

Bulldogging Takes Both Skill, Strength

Wrestlers Must Study Tricks of Trade

There's something fascinating about watching a man wrestle a steer three times his size and throw it to the ground with his bare hands.

Steer wrestling—or bulldogging as it's frequently called—looks like a job that takes not much skill but a lot of brute strength. Bulldoggers, at least, are all strong, husky young athletes.

On the contrary, it takes as much skill and training to throw a rank steer in less than 10 seconds as it does to drive a clean wood shot 275 yards off the tee, straight down the middle of the fairway.

Rodeo's top steer wrestlers study the technique of their trade as avidly as any football squad goes through long hours of skull practice.

They make films of good wrestlers in action, run them in slow motion to study the fine points of timing and balance needed to get an 800-pound pile of bone and muscle to lie down.

Many doggers have a few steers on their home ranch and in the

off weeks of the long rodeo season you'll probably find them out in the corral, practicing to improve their technique.

Watch them in action at the rodeo and you'll appreciate that steer wrestling is not as easy as years of practice make it look.

Steer wrestlers compete against each other for the best time and the first thing a cowboy must do in this event is make a good start out of the chute, whether the local rules call for starts behind the barrier or lap and tap.

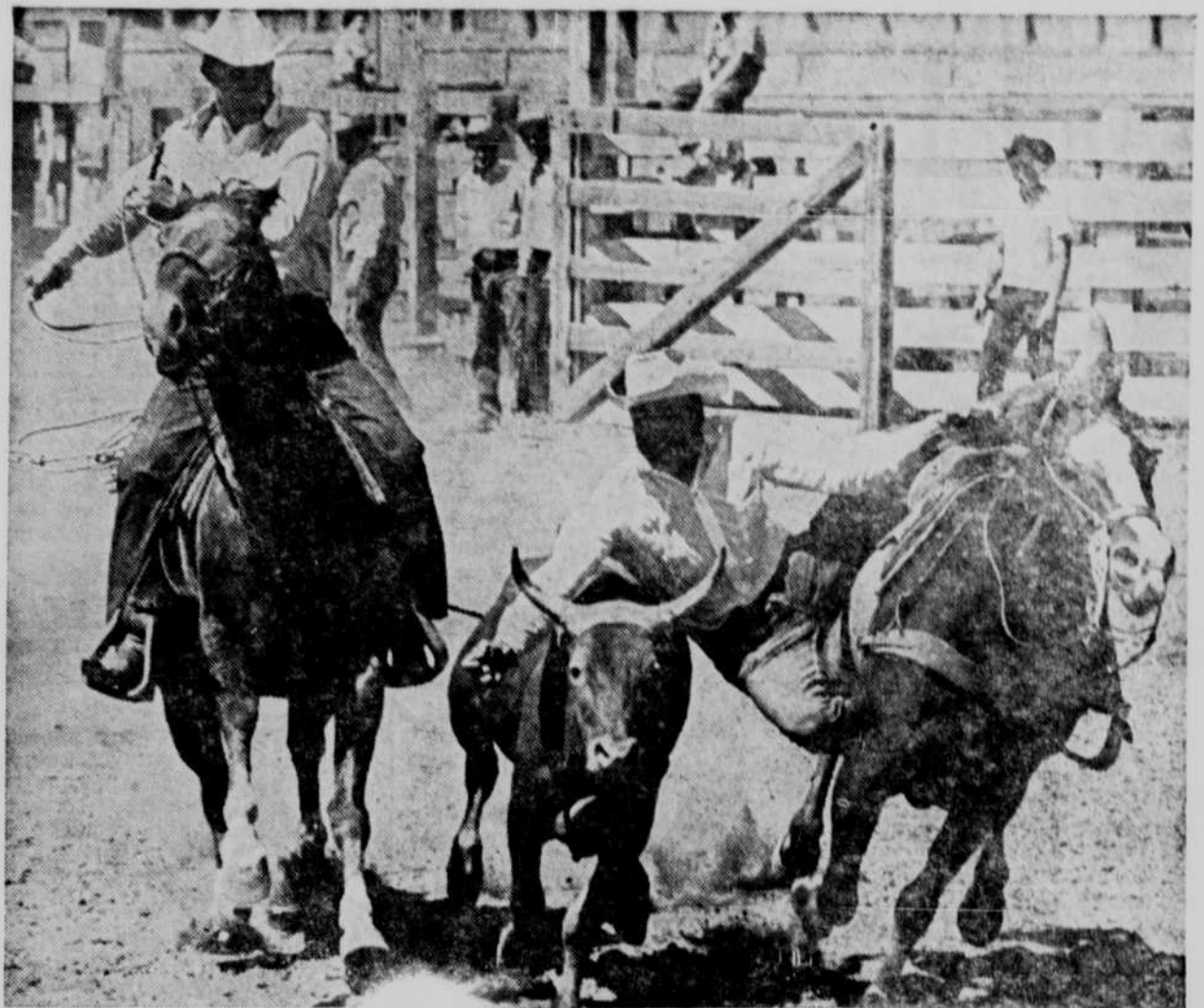
In some large arenas, the steers are all given a pre-determined head start marked by a score line several feet in front of the chute.

Next to the score line stands one of the flag men, with a line to a spring latch holding a rope across the box where the contestant awaits. As the steer crosses the score line, the flag man drops his flag to indicate the start of time and simultaneously pulls the rope barrier in front of the waiting bulldogger.

If the dogger starts too soon, he breaks the barrier and a 10-second penalty is added to his time. If he starts too late he loses precious seconds trying to catch up with the steer.

In lap and tap starts the steer is given no head start and the dogger can jump it right at the chute gate. If the cowboy starts too soon he gets ahead of the steer and it gets away.

The next problem is the jump.



Throwing a steer three times your size to the ground takes some doing. 'Dogger can't start too soon or faces a penalty.

No two steers run alike and you'll see quite a variation in their speed. On the opposite side of the steer another cowboy rides as a hazer to keep the steer running straight. There's always the danger that the steer will "set up"—stop just as the wrestler slips out of his saddle—and the cowboy will take a hard fall in the dust.

Once he has a firm grip on the head of the critter, the cowboy must bring the running steer to a complete stop by planting his boot heels in the dirt ahead of the steer. If his feet get behind him he'll be dragged along helplessly.

Time is up when the steer falls on its side with all four legs free and the feet and head pointing in the same direction. If the steer "dog falls," with its legs under it or spread eagled, the cowboy usually has to let him up and start over. And at any minute the big, sturdy animal may wrench free and escape.

As soon as the steer is properly thrown, the other flagman, mounted nearby, drops his flag in a signal to stop the timer's watch.

"Houlihanning"—jumping on the head of the steer so it's knocked off its feet—is out. If it happens accidentally, the dogger must let the steer up and throw him by hand. "Pegging"—driving a horn into the ground to gain leverage—is also outlawed.

Like roping, steer wrestling depends on the closest possible teamwork between cowboy and horse. The horse must not jump out of the box too quickly or lag behind when the barrier drops. Immediately, he must gauge the speed of the steer and get in just the right position close alongside. When the dogger drops the reins and starts to slip out of the saddle, the horse must hold both pace and position. If he shies to the left he'll drop the cowboy on his head; if he rides too close he can cause a serious injury.

But no matter how scientific its practitioners approach it, steer wrestling is still a man-sized job. Jumping from the saddle at full gallop to tangle with the horns of an 800-pound steer will never be either safe or easy.

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