

Yat Wahoo

UNL ropes in wins with few winks after working weekend rodeo

By ERIN GIBSON
Senior Reporter

WAHOO — With the restless bronc before him, Kyle Whitaker slapped his cheeks and jerked his head violently to each side.

He lurched his body backward with one hand extended, preparing to hold on through a fierce eight-second ride.

Then, with eyes focused, he slipped onto the bronc and nodded the OK. The gate was flung open, and the bronc exploded into the arena.

"There's nothing else like it," he said after a successful ride. "It's the best natural high there is."

Whitaker, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln sophomore who competes with the college rodeo team, won the men's all-around honors and belt buckle at the UNL Rodeo this weekend in Wahoo.

The University of Nebraska Rodeo Association was host for the 39th-annual event, which showcased the skills of about 300 college cowboys and cowgirls from colleges around the Great Plains region.

About 20 competitors representing the UNL team went into the contest tired from planning the rodeo, and the pressure seemed to hurt the team's overall performance.

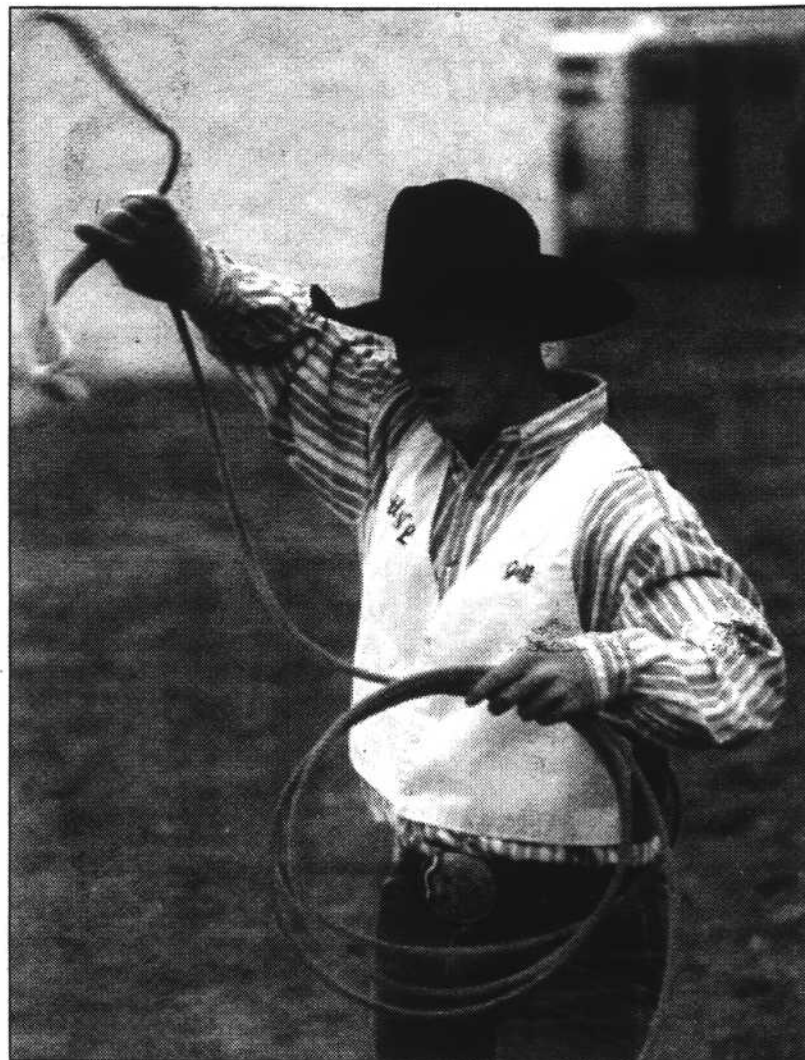
But six team members made it to the weekend's final round — the "short go" — with Whitaker finishing first in calf roping and Pat Williams placing third in bull riding. Whitaker also competed in saddle bronc riding.

In the short go, other UNL competitors were Stoney Fred in team roping, Sara Ragatz in barrel racing, Jamie Chaffin in goat tying and Jeff Richardson in steer wrestling.

Several other team members, including Janet Ebert and Jasper Fanning, were ranked 11th in events after Friday night and Saturday afternoon. Only the top 10 competitors in each event could compete in Saturday night's short go competition.

Jud Skavdahl, UNL senior and rodeo club president, said he wished more of his teammates had made the cut for the short go competition.

"It's been a long week," he said of the days in which the pressure of trying to fit practice for competition in with organizing a successful rodeo wore on the team.



ERIN GIBSON/DN
UNL SOPHOMORE JEFF RICHARDSON practices throwing his rope around the horns of a plastic steer head between rodeo competitions Saturday afternoon. Richardson said his father started him roping "as soon as I could throw."

George Pfeiffer, UNL professor of agricultural economics and rodeo team adviser, also said the week was a struggle for the team, which would have liked to have performed better in their rodeo.

He said he took pride in his team for the quality of its rodeo, though.

"I get as much pride in seeing all the kids work together to put on a rodeo as I do seeing them competing," Pfeiffer said.

Rodeo club members dedicated countless hours to the rodeo, he said, and those competing spent even more hours practicing for individual events.

"They know what they want to do, and they really work hard to do it," he said.

And that gets tough when the day's rodeo competition starts at 8 a.m. and ends just before 10 p.m., as it did Saturday. Friday night's competition ended at about 9:30.

Rodeo spectators see a portion of the long weekend competition, and few ever glimpse the in-between hours of caring for stock and practicing for an event.

For UNL team members, sleep was a fleeting moment Saturday, caught while they slumped onto the grass by their horses. Members cared for their horses between Saturday's afternoon and evening rodeo rounds before caring for themselves.

They fought drooping eyes, knowing Sunday they would travel to Madi-

son to compete again at 2 p.m. The rodeo team competes in Madison until Monday night.

But Skavdahl said Saturday night's loud crowd helped the weary UNL cowboys and cowgirls in the short go wake up and put in some good performances.

A full house makes a rodeo happen, he said, and even the stock animals know when the house is full, and perform at their peak.

Because bronc and bull riding events are scored partly on the difficulty of the ride, scores rise for cowboys when the bronzes and bulls draw energy from the crowd's excitement and buck harder, Skavdahl said.

Skavdahl credits the excitement of competition and his teammates' support for keeping him in rodeo competitions throughout college.

Team members become close friends and support each other through hours of practice at their arena on East Campus and through hours of traveling together to spring rodeos, he said.

But, although the UNL Rodeo is over, the hours of practice and travel are not over for the team.

The team will compete in six rodeos this spring, then top-scoring competitors in each event will compete in the College National Finals Rodeo in Rapid City, S.D.

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ERIN GIBSON/DN
UNL JUNIOR SARA RAGATZ rounds the final barrel during Saturday night's short go barrel race in the UNL Rodeo. Ragatz ranks fifth in the Great Plains Region in goat tying and seventh in breakaway roping.