodeo clown, jumped on the fence to direct



Rempel turns back a bucking bull at the Canadian Finals Rodeo. The routine task made international news when, in 2010, a bull jumped into the audience.

traffic. An impromptu fencing crew took apart the panel and Rempel dragged Rewind out of the arena.

Wayne Vold says the episode is an example of Rempel's greatest quality as a pick-up rider: "Ability. His knee-jerk reaction happened in two seconds. He was prepared, with rope out. The bull jumped and, boom, he had him. That's somebody who knows what he's doing. There are only a bucket-full of guys who could've handled it that well."

Looking back on it now, Rempel gives the credit to Rainbow.

"I couldn't have been on a better horse," he says.

Rewind has been banned from competition. Rempel feels some sympathy for the bull.

"If you look up at the stands from the spot where Rewind jumped, there's an aisle that looks just like an alleyway," he says. "I'm sure he thought it was the way out and went for it."

THE INCIDENT CEMENTED Rempel's reputation in rodeo circles, yet most rodeo-goers don't recognize his name. Pick-up riders are mostly invisible. They lurk behind the action, swooping in when cameras turn away and the audience is looking up at the Jumbotron to watch the replay. Too bad, because when Rempel's the pick-up rider, the best cowboy in the arena is in plain sight, all rodeo long.

The Spanish fighting bull proves to have been overbilled. The rodeo clown tries taunting him into action, but the animal barely lifts his head when the bullfighter jumps over him. When Rempel and Resch rope the bull, he slumps to the ground. Finally, they get him up and dragged out of the arena. Then Rempel takes his place along the arena fence and turns his attention to the bucking chutes. After all, the cowboys are why he's here. 🍷

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