Jeremy Roark 11/2013
For Phil

Behind the Chutes

I know a cowboy, but I don't. Not really. What I mean is I don't know what a cowboy is —because I haven't been one—but I know a man who knows—because he has. We get to talking and he tells me about it. He says:

"The traditions and attitudes of bull riders are rooted in Vaquero culture. That's where the word *buckaroo* comes from: from the old Spanish vaquero. Say it slow. I've been a buckaroo and I can tell you it's hard to be a working cowboy and have a family. Some guys do it but it was definitely difficult for me. When you're working twelve to sixteen hours a day, six or sometimes seven days a week it doesn't leave you much time for the family. There's not much money, either. Most outfits give you housing and around twelve hundred dollars a month. That's thin gruel by today's standards. I didn't do it for the money, though. Nobody does.

"It's not the sort of occupation a fellow just happens into. Being a working cowboy is a lifestyle commitment and it's one that has to be consciously made. I think the true spirit of the Cowboy is freedom, pure and simple. I know it sounds clichéd, but that is the one thing that all of the Cowboys and Buckaroos I know are adamant about. They are wanderers and seldom stay working for the same outfit very long. Lots of time they are bouncing from one ranching area to another, sometimes another state or even another country. Some may work for the same outfit for a few years, take a break—a cowboy sabbatical—then come back a couple years later with some new stories. Maybe a few of them are even true.

"I know one Vaquero named Jose Villigrana who has worked for the Roaring Springs Ranch probably seven or eight different times. He'll work there for a year or two, but then he

gets restless. His feet start itching for the road, and he goes back to Mexico or maybe Nevada and works for some other outfits. Then, a couple years later he pops back up at the Springs again.

"Buckaroos are a bit like cats. They come and go as they please. They make a big show of saying hello, but they're a little stingy with goodbyes."

He's a barrel-chested, long-legged giant of a man. He has kind eyes and a ready smile. He's dressed in a black T-shirt whose crew collar strains and stretches to accommodate his heavily muscled neck. He's wearing packer boots and a pair of old wranglers with a faded white ring in the back pocket where a perpetual can of Copenhagen has worn away the blue. He pulls out the can while we talk and takes a mighty pinch of the fine-grained chewing tobacco. He puts it purposefully between his bottom lip and his lower gums.

"I've tried to quit," he says, apparently reading my mind, "but it never takes."

He's calm and direct. His dark hair is cropped short and the line across the back of his neck is so perfectly straight it must have been cut with a ruler.

When I ask him what ever possessed him to become a bull rider. He considers a moment before replying.

"I guess I've just always had something inside of me that stirred a feeling—a need to push the limits and achieve greatness. Bull riding seems like a natural consequence of that. I know it started young. I remember going to the junior rodeo when I was just a kid and being so drawn to the rough stock that I went home and tied a rope around the inner tube of a big ol' skidder tire and went to practicing bull riding.

"There is a distinctive sound when they start running the bulls down the crowding alley and into the chutes, it's a sound of metal and flesh banging together. First comes the sounds of hooves in the soft dirt of the arena floor. It's gentle-like and far away. As the stockmen prepare

to move ‘em from the tub and into the alley the snorting and lowing tick up a notch. The clatter and banging takes an urgent tone as the bulls are turned into the alley and their options disappear. Being on the other side of the chutes it sounds like fate coming down in a rush. Like a terrible wind. It seemed no matter how loud the arena was or people yelling I could always hear the sound of the bulls and everything else just kind of fell into the background.

“Before you ride it’s kind of laid back. The cowboys are all behind the chutes stretching, rosining up there ropes, getting ready. There is a definite camaraderie between cowboys. You may not know a guy from Adam, but if you know he’s a bull rider then you know enough. There’s this misconception that we’re all adrenaline junkies or that we have something to prove, or a not-so-secret death wish. That view falls terribly short of the mark. It’s not to prove our greatness that we ride, but rather to express it.

“Most of the conversation between riders centered on which bulls they had drawn. Guys who had ridden your bull before would offer advice and tell you what to watch out for. Of course the bull is no doubt learning from each ride too, so he’s smarter than he was when that last guy got on him. There is a very real sense among riders that the bulls are fellow athletes and competitors in this sport. They’re just better equipped for it.

“The smell in the chute is all bull, rosin, and leather. Sometimes, especially on cold eastern Oregon nights, the smell of the bull’s breath would linger. It’s sort of sweet, going to sour. Like syrup and vinegar. When you’re wrapping up in the chute and your puller hands up the rope from under the bull it’s suffused with rosin, so your grip sticks fast. You get it tight in a suicide wrap and pound your hand down so it stays locked. When you pound it down the pinesap smell of rosin from the rope mixes with the smell of leather in your nose and tells your brain to wake up ‘n get ready.

“Depending on what order I was riding out in, lots of times I’d help other riders get geared up. I’d help ‘em get their ropes on and help ‘em get down on the bull. A few, not many, would sometimes get a look in their eye like fear was sitting there whispering terrible things. Like maybe they were suddenly thinking there are easier ways to commit suicide. I’d catch those eyes; hold ‘em fast and tell ‘em what they needed to hear. Mostly, though, you just offer a few encouraging words. They’d do the same for me, when it came my turn.

“You stand on the chute and start climbing onto the bull’s back real slow because even in the chute they’re very dangerous. They can mash your legs into the metal rails. Something that big can mess you up bad with very little effort, so you’re always mindful. When you’re getting on the bull and finding your perch the world just completely fades out. The bulls are tense and it’s like sitting on a volcano you know is apt to erupt at any time. You can feel the muscles twitch slightly underneath you. Time slows and disappears and so do your worries; you’re completely focused on the task at hand.

“Right before I’d call for the gate a great calm would wash over me and that’s when it was time. I would raise my hand, nod my head, and say 'OK, boys.' And it was on. All hell breaks loose and then things kind of go blurry. Sight turns to tunnel vision, at best, and sound all but disappears. Sometimes it seems to go in slow motion. You can feel the subtle shifts in posture telegraphing a sudden twist or dive and react as it happens. Other times it’s like being stuck on fast forward—those are usually the times you don’t make eight seconds. Your focus is always on his shoulders or the hump. If you move your eyes away, even for a moment, you’re done. You sit up kind of on your hand and puff your chest out with your chin tucked, if you rock back on your pockets he’ll get you off your rope and throw you down.

“He’s leaping and twisting around like a cyclone and you just hunker down in the eye of the storm, in that tiny space on his back where you hope the violence of it all can’t quite grab hold of you. But it will. Maybe he’ll drop down further than expected and gravity and inertia will conspire to smash your face into the anvil of his skull. Maybe you reach over to release your wrap but it’s too tight and now you’ve really done it because you’re hung up and that’s just about the worst because the ride doesn’t end at eight seconds. Sure the judges’ clock may stop, but bulls reckon time in their own way. Anger and murderous intent are the sands of that particular hourglass, and it’s not over until that anger is spent. Don’t get hung up.

“Everything is just adjusting and trying to stay in that sweet spot while earning a few style points in the process. When you come off it’s much like the way it began. You reach down with your free hand, jerk the tail of your rope to loosen the wrap, open your hand and let go.

“I don’t ever really remember feeling it when I hit the ground. I was always preoccupied with escaping. Your main goal is to get the hell out of there. Once you’re out of the thick of it you get hit with the most overwhelming feeling of happiness. I always felt like a champion—win or lose. You can feel the cold, grasping hands of death trying to get a hold of you but when you slap each one away and finally dodge back out of their reach, well—it’s a powerful feeling.

“I remember being hung up probably the worst I had ever been. I came off the side but I was still wrapped up tight and that bull was still madder than hell about it. He took to spinning and raking horns and there I was, unperched, trying to stay on my feet and move with him while wrestling with that rope. I finally caught the end and jerked my hand free. Afterwards, back behind the chutes while my heart slowed back to normal I just laughed and laughed. I couldn’t help it, because for a moment there I thought death had finally caught me by the collar, but

somehow I danced free again! If you haven't laughed right in the face of death at least once, well buddy: are you sure you've really lived?

"One way or another you come off, and hopefully you come off the back, so the clowns have time to do their thing, to get the bull off you. Rodeo clowns are sometimes other bull riders, sometimes they're solely about fighting bulls. They're all matadors at heart and flesh and blood guardian angels. I remember a few times when some of the other cowboys saw that the clowns wouldn't get between the bull and me, in time. They came sprinting out from behind the chutes to drag me out of the way. It's a brotherhood unlike any you'll find in other sports.

"Without a doubt you will be hurt. It will happen. The only question is how bad. That's the question fear keeps whispering in your ear. How bad? How bad?

"But the remedy is the ride. When you're sitting up there and the volume goes down on the world it goes down on the fear, too. After enough rides you learn how to turn it completely off."