

# Animal welfare

## Rodeo addressing the issue

**By Jen Cowley**

“Over the past four decades the rodeo industry has worked alongside government departments in relation to animal welfare – and the implementation and ongoing review of the Codes of Practice. We’re happy to continue to work with them if it will make our sport better, but we need to base these judgements on rational and informed arguments.” Di Hallam – Australian Bushmen’s Campdraft and Rodeo Association (ABCRA) general manager.

“The people who run these events these days take great pride in their professionalism and the rodeo fraternity has really come on board with calls to tighten up the way the events are conducted. There is a great deal more sensitivity to animal welfare and the sport, along with the public, has been very responsive to calls for greater scrutiny.” - Ross Pedrana – Dubbo-based equine veterinary practitioner.

The sport of rodeo has long attracted the criticism of animal welfare lobbyists and the campaign to have the sport banned has again been the subject of recent media attention.

ABCRA General Manager, Di Hallam, has addressed criticisms head on, a campaign she says is based mostly on misinformation.

“We are very keen for all our members to be aware of these claims and of the issue of animal welfare as a whole, and to do everything they can to show that ours is a sport that is well regulated and professional. We don’t want to hide from criticism – we’ve met these challenges head on and made changes in the past where necessary. All members need to be made aware of the issues,” she says.

Mark Pearson is the Executive Director of NSW Animal Liberation and has spearheaded the recent push to ban rodeos outright.

“We are opposed to rodeos full stop. We don’t believe rodeo reflects the Australian culture at all, which is often the argument posed in its favour. It’s just an import from the United States. Real stockmen don’t treat their animals in this way,” says Pearson.

However, NSW Police Assistant Commissioner Steve Bradshaw, who is also the NSW Spokesperson for Rural issues disagrees.

"Rodeo is part of Australian history. A visit to the Stockman's Hall of Fame in Longreach can verify that. The history is varied and extends from the animal husbandry practices used on large stations, to the need to ride a rough bucking horse for transport or work in days gone by to entertainment provided by travelling tent shows where riders skills were tested on buckjumpers and bulls," insists Bradshaw, who is also Commander of police in the western region.

"Rodeo is a development of a test of those skills, refined over the years. What has been greatly improved has been the use of animals bred and designed for rodeo performances. This makes it much easier for authorities such as Police and RSPCA to oversee and supervise these events as there is a clear line of responsibility and guidelines through codes of practice. There is very good cooperation between these agencies and rodeo associations to ensure any action which is rarely necessary."

Pearson's campaign has the support of organisations like the RSPCA and the Greens, whose policy platforms include a blanket ban on rodeo as a whole and whose increasing political muscle has not gone unnoticed by the rodeo fraternity.

But for the hundreds of thousands of the sport's competitors, fans and industry insiders, the premise of cruelty to animals is nothing short of "a load of bull".

"The problem is that most people who say they think rodeo is cruel have never even been to one. They just take their information at face value off the internet, where they see emotive statements and video grabs that don't tell the full story."

Hallam says rodeo is "one of the most regulated, scrutinised and controlled" sports in the country. "Which is a good thing – and we welcome that regulation and scrutiny because it makes the whole sport – and the industry of rodeo – much safer and more professional."

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Pearson concedes that the push to ban rodeo outright faces stiff opposition given the growing popularity of the sport in Australia but hopes to agitate for some smaller wins against what he says are the most barbaric of rodeo's practices.

Firmly in the Animal Liberation's sights is the Rope and Tie, which Pearson says is the "number one thing that has to go in NSW".

Police have been called in by Animal Liberation to investigate instances – documented on video by the organisation – of what Pearson believes are "blatant acts of cruelty and clear breaches of legislation" during roping events at certain NSW rodeos. "We believe this is a winnable one – calf roping is a savage and brutal practice and it simply has to go," he says, adding that rodeo's claims of self-regulation are empty. "The rules state that if there's a sudden stop or jerk back or if there's a drag, the competitor must be disqualified. But that never happens."

Steve Bradshaw has been actively involved in raising awareness of and addressing animal welfare issues within the sport.

"The use of animals in a legal sport is not restricted to rodeo. It follows that there must be regulations and codes of practice to ensure the best treatment of animals and they must be adhered to.

"Last November I organised a Rodeo Animal Welfare forum at Dubbo to discuss and debate issues of the welfare of animals used in rodeos. There was a wide range of attendees including members of all rodeo associations, RSPCA, Qld, Victoria and NSW DPI, rodeo committees, stock contractors, NSW Police and competitors. All aspects of animal welfare were discussed. Following this there was a stock contractors meeting held at Tamworth in January. The outcome has been to seek common accreditation of persons involved in dealing with animals used in rodeo," he says.

"I have been associated and involved with Rodeo for over 40 years and believe it is a legitimate use of animals and the people involved who organise Rodeos and own the animals have their best interest of these at stake."

Well known professional stock contractor Matt Adams is equally adamant in his defence of the sport and its treatment of animals. "Let me put it this way: these animals are my livelihood – they're valuable to me and I love them. Most of them are like pets and there's no way known I'd mistreat them or deliberately subject them to any cruelty. They're purpose bred to buck – and they love it. You can't make an animal buck if it doesn't want to – it just won't happen."

Mark Pearson dismisses that argument as "rubbish".

"They say that horses and bulls buck naturally and that they enjoy it. But if that's the case, why do they need to use the flank strap? It clearly irritates the animal. It simulates an attack because that's the way they'd be brought down by a natural predator, around the hindquarters. So the flank strap invokes a fight or flight response – you only have to look at the animal when

it's bucking – it's teeth are clenched, it's often foaming at the mouth and it's clearly not 'enjoying' the experience."

Matt Adams concedes that the flank strap is an irritant, but insists its use is a tool that favours the horse or the bull. "There's no disputing that the strap will make a horse or bull buck more, but it's used really to stack the competition in favour of the animal. And any contractor will tell you that we always back the animal, never the cowboy."

Experienced Dubbo-based equine vet, Ross Pedrana, is comfortable that most rodeos operate within moral and ethical animal welfare boundaries.

"My personal view – and I certainly don't speak for the veterinary industry as a whole – is that, as long as all the regulatory boxes are ticked, rodeo is fine as a sport.

"Calling for a blanket ban is excessive. A lot of people think of rodeo as just bucking bulls and broncs, but there are so many other events that are associated with rodeo, like barrel racing and steer undecorating and the like that in no way involve even a suggestion of cruelty."

Pedrana believes the sport, and the regulations governing it, have come a long way.

"The people who run these events these days take great pride in their professionalism and the rodeo fraternity has really come on board with calls to tighten up the way the events are conducted. There is a great deal more sensitivity to animal welfare and the sport, along with the public, has been very responsive to calls for greater scrutiny."

The use of a flank strap on bucking stock is not a concern for the renowned vet. "Look, there are lots of horses that'll do that (buck) if you simply put a girth strap on them. And when you think about it, the flank strap is really only on the animal for a few seconds."

Pedrana agrees that stock contractors are proud of their animals and subsequently conscious of their welfare. "I've had a bit to do with treating them, and these animals are very valuable, so contractors are not going to jeopardise their health through unscrupulous practice. And as to "making" them buck, most of these purpose bred animals will do it voluntarily – they just love it."

Di Hallam is comfortable with the public attention and expectation, which she says has helped make the ABCRA and the sport and industry as a whole more professional. We want to take the sport into the mainstream. We can only do that if we're all committed to addressing issues like animal welfare – and I think we've done and are continuing to do that".

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