

MAGAZINE FEATURES JOE CAVANAUGH . . .

## Bull Riding Announcer

Editor's note: The following article concerning Holt county's own Joe Cavanaugh, who was reared in the Chambers community, was featured in the nationally distributed magazine, The Western Horseman, June, 1956, issue:

By JERRY ARMSTRONG

It has been said that a rodeo announcer can make or break a rodeo — this statement, fortunately, is not true; if it were, an imposing number of rodeos would have been "broken" a long time ago. It is a fact that really good rodeo announcers are, and always have been, too few. This fact is especially apparent today. One does not appreciate the really good ones until you have heard some of the mumbling bad ones. The outnumbered good announcers are scattered around the country and many of them are not as well-known as they should be.

Now out in Chambers, there lives an ex-bull rider who in the past 10 years has developed into a very good rodeo announcer. This boy's name is Joe Cavanaugh and he is a popular announcer in the midwest rodeo scene — in the near future he should become very well-known all over the country. He is that good at the mike, and this boy really knows the rodeo. Shortly after the conscientious Joe Cavanaugh had started announcing, and while he was still no slouch on the bulls, he got the notion that a good authentic cowboy announcer should at one time or another have worked all five major events. He got this notion on the eve of a Paul Long rodeo in Kansas, and promptly entered the saddle bronc riding and the 'dogging, along with his number one event, bull riding. Joe (who had started in rodeo as a bareback bronc rider) later said that if he had had a horse he would have entered the roping, too. He probably would have, too; he's that kind of a cowboy.

We first observed Jerry Cavanaugh in action, at the mike and on the bulls, one warmish afternoon several years back. Before the start of the rodeo, a group of contestants were squatting in front of the chutes talking of this and that and we sat down with them. Two of these cowboys were the writer's current traveling companions. We had started out together that spring with a business arrangement of sorts—the writer supplying the transportation and paying the entry fees in return for a cut of all winnings.



Cavanaugh, nation's number 2 rodeo announcer . . . returning to announce at the Holt county fair. — The Frontier Photo.

But, all had not gone well from the start, and now in effect was a turnabout business deal—our two buddies bought the gas, our typewriter ribbons, paper, envelopes and stamps, and we split the checks for all writings that were sold.

As the rodeo was about to start, one of the cowboys in the group arose, put his bull-roping under the fence, and climbed up into the announcer's stand. There he busily started fussing with papers and testing the mike for sound. "Does that bull rider know what he's doing up there?" we asked one of our buddies. "Sure, he does," was the retort, "that's Joe Cavanaugh, the announcer."

Later, Joe climbed down out of the crowd's nest announcing stand to take out a bull. It turned out to be a dilly of a ride on a rank spinning bull—and it had been a good, capable and unusually entertaining announcing job. We were muchly impressed and determined to some day write about this talented cowboy from Nebraska's sandhill country. This is that someday, for it took much doing to get the Joe Cavanaugh story.

Joe, who is 33 - years - old though he appears much younger) was born in O'Neill. He was

always around and up on horses, and his first job was wrangling horses for 50 cents a day on the Quarter Circle S ranch out of O'Neill. He entered his first rodeo at Chambers in 1938. Here he was in a bareback bronc riding event, and he placed second in the first go-round. This was in the period when bareback horses were being ridden the hard way, with a loose rope. Young Cavanaugh had the rodeo bug, and a braided loose rope; so, in the ensuing years, he came out aboard a lot of bareback horses. But, this was in the depression era and Joe had 11 brothers and sisters—and he wasn't getting to the pay window often enough to contribute much wampum at home. So, the young bareback bronc rider put away his big hat, his boots, and the worn loose rope, and went to a CCC camp for two years.

World War II started shortly after he arrived home from camp, and Joe joined up. He served with the air transport command in China, Burma and India. He was a sergeant when he received his discharge early in 1946. Even after all those long years, Joe still had the rodeo bug—and bad. He went to work on the chutes and handling stock and doing this and that for mid-west stock contractor-producer Walter Plugge, and was also back in the arena riding bulls and "buffalo" (catalo—buffalo—Hereford cross).

At the 1946 Wymore rodeo, the regular announcer, Eddie Boysen, also an all-around cowboy, was injured. An announcer was needed in a hurry—and young Cavanaugh, who had quite a gift for gab, and enough courage to tackle anything that came along, was available. So, Joe took over the mike and all went well—the spectators and the cowboys both liked his manner at the mike, his clear voice, and his special brand of authentic cowboy chatter. The injured announcer, Eddie Boysen, and Jack King, a well-known and highly-rated horse-show announcer, both encouraged Cavanaugh to continue announcing. So, Joe decided that this was for him, and he set about learning all that he could about the workings and the foibles of the announcing craft.

Joe was always available from then on, and he announced rodeos and matches whenever and wherever he could, and, meanwhile, he was still riding bulls—and riding good, too. That year (1946) Walter Plugge had a lot of bull in an old meanie known as Blue Boy. Only two cowboys managed to chalk up rides on Blue Boy's rough old back. One of these riders was Charlie Colbert, the other was Joe Cavanaugh. In 1950, stock contractor-producer Paul Long had a fast-spinning bull in the string that was called 8-Ball. This one was giving all of the bull riders a bad time, but two boys did manage to make money rides on old 8-Ball that season. Clayton Hill rode him at the South Sioux City rodeo and Joe Cavanaugh won the bull riding at Nelson aboard the violent 8-Ball. In talking of bulls, Joe avers that among the best bulls that he's been aboard are George Stichka's Joe Louis and Number 273; Paul Long's Railroad and Walter Plugge's old Number 18.

In 1954, at the Broken Bow Elks club rodeo, Stichka's Buckshot bull stepped on Joe, breaking three ribs loose from the backbone. But, the taped-up bull riding announcer was back at the mike to announce the following performance. In 1952 Joe was riding bulls and announcing at the Lawrence stadium rodeo in Wichita, Kans. It was here that he drew the good Stichka bull, Joe Louis. Bob Erickson was up on the chute, assisting Joe on and out. As Bob was pulling his rope for him, Joe looked up and said: "Bob, if I ride this bull, I'm going to Omaha."

Joe did ride the bull and did go to Omaha's Ak-Sar-Ben rodeo. Here he had three go-round bulls, and, although all of them were good, each one, seemingly, was a little better and a bit rougher than the one before. The third and final bull was Leo Cremer's notorious Number 77. The tricky Number 77 came out fast and then, in a tight circle, spun right back into the open chute. When

(Continued on page 20.)

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