

Love of the game: Bull riders unfazed by danger of their sport

By Joe Ragazzo, Daily News staff

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ESTERO — Before the competition begins, most of the cowboys mill around near the area where the bulls are held. Some pretend to shoot off invisible pistols. Others are joking around with fellow bull riders. None are doing any intensive physical activity.

That's because, as Caleb Sanderson, who's been riding professionally for about a year and a half, said, it's pretty much mental.

"I mean, really, if you're at this stage, where you're riding professionally like this, you know how to ride bulls," he said. "If you got your head right, you can ride anything underneath you."

Sanderson grew up on a ranch in Kissimmee, and although he's only 21, he's been riding bulls for 13 years. The mental preparation he speaks about isn't simply focusing on using good technique or keeping a positive attitude. A lot of it has to do with lassoing fear and accepting that being knocked unconscious (he has been four times and rode the next day three times) or suffering a broken bone is just a part of the sport.

Sanderson said he's seen guys ride a week after breaking a jaw, and that most guys would ride with a broken leg if they could.

"It's just part of it, something you've got to accept," he said. "You can get hurt, killed walking down the middle of street. We just take it a little too far sometimes."

But even with the danger, he said he's never once considered quitting. And he didn't hesitate when asked. It was very sharp, stern, "Never."

Ask around the stable at the Professional Bull Riders Inc. Touring Pro Division and that's the norm. Chris Shivers is a clean-shaven 5-foot-5 cowboy with a Louisiana drawl and two PBR World Championships under his belt buckle. At 31 years old, he's the second in PBR's all-time money rankings with more than \$3.5 million.

Shivers said been riding bulls for 16 or 17 years. He said there's probably more fear now than when he started.

"I was young and really didn't care what happened," he said. "Now I kind of look out for myself, and in bull riding that isn't something you want to do. When you hesitate, that's when things go wrong."

In a sport where the action usually lasts less than eight seconds, things can go wrong

pretty quickly. Shivers has broken his leg, arm, collarbone, crushed his eye socket and cheekbone, and had a herniated disk in his neck.

Quitting?

“No, no it never was an option,” he said. “I got into the PBR and put both feet in.”

Like Sanderson, Shivers grew up around bulls and bull riders. As a kid in Jonesville, La., there were a lot of practice pens and a lot of places to get on bulls, he said.

“When I was 13, that’s what you did,” he said.

Shivers knew he wanted to be a pro at a very young age, and he excelled from the start.

“I won a truck, won all the money I could spend at 13, 14, 15 so I just kind of figured that’s what I was going to do,” he said. “It’s pretty cool out here doing what you love.”

Shivers said when it stops being fun, he’ll get out of the sport and spend more time on his ranch. Until then he’ll just keep putting his hand in the rope like everyone else.

Many of the riders compete in events every week and hail from all over the world, from Brazil to Australia.

Ednei Caminhas is a 35-year old from Sao Paulo, Brazil, and now makes his home in Denton, Texas. He has an affinity for competing in Florida because it’s where he won his first American tournament.

Caminhas said bull riding is as popular as baseball in Brazil, and it’s just something he grew up with. Like Shivers and Sanderson, he said he knew he wanted to ride bulls from the first time he got on one more than 19 years ago.

He said he’s going to keep riding until God wants him to stop, and he just loves riding bulls — the adrenaline rush, the challenge and the fun.



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