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Legends set to take on livestock

Bull riding event features names from sport's past

By CHARLES RUNNELLS
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Put 'em on a bull. They're ready to ride.

A hurt wrist won't keep Chris Shivers from his eight seconds of glory, he says. And "old age" won't stop Brazilian bull riding hero Ednei Caminhas, either.

"What am I going to do, retire?" says Caminhas, who at age 35 is considered retirement-ready in a sport full of 20-somethings. "The bull is in my blood."

Both bull riding stars plan to compete at Germain Arena's PBR Touring Pro Division event today and Saturday.

Organizers expect the two riders to draw thousands of bull riding fans - especially superstar Shivers.

"Ednei was a world champion in 2002," says organizer Jeff Robinson. "And Chris Shivers is probably one of the top three bull riders of all time.

"He's a two-time world champion, and the youngest world champion ever."

Both riders are building their way back after various setbacks. In the PBR Touring Pro Division, riders earn points and money to qualify later for the major-league Built Ford Tough Series and - they hope - the World Finals. The top 40 moneymakers compete in the Finals, which take place Oct. 20-24 in Las Vegas.

Caminhas considered retiring from the sport last year, but he changed his mind and started pursuing the World Finals again with a vengeance.

Now he's ranked 33rd in the world, according to PBR's Web site. Shivers is 15th (and already qualified for the Built Ford Tough Series).

"Bull riders can usually go until they're 37 or 38," Caminhas says. "I'm in good shape, and I feel good. I think I'm better than a lot of the kids.

"I could go one more year, maybe two."

About \$30,000 in prize money is at stake this weekend, Robinson says.

Bull and rider compete for points: the bull for bucking and kicking and generally putting up a fight; and the rider for staying on board long enough - at least eight seconds - and for looking good while he's doing it, too. Good form is everything.

Everyone but bulls love a clown

Two judges award up to 50 points to the bull and another 50 to the rider. In all, 100 points are up for

grabs.

Shivers has had a whopping 84 90-point rides in his career, according to PBR. Caminhas has earned 20.

Getting those points isn't easy, though.

And sometimes it hurts.

Shivers will be nursing an injured wrist during his appearance at Germain Arena.

"It kinda doesn't feel really good right now," says Shivers, 31, of Louisiana. "It's pretty painful, but I think it's something that will heal."

He's taking part in the minor-league event to maintain his standing in PBR and prepare the way for the World Finals.

"I'm kinda holding back and only going to a few select events," he says.

He's done it before. Broken bones and sprained joints are a way of life in bull riding.

"It's part of the territory," he says.

Shivers estimates he's broken 15-16 bones in his 12-year PBR career - including a broken cheekbone and eye socket in 2008.

"I've had quite a few hospital visits," he says matter-of-factly.

Shivers bears the pain, though. The legendarily tough rider says he's too dedicated to quit now.

"When I want something, I go at it at full speed," he says. "And it seems to be paying off."

Additional Facts

If You Go Why eight seconds?

What: PBR Touring Pro Division bull-riding event

When: 8 p.m. today and Saturday

Where: Germain Arena, 11000 Everglades Parkway, Estero

Tickets: \$12-\$52.

Info: Call 948-7825 or go to the Germain box office. You can also get tickets at ticketmaster.com or local Ticketmaster outlets.

By CHARLES RUNNELLS

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Rodeo clowns live by two basic rules:

- Make 'em laugh.

- And don't get killed.

Matt Merritt tries for both whenever he steps into the arena in his cowboy hat and greasepaint smile.

Most of the time, Merritt keeps his distance from the sharp-horned bulls - he's there to get the audience smiling, after all, not to tangle with a 1,600-pound beast.

But sometimes that bull heads straight at him. And sometimes he has mere seconds to get out of the way.

"People say they see it in slow motion," says Merritt, 28, of North Carolina. "But to me, it's a blur. It's just a mad rush."

Merritt clears up a common misconception about rodeo clowns. He's not there to distract the bull from fallen bull riders - although he does end up doing that sometimes.

Instead, he's an entertainer above everything else. That's why he got into the business.

"I'm a straight entertainer," he says. "I'm like a redneck stand-up comedian."

During this weekend's PBR bull-riding event, Merritt plans to tell jokes, throw T-shirts into the audience and dance to funk and rap tunes.

And sometimes he does taunt the bull to hurry things along - all while keeping a safe distance.

"I mess with 'em," he says. "Sure. And if they try to hook you, you get out of the way."

Merritt became a rodeo clown when he was 16 years old. The job combined his love of entertaining with his love of the rodeo.

Besides, there was no way he was going to climb onto one of those bulls.

"I was scared of bull riding," he says. "I didn't want to have anything to do with them."

Instead, he conquered another fear.

"Public speaking is the number one fear in the world," he says and laughs. "So this is my own way of being tough."

Contrary to popular belief, bull riding's eight-second rule has nothing to do with the rider's safety.

It's all about the bull.

To qualify, bull riders stay on a bull at least eight seconds. That rule existed long before Professional Bull Riders formed in 1992, says spokesman Jack Carnefix. It's bull-riding tradition.

The rule is designed to protect the bull, according to PBR. After eight seconds, the bull's adrenaline, energy and bucking ability decrease.

To prevent injury and stress, a buzzer or horn sounds to end the ride and signal the rider to dismount.

That keeps the bull relatively stress-free and competing at the best of its ability later. It also keeps the bull from "breaking" and becoming too tame.

That way, he'll buck and jump all he can for the next cowboy.
