

BUCK IT UP

Bull riders converge on Las Vegas for world finals

BY JAMIE HELMICK

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All that's standing between you and \$1.5 million is eight seconds and a bull with a bone to pick.

Could you do it? Could you stay on an animal weighing in around 1 ton while it bucked and jumped five or six feet in the air?

If you answered yes, you're either kidding yourself or you're one of the 45 professional bull riders that will descend upon Las Vegas at the end of October to compete for the title of PBR World Champion (and a sizeable chunk of prize money).

Taking place over two weekends – Oct. 31 – Nov. 2 and Nov. 6 – 9, the 2008 Professional Bull Riders Built Ford Tough World Finals presented by Wrangler (PBR for short) rolls into Sin City to remind everyone that it's not the ability to jump to the front of a nightclub line or swing VIP status that's the only measure of a man – sometimes it's just brute strength and more than a little questionable judgment.

PBR's roots stretch back to 1992 when 20 of the top bull riders in the world broke away from the rodeo circuit to create their own tour and make the spotlight for bull riders a little bigger, said Randy Bernard, CEO of the PBR.

It wasn't until 1994 that they held an event, Bernard said. Each rider put up \$1,000 of his own money, with three so broke that they had to borrow the sum, and the PBR was off and bucking.

The eight events held in 1994 pale in comparison to today's bull riding world, with 225 official events in the United States and 150 outside of the U.S. in places like Brazil, Australia, Canada and Mexico, all culminating in the championships in Vegas.

And while Bernard says it's always a nail-biter watching bull riding competitions, Vegas is special because there's \$3.2 million in total prize money up for grabs.

"You're not going to let go because of how much money is on the line," Bernard said. "If you don't perform, you don't get paid."

Performing means that you stay on a bucking, snorting, hopping bull for eight seconds – with only one hand holding on and the other up in the air for balance. And the wilier the bull, the better for the rider, as scores are judged not only on rider performance, but also the athletic ability of the animal or, as Bernard puts it, "anything that makes a bull hard to ride."

Plus, they aren't ordinary bulls. Bernard quickly dismisses rumors



Tony Mendes attempts to ride Humps and Hornz's Mr. Universe during the first round of the 2008 Anaheim Built Ford Tough Series PBR.

Photo by Andy Watson/Professional Bull Riders

of parts of bulls being strapped to make them buck with the efficiency of someone who's answered the question a million times.

"It's all genetics, just like horses," he said. "You can't make a horse run fast and you can't make a bull buck if it's not in their genes."

Bernard said millions of dollars are put into the stock of these bulls and some of them are owned by celebrities like Larry the Cable Guy and Ron White. Bulls usually last about nine or 10 years on the circuit, beginning breeding at age 3 and bucking at 4.

Riders in the finals have a draw for the bulls initially and then once a winner is declared for a night, he'll get to pick his bull the next day.

So just who is getting on the bulls? Bernard puts the stereotypical bull rider somewhere between 5'8" and 5'9," with some taller, some shorter and all built, "hard as a rock with no fear."

Drawing in fans at this year's PBR finals is Adriano Moraes, who Bernard said some consider the best bull rider in the world.

Moraes – who at 180 pounds is the heaviest guy on the tour – will be retiring after this year's finals, wrapping up a fairytale story in the world of bull riding.

Growing up in poverty in Brazil, Moraes said he began riding bulls for fun at 3 years old. It wasn't until he was 12 that he said he realized bull riding was actually an organized sport.

"What I did for fun, people were

"It's a huge production. It's like going to a Rolling Stones concert or a U2 show."

— Randy Bernard, CEO of the PBR

doing for money," he said. "I saw an opportunity to step out of poverty by riding bulls."

Moraes went on to win that first championship in 1994 and has taken two more world champion titles (among other prizes) since then, but it hasn't been an easy ride.

Bernard said that one of the things that makes bull riding so exciting to watch is it's hard to pick a sure thing because, "it can change at any given minute, you can get hurt at any minute."

And get hurt they do – as Bernard puts it – "It's not when you get hurt, it's how bad you get hurt."

For every 14 rides, one will end in injury, Bernard said. These aren't run of the mill scrapes and cuts though.

"What is minor for me is a thing that would put you in bed for a week,"

Moraes said.

During his time riding bulls professionally, Moraes has endured 25 broken bones and nine major surgeries, as well as all the "minor" cuts and bruises.

The worst was the time he dislocated his left elbow, Moraes said.

"My elbow had come out of its socket, pushing through, it almost exposed the bone," he said.

All this is catching up with Moraes now, which is what led the 38-year-old to choose retirement.

"I'm old and beat up," he said. "I ache twenty-four hours a day, every day."

Although it's hard to pin down just what makes every individual rider want to get on top of a bucking bull, Moraes sums up his own drive succinctly.

"It's the challenge of conquering the beast," he said. "I am a weak animal trying to ride a 2,200 pound animal. They just love to buck and I need to conquer him, with my little strength and a lot of balance and technique."

And when it's internal motivation on the line, Moraes said it's easy to walk away a winner.

"If you end up first or forty-fifth, if you rode, to yourself, you are a champion," he said.

That's not what the judges consider a champion though and Moraes has his thoughts about what makes him that, too.

"I think it's my desire to win and commitment to bull-riding and my determination and my toughness and my passion," he said. "All of those put together."

Moraes said the fans won't just be cheering for him though.

"Our fans are loud fans, for all the guys," he said. "It doesn't matter what happens, if the guy rides or falls, it's a great spectacle – two and a half hours of pure excitement."

Bernard echoes that sentiment, especially where the Vegas finals are concerned, full of pyrotechnics, rock music and more than a few thousand screaming fans.

"It's a huge production," Bernard said. "It's like going to a Rolling Stones concert or a U2 show."

Plus, bull riding pulls its followers from everywhere, so they don't have to fill the stands with just one demographic. Bernard said 60 percent of bull riding fans come not

Cowboy 24/7

PLAY

Complete with a mechanical bull where you can get a little taste of just what your favorite bull rider goes through, **Stoney's Rockin' Country** (9151 S. Las Vegas Blvd.); (702) 435-2855 is pretty much the last word in Western fun in Sin City. There are line-dancing classes, beer specials and plenty of opportunities to show off your 10-gallon hat.

DINE

Vegas has it covered when it comes to the nutritional needs of bull riders, people watching bull riders and people who just want some good barbeque. There's **RUB BBQ** (inside the Rio, 3700 W. Flamingo Rd.; (702) 777-7777) near the Strip and **The Salt Lick Barbecue** (inside Red Rock Resort, 11011 W. Charleston Blvd.; (702) 797-7777) and **Lucille's Smokehouse Bar-B-Que** (in The District in Henderson; (702) 257-7427) if you venture a little further out.

SHOP

Whether you're looking to blend in with the PBR crowd or looking for some serious gear, between **The Boot Barn** (7265 S. Las Vegas Blvd.; (702) 260-1888), **Cowtown Boots** (1080 E. Flamingo Rd.; (702) 737-8469) and **Sheplers** (inside Sam's Town, 5111 Boulder Highway; (702) 454-5266), there's no reason for you to be without Wranglers ever again.

DRINK

You can't throw a lasso in Sin City without hitting a place to whet your whistle, but for watering holes with a little more yee-haw, try **Toby Keith's I Love This Bar & Grill** (inside Harrah's, 3475 S. Las Vegas Blvd.; (702) 369-5000) or the several **Roadrunner Saloons** scattered about town.

from the West, but from east of the Mississippi River. Then there are events like the one at the Pond in Anaheim that sell out every year.

"It's definitely not just a Western lifestyle event, it's almost like NASCAR and the WWE," he said. "And there's nothing fake about it."

For this year's PBR finals, where both weekends will be held at the Thomas & Mack Center on the UNLV campus (a first for the PBR – the first weekend is usually held at Mandalay Bay), Bernard projects the number of tickets they'll sell as 120,000, give or take a few thousand.

Plus, along with Moraes, there are former world champions Justin McBride, Mike Lee and Ednei Caminhas, after this year's title.

And as Bernard tells it, it's hard to predict who'll win.

After all, with a 2,000-pound animal getting five or six feet off the ground, "it's not over till it's over."



Photo by Andy Watson/Professional Bull Riders

Shorty Gorham works to save Sinovaldo Correia from D&H's Mr. Zantrex during the first round of the 2008 Tulsa Built Ford Tough Series.