

12-31-2007

## Campus Cowboys and Cowgirls: A Research Note on College Rodeo Athletes

Gene L. Theodori  
*Sam Houston State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jrss>



Part of the [Rural Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Theodori, Gene. 2007. "Campus Cowboys and Cowgirls: A Research Note on College Rodeo Athletes." *Journal of Rural Social Sciences*, 22(2): Article 8. Available At: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jrss/vol22/iss2/8>

This Research Note is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Population Studies at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Rural Social Sciences* by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

**CAMPUS COWBOYS AND COWGIRLS:  
A RESEARCH NOTE ON COLLEGE RODEO ATHLETES\***

**GENE L. THEODORI**

*SAM HOUSTON STATE UNIVERSITY*

**ABSTRACT**

College rodeo has evolved from small, single-campus fund-raisers, celebrations, and/or competitions into an internationally recognized North American collegiate sport. Throughout its history, though, the sport has received virtually no attention in the sociological literature. In this research note I provide a descriptive summary of member characteristics and selected findings from a 2003-2004 National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association membership survey. I also empirically examine the association of size of place of residency during childhood with previous involvement in rodeo (i.e., before participating in college rodeo). Findings reveal that respondents who spent most of their childhood in more rural areas (i.e., in the countryside outside any city or town) have participated in rodeo (or rodeo-related events), on average, for more years than those who primarily resided in more urban locales (i.e., a city of 50,000 or more) during childhood.

Why shouldn't the range kids have a chance to show off at college? Kids brought up on remote ranches haven't had the coaching to do anything spectacular in football or basketball. Some of them never saw enough water to swim in before they went to college, and as for track, can you imagine a cowpuncher in a little pair of running pants sprinting across the desert? Ranchers hate to walk, let alone run. Rodeo is their natural sport. They've grown up riding daddy's cows. – quote from a cattleman-father [see Muir (1951)].

**Introduction**

Over a span of roughly eight decades, college rodeo has evolved from small, single-campus fundraisers, celebrations, and/or competitions held primarily at land-grant institutions throughout the west and southwest into an internationally recognized North American collegiate sport (Theodori 2006). In most respects, the earliest college cowboys and cowgirls were the sons and daughters of rural families (Mahoney 2004). While preparing for careers in fields such as farming and ranching

---

\*Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the annual meetings of the Southern Rural Sociological Association held in Tulsa in February 2004 and the Rural Sociological Society held in Sacramento in August 2004. Support for this research was provided by a grant from the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association.

at the various agricultural and mechanical institutions of higher learning, college students from rural areas began in the 1920s to hone their roping and riding skills at campus rodeos and rodeo-related competitions, and soon afterwards at organized intercollegiate rodeos. By the middle of the twentieth century, popular press articles had perpetuated, correctly or incorrectly, the notion of rodeo as the preferred and/or natural sport of college students from rural America (Bruce 1949; Mahoney 2004; Muir 1951; O'Neil 1955).

The extent to which the sport was ever the preferred and/or natural extracurricular activity of college students from rural areas, as opposed to their counterparts from urban locales, is an empirical question. To date, no published study exists which has examined that particular topic. Overall, the extant scientific literature conveys limited information about the sport of college rodeo. A literature review uncovered college rodeo-related studies examining issues such as injuries in intercollegiate rodeo athletes (Meyers, Elledge et al. 1990), precompetitive mood state changes in collegiate rodeo athletes (Meyers, Sterling et al. 1990), exercise performance of collegiate rodeo athletes (Meyers et al. 1992), sensation seeking and competitive trait anxiety among college rodeo athletes (Rainey et al. 1992), and the biomechanical and physiological analysis and conditioning of college rodeo athletes in one event (Harris et al. 2004).

Given the paucity of sociological research on the sport, the purpose of this research note is to contribute to the literature on college rodeo. Specifically, in this article I provide a descriptive summary of member characteristics and selected findings from a 2003–2004 National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association (NIRA) membership survey. I then revisit the once propagated “rural–urban residency and involvement in college rodeo” issue by empirically examining the association of size of place of residency during childhood with previous involvement in rodeo (i.e., before participating in college rodeo). In doing so, I tested two hypotheses. First, it was hypothesized that size of place of childhood residency is associated with the number of years respondents have participated in rodeo (or rodeo-related events). The second hypothesis was that size of place of childhood residency is associated with rodeoing in high school as a member of the National High School Rodeo Association (NHSRA). Data gathered in a 2003 NIRA membership survey were used to depict the college rodeo participants and empirically test the proposed association.

## CAMPUS COWBOYS AND COWGIRLS

129

**Data**

Data on collegiate rodeo participants were collected via survey questionnaire during the fall of 2003. A survey questionnaire was included with each of the 2003-2004 membership application packets administered in the eleven NIRA Regions located within the United States of America (i.e., Big Sky Region, Central Plains Region, Central Rocky Mountain Region, Grand Canyon Region, Great Plains Region, Northwest Region, Ozark Region, Rocky Mountain Region, Southern Region, Southwest Region, and West Coast Region).

The survey instrument contained 54 questions and required approximately 30 minutes to complete. It was designed to measure the attitudes, opinions, current behaviors, and behavioral intentions of the NIRA membership regarding selected products, services, and name-brand merchandise. In addition, the survey questionnaire also collected information on students' educational status, rodeo background, and general sociodemographics, as well as the rodeo events that respondents regularly enter.

Students were instructed to complete the survey and return it with their membership application to the NIRA National Office. No additional communication regarding completion and return of the survey was made. Overall, 2,303 of the 3,123 NIRA members located within the surveyed regions returned their questionnaires. Eleven of the questionnaires were deemed unusable and excluded from the analysis. In sum, 2,292 useable surveys were received. This resulted in a 73 percent completion rate.

**Descriptive Results**

Approximately eight of every ten survey respondents (1,843 of 2,276) rodeoed in high school as a member of the National High School Rodeo Association (NHSRA). Despite whether or not they competed in high school rodeo, respondents were asked to report the number of years they had participated in rodeo or rodeo-related events. Responses ranged from zero to 24, with the mean number of years equaling 10.0 (s.d. = 4.9).

NIRA student rodeo athletes were asked to indicate the state, province, or country (other than the United States or Canada) in which they graduated high school. As shown in Table 1, respondents reported a total of 43 states and four Canadian provinces, along with the countries of Australia and Brazil. Texas was specified most frequently (17.5%), followed by Oklahoma (6.9%), Montana (6.3%), Kansas (5.9%), then Colorado (5.4%).

Roughly 61 percent (n = 1,388) of the respondents were male. The age of NIRA student members ranged from 17 to 25, with a mean age of 19.5 and a standard deviation of 1.43. Approximately 92 percent (2,040 of 2,228) of the responding NIRA members classified themselves as Caucasian or Anglo American. Of the remaining members, 4.13 percent (n = 92) reported being American Indian; 1.89 percent (n = 42) indicated being Hispanic; 0.45 percent (n = 10) described themselves as black or African American; 0.18 percent (n = 4) specified being Asian; and, 1.39 percent (n = 31) reported “other.” Less than one half a percent (0.40%; n = 9) indicated multiple ethnicities.

Table 1. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS BY STATE/PROVINCE/COUNTRY WHERE GRADUATED HIGH SCHOOL.<sup>a</sup>

STATE	N	%	STATE	N	%
Alabama.....	13	0.6	Maryland.....	1	—
Alaska.....	1	—	Michigan.....	7	0.3
Arizona.....	72	3.2	Minnesota.....	15	0.7
Arkansas.....	39	1.7	Mississippi.....	36	1.6
California.....	87	3.9	Missouri.....	60	2.7
Colorado.....	122	5.4	Montana.....	142	6.3
Delaware.....	1	—	Nebraska.....	64	2.9
Florida.....	10	0.4	Tennessee.....	26	1.2
Georgia.....	12	0.5	Texas.....	392	17.5
Hawaii.....	2	0.1	Utah.....	76	3.4
Idaho.....	69	3.1	Virginia.....	5	0.2
Illinois.....	26	1.2	Washington.....	45	2.0
Indiana.....	10	0.4	West Virginia.....	1	—
Iowa.....	24	1.1	Wisconsin.....	12	0.5
Kansas.....	133	5.9	Wyoming.....	85	3.8
Kentucky.....	24	1.1			
Louisiana.....	65	2.9	CANADIAN PROVINCE		
Maine.....	1	—	Alberta.....	19	0.8
Maryland.....	1	—	British Columbia.....	6	0.3
Michigan.....	7	0.3	Manitoba.....	4	0.2
Minnesota.....	15	0.7	Saskatchewan.....	8	0.4
Mississippi.....	36	1.6			
Missouri.....	60	2.7	COUNTRY		
Montana.....	142	6.3	Australia.....	4	0.2
Nebraska.....	64	2.9	Brazil.....	2	0.1
Maine.....	1	—			

<sup>a</sup> “—” indicates less than 0.1%.

## CAMPUS COWBOYS AND COWGIRLS

131

Concerning political ideology, 54 percent ( $n = 1,109$ ) indicated that they were moderate. Six percent ( $n = 124$ ) reported that they were liberal, while 19 percent ( $n = 381$ ) signified that they were conservative. Those specifying that they were moderate-liberal and moderate-conservative were 5 percent ( $n = 108$ ) and 16 percent ( $n = 315$ ), respectively.

When asked about the size of place where they spent most of their childhood, roughly 9 percent ( $n = 192$ ) said in “a city of 50,000 or more.” Thirteen percent ( $n = 291$ ) indicated “a smaller city of 10,000 to 50,000.” Four percent ( $n = 96$ ) stated in “the suburbs of a city of 10,000 or more.” Approximately 22 percent ( $n = 471$ ) specified spending most of their childhood in “a town or village of 10,000 or fewer people.” Lastly, slightly more than one half (52%;  $n = 1,134$ ) reported “in the countryside outside of any city or town.”

Survey respondents were asked to indicate their family’s 2002 total household income from all sources before taxes. Total household income was assessed with 10 categories, ranging from less than \$9,999 to \$90,000 or more. Results were as follows: under \$9,999 (4.6%;  $n = 89$ ); \$10,000 to \$19,999 (5.4%;  $n = 105$ ); \$20,000 to \$29,999 (8.8%;  $n = 172$ ); \$30,000 to \$39,999 (11.1%;  $n = 216$ ); \$40,000 to \$49,999 (12.1%;  $n = 237$ ); \$50,000 to \$59,999 (12.1%;  $n = 237$ ); \$60,000 to \$69,999 (10.3%;  $n = 201$ ); \$70,000 to \$79,999 (9.6%;  $n = 187$ ); \$80,000 to \$89,999 (7.4%;  $n = 144$ ); and \$90,000 or more (18.6%;  $n = 363$ ).

NIRA members have six years after their high school graduation (or general education degree equivalent) to use four years of eligibility.<sup>1</sup> In 2003-2004, 43 percent ( $n = 957$ ) of the student athletes who responded were in their first year of eligibility, 27 percent ( $n = 601$ ) were in their second year, 18 percent ( $n = 394$ ) were in their third year, and 12 percent ( $n = 269$ ) were in their fourth. One individual reported using a fifth year of eligibility.

About 99 percent of the students (2,193 of 2,222) were undergraduates, while just more than 1 percent ( $n = 29$ ) reported being enrolled in graduate school. Approximately 37 percent of the undergraduates (808 of 2,185) were in their first year of college/university, 27 percent ( $n = 581$ ) were in their second year, 19 percent ( $n = 409$ ) were in their third year, and 14 percent ( $n = 308$ ) were in their fourth. Roughly 3 percent ( $n = 75$ ) reported being in their fifth year of

---

<sup>1</sup>If a prospective NIRA member did not graduate from high school, but completed his/her general education degree, he/she will have six consecutive years from the date of his/her eighteenth birthday to complete four years of NIRA eligibility.

undergraduate studies, while less than 1 percent ( $n = 4$ ) indicated being in their sixth year.

Besides paying individual membership dues to the NIRA, college rodeo contestants must pay fees to enter each collegiate rodeo and cover their own expenses associated with travel to and from every competition. Scholarships and other monetary awards help defray some of these costs. In 2003-2004, approximately three out of every four NIRA members (1,684 of 2,222) received some type of scholarship or monetary award (i.e., academic scholarship, athletic scholarship, rodeo club scholarship, or other monetary scholarship/award) at their college/university.

Collegiate rodeo is not sanctioned by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA); therefore, college rodeo athletes can receive monetary winnings and compete simultaneously at a professional level. Survey respondents were asked to report how much money they won at NIRA rodeos during the 2002-2003 season. Slightly more than one half (53%;  $n = 605$ ) of those who responded made less than \$499, while just less than 2 percent ( $n = 19$ ) earned more than \$4,500. During the 2003-2004 NIRA rodeo season, about one out of four college rodeo athletes (582 of 2,172) competed in professional rodeo or professional bull riding. Of those who rode professionally, 31 (approximately 6%) won more than \$14,000 in prize money in the year 2002.

When asked what events they regularly planned to enter during the 2003-2004 college rodeo season, females reported barrel racing most frequently (79.2%;  $n = 691$ ). Breakaway roping followed as a close second (63.3%;  $n = 553$ ) and goat tying was third (42.8%;  $n = 374$ ). Team roping was a distant fourth (13.4%;  $n = 117$ ). For the males, though, team roping was the event mentioned most frequently (56.8%;  $n = 781$ ) when asked what events they regularly planned to enter during the upcoming college rodeo season. Calf roping was second (38.8%;  $n = 533$ ), followed by steer wrestling (23.9%;  $n = 328$ ). Bull riding was fourth overall (22.5%;  $n = 309$ ), but the most popular of the three rough stock events. Saddle bronc riding (14.7%;  $n = 202$ ) and bareback riding (10.5%;  $n = 144$ ), respectively, followed bull riding as the events in which males anticipated entering during the 2003-2004 college rodeo season.<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, NIRA student rodeo athletes were asked whether they plan to continue rodeoing after graduating from college/university. Approximately 98 percent (2,181 of 2,232) of the survey respondents answered affirmatively.

---

<sup>2</sup>Total percentages for females and males exceeds 100% due to multiple responses.

### **Hypothesis Testing**

Data collected in the survey questionnaire described above were used to test the following two hypotheses: that size of place of childhood residency is associated with the number of years respondents have participated in rodeo (or rodeo-related events), and that size of place of childhood residency is associated with rodeoing in high school as a member of the NHSRA. The statistical significance of observed variances was tested by analysis of variance procedures (F-tests). Below, the variables used to test the hypotheses are described, followed by a presentation of the results.

#### **Measuring Place of Residency**

Place of residency during childhood was the independent variable of interest in the following analyses. The question on the survey asked: "Which category describes the size of place where you spent most of your childhood?" As noted above, response categories included: (1) a city of 50,000 or more people, (2) a smaller city of 10,000 to 50,000, (3) the suburbs of a city of 10,000 or more, (4) a town or village of 10,000 or fewer people, and (5) in the countryside outside of any city or town. Based on the small number of cases in "the suburbs of a city of 10,000 or more" category, respondents who answered as such were combined with those who reported spending most of their childhood in "a smaller city of 10,000 to 50,000." Therefore, the four categories in this analysis describing childhood place of residency are called "a city of 50,000 or more," "the suburbs or a small city of 10,000 to 50,000," "a town or village of 10,000 or fewer people," and "in the countryside outside of any city or town."

#### **Measuring Past Levels of Involvement**

Past levels of involvement were measured using two items. First, respondents were asked to indicate the number of years, overall, that they have participated in rodeo (or rodeo-related events). As previously noted, responses ranged from zero to 24. Next, respondents were asked whether they rodeoed in high school as a member of the National High School Rodeo Association. Responses were dummy coded (1 = yes; 0 = no).



Table 2. ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE FINDINGS FOR THE ASSOCIATION OF PLACE OF RESIDENCY DURING CHILDHOOD WITH YEARS OF PARTICIPATION IN RODEO

PLACE OF RESIDENCY DURING CHILDHOOD	N	MEAN	F-RATIO
In the countryside outside of any city or town	1,115	10.28 <sup>a</sup>	4.07*
A town or village of 10,000 or fewer	458	9.88	
A smaller city of 10,000 to 50,000	375	9.56	
A city of 50,000 or more	189	9.17 <sup>A</sup>	

\*  $p \leq 0.01$ ; Superscripts with matching letter and opposing case indicate significant difference at  $p \leq 0.01$ .

### Bivariate Results

As shown in Table 2, statistical support was found for the proposition that size of place of residency during childhood is associated with the number of years respondents have participated in rodeo (or rodeo-related events) (F-ratio = 4.07;  $df = 3, 2133$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ). A Bonferroni post hoc test revealed that respondents who spent most of their childhood in the countryside outside any city or town were significantly more likely to have participated in rodeo (or rodeo-related events) longer than those who primarily resided in a city of 50,000 or more during childhood. The proposition that size of childhood place of residency is associated with rodeoing in high school as a member of the NHSRA failed to reach statistical significance (see Table 3).

Table 3. ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE FINDINGS FOR THE ASSOCIATION OF PLACE OF RESIDENCY DURING CHILDHOOD WITH RODEOED IN HIGH SCHOOL AS A MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL RODEO ASSOCIATION

PLACE OF RESIDENCY DURING CHILDHOOD	N	MEAN	F-RATIO
In the countryside outside of any city or town	1,131	0.82	0.69
A town or village of 10,000 or fewer	471	0.79	
A smaller city of 10,000 to 50,000	385	0.81	
A city of 50,000 or more	189	0.79	

### Summary and Concluding Comments

Over the past eight decades, college rodeo has undergone a dramatic sociocultural evolution. Throughout its storied history, the sport has received limited attention in the extant academic literature. My purpose in this paper was to provide a descriptive summary of member characteristics and selected findings

from the 2003-2004 NIRA membership survey. No published sociological studies exist that describes the participants of college rodeo.

Furthermore, building upon popular press articles that touted, either justly or unjustly, the notion of rodeo as the preferred and/or natural sport of college students from rural America, I tested two hypotheses and empirically assessed the association of size of place of residency during childhood with previous involvement in rodeo (i.e., before participating in college rodeo). The results of the analysis of variance tests revealed that while size of childhood place of residency is not associated with rodeoing in high school as a member of the NHSRA, it is associated with the number of years respondents have participated in rodeo (or rodeo-related events). Respondents who spent most of their childhood in more rural areas (i.e., in the countryside outside any city or town) have participated in rodeo (or rodeo-related events), on average, for more years than those who primarily resided in more urban locales (i.e., a city of 50,000 or more) during childhood.

Although these data do not allow for substantive conclusions to be drawn about why this statistical difference does, in fact, exist, several speculations can be offered. One reason for the disparity may be that rural children are exposed to horses and other livestock at an earlier age than their urban counterparts. Another explanation may be that the parents and/or kin of the students who were reared in rural areas rodeoed, whereas family members of those from the urban locales did not. Moreover, it may be that the national, state, regional, and local youth rodeo associations (e.g., National Little Britches Rodeo Association, American Junior Rodeo Association, Wyoming Junior Rodeo Association, Central Texas Youth Rodeo Association, Midsouth Youth Rodeo Cowboys Association, and Pineywoods Youth Rodeo Association) are more prevalent in rural America, and that they cater more to rural youth. Further research is needed to substantiate such claims.

Taken together, the descriptive and inferential analyses shed some initial insights on the nearly 3,000 students from roughly 200 institutions of higher learning in the United States who participate in college rodeo while furthering their education.

### References

- Bruce, E. 1949. "National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association." *Hoofs and Horns* 19: 21.
- Harris, C., M. DeBeliso, K.J. Adams, and M. Curtin. 2004. "Steer Wrestling – Event Analysis and Conditioning Model." *Strength and Conditioning Journal* 26:8-13.

- Mahoney, S.G. 2004. *College Rodeo: From Show to Sport*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.
- Meyers, M.C., J.R. Elledge, J.C. Sterling, and H. Tolson. 1990. "Injuries in Intercollegiate Rodeo Athletes." *American Journal of Sports Medicine* 1:87-91.
- Meyers, M.C., J.C. Sterling, A.D. LeUnes, J.R. Elledge, and H. Tolson. 1990. "Precompetitive Mood State Changes in Collegiate Rodeo Athletes." *Journal of Sport Behavior* 13: 114-21.
- Meyers, M.C., J.G. Wilkinson, J.R. Elledge, H. Tolson, J.C. Sterling, and J.R. Coast. 1992. "Exercise Performance of Collegiate Rodeo Athletes." *American Journal of Sports Medicine* 20: 410-5.
- Muir, J. 1951. "Cowboys on the Campus." *The Saturday Evening Post* 223(33):36+.
- O'Neil, P. 1955. "The Rodeos Go to College." *Sports Illustrated* 2:28+.
- Rainey, D.W., F. Amunategui, H. Agocs, and J. Larick. 1992. "Sensation Seeking and Competitive Trait Anxiety Among College Rodeo Athletes." *Journal of Sport Behavior* 15:307-17.
- Theodori, G.L. 2006. "The Rural Roots of College Rodeo." *The Rural Sociologist* 26: 18-21.