

CBR Stars Strike Gold at NFR

By Ted Harbin



When Jeff Medders looked down from his perch high atop the Thomas & Mack Center, the TV play-by-play commentator couldn't help but notice the familiar faces and personalities.

The Wrangler National Finals Rodeo is the championship in the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, and Medders has been calling the action inside the Las Vegas arena for much of the last two decades. He's the television voice of ProRodeo.

But he's also the TV voice of Championship Bull Riding, bringing to life the awesome action that takes place on the Cinch CBR Tour. Both the NFR and CBR worlds collided, to a degree, this past December in Las Vegas, and Medders got to see the awesome action as close as anyone.

He also got to share some background on CBR cowboys like Clayton Williams, Ardie Maier, Clayton Williams, Wesley Silcox, Steve Woolsey and J.W. Harris, who has won the last three PRCA world championships.

"I thought all those guys represented the CBR really well," said Medders, who owns Geronimo Productions, the company that presents CBR broadcasts to the audience on GAC.

While the contestants were representing themselves, the CBR reaped the rewards of having some of the biggest names in the association competing for the coveted 2010 PRCA gold buckle.

"We're excited to see those guys at the NFR," said Tuff Hedeman, the CBR's president and a four-time world champion bull rider who won the top honor in the PRCA in 1986, 1989 and 1991. "Those are the guys we want at our events."

"As far as having the flexibility and freedom to do what they want, which is what we offer, I want people to come compete at our events because they want to be there, not because they have to be there. It's their choice. It's back to treating them like how I wanted to be treated when I was competing."

A champ is crowned ... again

"I think J.W. Harris is a monster," Medders said. "He reminds me so much of Tuff. He has the attitude that he's going to go out there and kick butt. He definitely did that during the NFR."

Everyone who knows a little bit about rodeo and bull riding saw that. Harris, of Mullin, Texas, entered the 10-round competition No. 8 in the world standings, then placed in the opening three go-rounds, including an 89.5 on Andrews Rodeo Co.'s Red Onion to win on the second night of the championship.

After bucking off in the fourth round, Harris jumped on the NFR engine's accelerator and won the next three rounds: He rode Burch Rodeo's Velvet Revolver for 89 points to win the fifth; he rode Klein Brothers' Fast Lane for 89.4 points to win the sixth; and he matched moves with Franklin Rodeo Co.'s Smoke Screen for 94.5 points to win the seventh.

"J.W. Harris rode as good as anybody I've seen at the NFR in the last 10 years," Hedeman said. "In the round where he was 94.5, he could've been more, like 96 or 97. It's as good as you might ever see."

How dominating was Harris? He clinched the world and NFR average titles after the ninth night of the championship and earned \$158,738 in Las Vegas, breaking the NFR earnings record that B.J. Schumacher had held since 2006, \$142,644. He also became the first bull rider to win three straight titles since Don Gay did so from 1979-81.

"I knew I couldn't screw around too much if I wanted to win the world," said Harris, who witnessed the birth of his daughter, Aubrey, just two days before the start of the NFR. "Whenever you go to the finals, it's pretty much a clean slate because there's so much money that could be won there."

It helps when one places in eight of 10 rounds and wins four outright. That average check of \$44,910 was a nice addition, but he'd earned more than \$100,000 in the Nevada desert by staying on for eight qualified rides. It all comes back to doing what he loves and having the freedom to do it his way.

"The CBR is more cowboy friendly than the PRCA really is," Harris

said. "You can't ask for an association to lean more toward the cowboy, wanting them to do good. They're flexible for us. They don't make us commit. They understand that if we have a big rodeo, we might not be able to make it to their event."

So how did the CBR help Harris win PRCA gold?

"I like going to the CBRs, because it keeps ups tuned up when we show up at a rodeo or make the short round," he said. "Going to the bull ridings, it's good to get away from the rodeo side of it, and it's a lot more relaxing. It's a lot of fun."

Making money in Las Vegas

Harris was the only bull rider to have earned more than \$100,000 in Las Vegas over the 10 days in December, but there was plenty of money being won all across the board. Silcox, the top-ranked cowboy heading into the NFR with \$137,392, added nearly \$78,000 in Sin City and finished with \$215,349, good enough for second place in the final world standings.

"The NFR started out slow, but I can't complain," said Silcox, who placed in five go-rounds – including the ninth-round win with a 90-point ride atop Silverado Rodeo's Playmate – and finished third in the average. "I'm happy with my performance there."

"There's just so much money. J.W. was coming in eighth, and he just rode his bulls and was on fire. That's what won him the world title. When there's that much money, that happens."

And since Wilcox makes money riding bulls, he takes every opportunity he can to do so, which includes appearances at CBR events.

"I've always rodeoed because I want to do what I want," he said. "Tuff's made the NFR I don't know how many times, and he knows what we're thinking and what's going on. He's not pressuring us to do anything, and that's why I like the CBR."

Williams, the son of the CBR's Terry Williams, placed four times and earned the final spot in the average to collect \$38,131, and Woolsey, whose finale was less memorable thanks to a bull's hoof in the 10th round, placed in three rounds and earned \$22,314.

Maier rode just one bull, but he made the most of it with 91.5 points on Beutler & Son Rodeo's Scent Loc to win the final go-round and collect \$17,512.



"For me, to win a world title in both the CBR and the PBR would be great," said Maier of Timber Lake, S.D. "If I could do more in both organizations, I could win more money. I try to get to events in both associations as much as I can, because that's how we make money and pay our bills."

Plus the competition is a big part of the equation.

"When you go to the CBR, you know you're going to get on good bulls," he said. "Anytime you're getting on good bulls, it's just like competing with the other good guys ... you're just as good as your competition. You're not going to ride to your potential if you're just getting by. You're going to rise and be more competitive."

It's something every cowboy realizes if they want to ride among the elite. It doesn't matter if Silcox is riding in his hometown rodeo in Utah or Harris is winning in Austin, Texas, it's about performing at one's best and proving your merit with each opportunity.

Whitney, who finished the 2009 NFR with \$17,416, began his second trip to the championship with a not-so-impressive 68.5-point ride in the opening round. But he came back with a vengeance, finishing second in each of the next three nights – he rode Franklin Rodeo's Tiger Lips for an 88 in the second round; he matched moves with Burns Rodeo's Kid Twist for 90.5 in the third; and he handled 4L & Diamond S Rodeo's Mission Accomplished for 87.5 points in the fourth.

"I just figured I better ride bulls this year," Whitney said with a laugh. "I had to do something different."

He rode five bulls, placed in four rounds and finished fourth in the average – that 68.5 came back to be a benefit, when the No. 5 cowboy in the average, Bobby Welsh, did so on four qualified rides. Whitney also had the third-best NFR earnings among bull riders with a little more than \$70,000. It's a pretty nice turnaround for Whitney, who squeaked into the finale field as the No. 15 bull rider in the standings.

After suffering a couple of injuries early in the season, the Asher, Okla., cowboy found himself on the sidelines for more than two months. A veteran of the sport, he knew he would have to show his skills at PRCA events in order to make it back to the championship. That's when he leaned on the experiences he's had in the CBR.

"The CBR is pretty much the same set of guys that rodeo, the top guys, and that is what you want to see any time you go to compete," Whitney said. "The people that run the CBR try to work with you the best they can on the rodeo schedule, and you can see that in the way they schedule stuff."

"They know the prestige of getting to make the NFR, but on the same lines, they're trying to build there association where it's just as prestigious."

For Hedeman and others associated with the CBR, there will be plenty to take from this year's PRCA showcase.

"The NFR's awesome, the greatest rodeo there is," Hedeman said. "Anybody that's ever ridden at any level in rodeo always wanted to go to the NFR, whether they want to admit it or not. They have a chance to get on the best bulls, which is something we offer them. We want everybody to have a chance to be competitive, whether you're a three-time world champion or not."

"We want these guys to do whatever's in their best interest. That's why we put on our bull ridings and add as much money as we possibly can." ◉

