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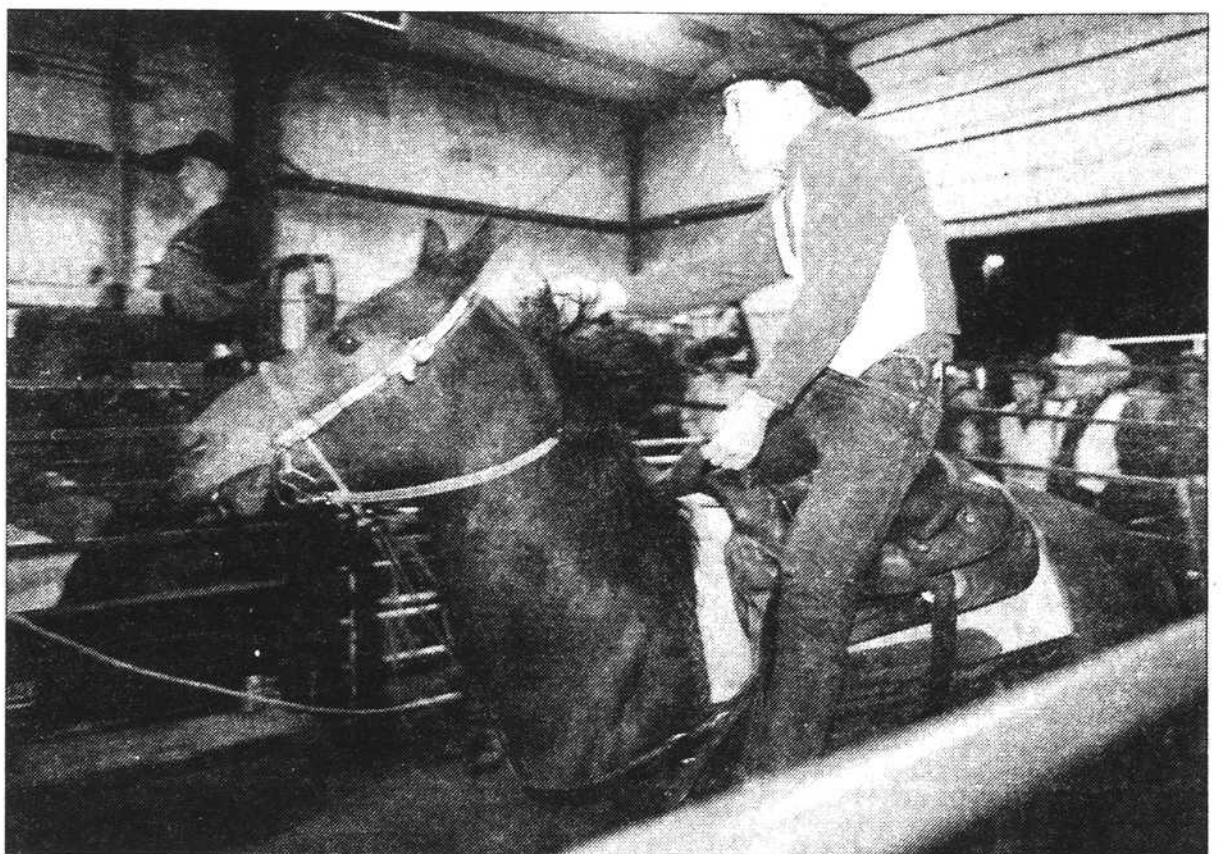
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KYLE WHITTAKER, UNL junior agriculture economics major and winner of 10 all-around professional rodeo competitions in 1997 alone, competes in the calf-roping competition during the UNL College Rodeo. The 40th annual rodeo finals were held in Wahoo April 4.

Cowboy carries on rodeo tradition

RODEO from page 1

Whittaker said the death of his grandfather always stayed in the back of his mind but didn't phase him during competition.

He remembers his youth fondly, describing, with a smile, growing up in the rural community of Chambers.

"I've been swinging a rope ever since I could walk - or ride," he said, explaining how episodes of "The Lone Ranger" inspired him to teach his first pony, Casper, to rear up like the hero's horse, Silver.

That inspiration persisted, even when he suffered his own accident on New Year's Day 1996 while riding in South Dakota.

Practicing for the same event that his grandfather died doing, Whittaker's horse was tripped by a steer and rolled over, knocking him unconscious. They were 40 miles from the nearest town.

The accident happened around 6 p.m., his father said, but he didn't regain consciousness until nearly 18 hours later in a Rapid City, South Dakota hospital.

He suffered a bad concussion that left him "like a zombie for days," Chip said.

Whittaker doesn't remember the accident, and is thankful for it.

He doesn't recall watching a videotape of the 1996 Fiesta Bowl four days in a row just after the incident either, each time wondering who would win.

Whittaker jokes that the incident may have knocked some sense into him.

"It was the only semester I got a 4.0," he said with a grin.

Healthy competition

Whittaker has managed to hold his grade point average at a 3.6, despite the all-night drives rodeo requires.

Competing in steer-wrestling, saddle-bronc-riding and calf-roping events, his rodeo achievements include qualifying to compete in the National High School Rodeo Finals, countless all-around championships in some of the nation's biggest rodeos and winning the UNL College Rodeo two years in a row.

Whittaker is modest about all the recognition, however, even after winning the internationally coveted Linderman Award, named for the 1950 Saddle Bronc Champion Bill Linderman, who was killed in a plane crash in 1965.

Whittaker's father won the award for versatility in rodeo four times, making the two the only father-son duo ever to win the honor.

But Whittaker said rodeo hasn't always been a success, describing his junior year of high school as a low point.

Going into the state finals in second place with a clear shot at national competition, Whittaker didn't qualify.

The first two years of college competition would prove to be disappointing, too, as Whittaker came up short of qualifying for nationals both years.

"It's frustrating that you can't be at the top (all of the time)," he said, adding that he'd considered giving up bronc riding at one point. "But it was also very motivational ... I knew I could do better."

He said the constant challenge and love of rodeo keeps him going now.

Training his six horses gives him a lot of satisfaction too, as they account for half of a cowboy's success in a rodeo, he said.

To prepare for competition, Whittaker uses mental imagery and tries to imitate other champion riders' techniques.

But animals are rarely predictable, so he imagines every possible scenario before competing.

"You have to have a backup plan, so you can react instead of having to think," he said.

At the 40th annual UNL College Rodeo finals April 4, Whittaker's tense composure filtered through the nerves of final competition in the steer-wrestling and saddle-bronc-riding events.

With a wipe of his upper lip and one quick tug on his hat, Whittaker nodded to open the shoot and flew out into the arena on a bucking bronc. His teeth gritted and he hung on for the eight seconds and a score of 68.

Though it placed him fourth overall, his slow saunter made it clear he wasn't pleased.

"For the first four seconds I was just trying to survive," he said later that evening. "If I had taken my time and gotten my saddle pulled it would have helped a lot."

His average win in the steer-wrestling event balanced his disappointment.

"I'm pretty happy - it will help me in the college standings," he said.

He said steer wrestling, in which the rider must slide off his horse onto a running steer at a speed of about 30 mph then wrestle the beast to the ground, is the event most likely to bring injury.

"With high velocities and large masses, you're asking for a wreck," he said.

After earning a time of 4.5 seconds in the steer-wrestling finals Saturday evening, however, he showed no sign of feeling the bumps and bruises of rodeo. With his familiar grin, he dusted off his pants and walked out of the arena.

True colors

Whittaker said despite family tradition, he was never forced to be a cowboy and held high hopes of playing football for Nebraska until his senior year of high school.

But rodeo was just too appealing. "Of all the guys I've ever looked up to, cowboys were the coolest people in the world," he said. "You could tell they were a cut above everyone else. They had a no-fear attitude - real independent."

Whittaker said if he couldn't be a cowboy he would choose to write, perhaps help restore the image of the American farms and ranches, as well as rodeos, which he feels have become prone to misconceptions.

"Some people think we're just a bunch of dumb cowboys," he said. "But I don't see how you can't like rodeo if you get to know the people who try to make a living doing it."

Making a living off rodeo competition is not easy, he said, listing expenses that pile up traveling to competitions. It's not as glamorous as some may think either, he said, describing the sacrifices that come with competing.

But for Whittaker, rodeo will never be a chore.

"I don't think anybody would view rodeo as a job," he said. "If you're loving what you're doing I don't see how anyone can call it work."

Like his strong love for the cowboy way of life, Whittaker keeps a strong love for his religion on hand at all times.

"It keeps me going," he said. "I know there's no sense in getting real upset, because it's not the end of the world - I've got something more important."

He hopes to compete full time after college, he said, citing the National Finals Rodeo as his ultimate goal.

"It's the Super Bowl of rodeo," he said, describing the highest level of competition in the PRCA between the top 15 competitors in each event. Whittaker wants to compete in the NFR in 1999, the year he will graduate.

Deep down

Back home in rural Chambers, Chip and Marilyn Whittaker throw on old coats and head to the barn to help a cow having a backwards calf. Marilyn returns a few minutes later with a smile - all is well.

She goes over to a bookshelf and pulls out a few photo albums. After a few minutes of leafing through them, she displays a picture of Kyle taken when he was not yet 1 year old.

Kyle is in red pajamas on the floor, grinning coyly up at the camera. In his tiny hands he grips just one thing, no doubt as tightly as he could: a lasso.

She said Kyle's success in rodeo is admirable but not the most important thing in life.

"It's more important to me that he's a good person," she said. "His honesty means more than any award he could win."