

Notes from the Field

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Shootout at the Rodeo



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Rodeos offer an opportunity to shoot a wide range of subjects including fast action sports, human interest, and candid street scenes to mention a few. Knowing what to expect, understanding the various rodeo events and a little prep work will help insure a successful outing.

Introduction

Rodeos offer a wide variety of subjects to shoot. These include the fast action sporting events that have their roots in the daily work activities of cowboys in years past, the culture of rodeo and the western lifestyle, and human interest shots of people out and enjoying their day. Like every shoot preparation is important. The photographer needs to understand the various events so they can anticipate and capture the critical elements, they need to know the conditions they can expect regarding light and shadow, and they need to have an idea of the kinds of shots they want to focus on.

The Sport of Rodeo, Its Events, and How to Shoot Them

Bull and Bronco Riding

Description

Bull or bronco riding is basically an event that takes a cowboy who has a serious lack of judgment in what constitutes a safe way to pass time and an unreal addiction to adrenalin and sits him astride a 4,000 pound bull or a 1,500 pound horse with an equally dysfunctional definition of personal space and then asking the cowboy to hold on for 8 seconds. Judges then score the cowboy on form...like the cowboy has any say in the matter. Typically, the cowboy and animal start off in what amounts to a cage that restricts the animal's reaction while the cowboy gets on and then the gate to the cage is opened allowing the animal into an arena where it does its best to communicate its definition of personal space.

How to Shoot

There are no rules to follow here beyond using a fast enough shutter speed to freeze the action which is no small feat. Long lenses are usually needed as the photographer, along with anyone else with sense, is normally some distance for the contest. These lenses also need to be relatively fast, meaning wide apertures to let in lots of light. Bumping up the ISO (the sensitivity of the light sensor via signal amplification), can be done within limits but like all shots, noise is a serious technical detractor. When it comes to lighting, one key consideration is the arena. Is it open to natural daylight, is it closed relying on artificial light, or is it a night event where stadium lighting is being used?

Composition

The key compositional considerations are as follows:

- Is the subject in focus
- Is the subject distinct from the background...i.e. is there too much convergence with other background elements
- Is the subject isolated from the background via a limited depth of focus
- Can one clearly see the face of the rider and the animal

The last element is key. The expression of both adds to the energy of the shot. What makes this difficult is that often cowboys set their hats low on their face hiding their eyes or their body position is such that one can't see the face.

Another key consideration is managing the background. The challenge here is that the majority of the contest between rider and animal occur within a short distance of the arena side making convergence and subject isolation by controlling the depth of focus problems.

There are other compositions to consider. Often shots with the rider separated from the animal and in mid-air make for interesting shots...especially those at the moment when the cowboy is reintroduced to mother Earth or the animal decides it's necessary to further communicate its displeasure with the whole affair by chasing the cowboy across the arena.

Sample Shots



Figure 1 - Note how the rider's and the animal's faces are visible and the rider is distinct from the background

Alternative Compensations



Figure 2 - If you can maneuver to a location behind the chute it may be easier to isolate the action and catch that moment when the action first starts



Figure 3 - here is another example of a shot from above the chute

Positions

Typically photographers position themselves on the opposite side of the arena from the chutes. While this gives the best view of the action it creates issues with long focal lengths limiting aperture options and increased depth of field. An alternate position is seen in the example above which is directly above the chutes. This position gets you closer to the action and helps eliminate the background issues mentioned above.

Calf Roping

Description

Calf roping is also known as tie-down roping and originates in the spring-time branding of the new calves. This is a rodeo event that features a calf and a rider mounted on a horse. The goal of this timed

event is for the rider to catch the calf by throwing a loop of rope from a lariat around its neck, dismount from the horse, run to the calf, and restrain it by tying three legs together, in as short a time as possible. Hey...sounds simple right....so, what could go wrong.

How To Shoot

Composition

The essential aspects of composition are the same here as for bull and bronco riding above.

- Is the subject in focus
- Is the subject distinct from the background...i.e. is there too much convergence with other background elements
- Is the subject isolated from the background via a limited depth of focus
- Can one clearly see the face of the rider and the animal

Backgrounds here aren't as difficult as the action takes place closer to the center of the arena. The trick here is to determine where that action will be and have the camera zoomed into that point.

This event has several good opportunities for creating an effective composition. The first is when the rider first leaves the chute and when the lasso is tossed and about to land around the neck of the calf as seen below.



Figure 4 - this "full story" composition features all of the elements of the event and the critical moment of capture.



Figure 5 - another "full story" example

Another opportunity is when the calf is picked up and positioned for the tie as seen below or when the rider raises his hands signaling he/she is done as he stands above the calf..



Figure 6 - The Toss...a key moment in the event

Positions

The best position for this event is not too different from that of the bull riding event. The photographer is either opposite of the chute, maybe a little off to the right, or above and behind the chute.

Steer Wrestling

Description

Also known as "Bulldogging," this is a rodeo event where the rider jumps off his horse onto a steer and 'wrestles' it to the ground by grabbing it by the horns. Here there is a lot of action and flying dirt that can make for interesting shots.

How To Shoot

Composition

Again, as above, seeing the faces of the rider and animals is essential and the action is closer to the center of the arena.

Compositions can include the chase and catch as seen below



Figure 7 - a "full story" shot of bulldoggin'

or the fight.



Figure 8 - this is pivotal moment in the event...facial expressions are key

Finally, full story shots work well but vignettes also work well as seen in the tight crop below.



Figure 9 - this vignette is just as effective if not more so than the full story composition as it focuses on the struggle between man and beast

Positions

The best position for this event is across from the chute with the rider and steer coming toward the photographer or with the photographer a little to the right. Alternates can include perpendicular to the rider's path as seen in the vignette above or from behind the chute as the rider and steer first take off.

Barrel Racing

Description

Barrel racing is a rodeo event in which a horse and rider attempt to complete a pattern around preset barrels in the fastest time. Reminds me of those shuttle runs I hated so much back in high school. It combines the horse's athletic ability and the horsemanship skills of a rider in order to safely and successfully maneuver a horse through a clover leaf pattern around three barrels (typically three fifty-five gallon metal or plastic drums) placed in a triangle in the center of an arena.

The configuration of the barrels and the path the rider takes can be seen in the diagram below.

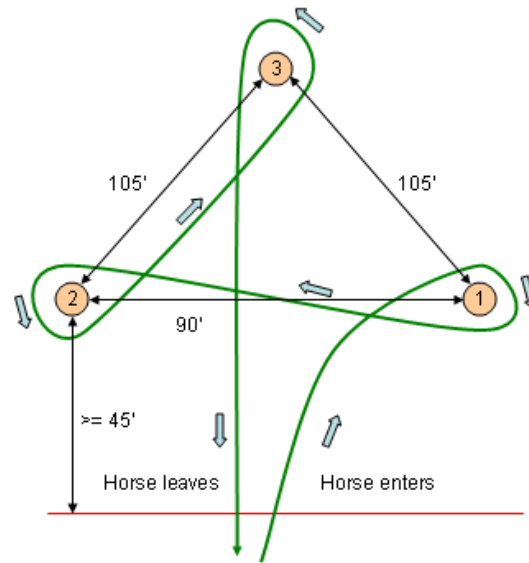


Figure 10 - barrel racing course - source, Wikipedia.org

How To Shoot

Composition

There are several compositions that work. The first is to catch the horse and rider just after the turn as the "push off" and accelerate toward the next barrel. Here the horse and rider are typically looking up and toward the next barrel and the power of the animal can be captured as seen in the example below.



Figure 11 - note the focused look on both the rider and horse

Another effective composition is catching the rider in the middle of a turn where the extreme angles of the rider and horse create a dynamic sense of motion as seen below.



Figure 12 - Note the extreme body angles that help communicate a sense of motion

Another option may be to crop in tight as seen here.



Figure 13 - the long stretch of their necks...reaching for the finish create great tension

Positions

Given the triangle nature of the course just about anywhere is a good spot.

Mutton Busting

Description

Mutton Bustin' is a kid's event that is very similar in most respects to bull riding. The rider wants to hang on and the sheep wants nothing to do with it...therein lies the fun. Often kids will dress as rodeo clowns as well and that helps add color to the event.

How To Shoot

Composition

Again, this is not much different than the bull riding discussed above. A lot here depends on where in the arena the kids saddle up. A sample shot is seen below.



Figure 14 - if this isn't a contest winner I don't know what is

Positions

Anywhere

Other Opportunities

There are all sorts of other opportunities at a rodeo. Check out some of these shots for ideas.



Figure 15 - colorful clowns



Figure 16 - opening events



Figure 17 - kids events



Figure 18 - the agony of defeat



Figure 19 human interest



Figure 20 - western wear



Figure 21 - hunks in jeans



Figure 22 - vendors



Figure 23 - cowgirls

Oh...and don't forget to think about monochrome shots while you're shootin'.



Figure 24 - waiting to be called



Figure 25 - lines by the men's room

Summary

Rodeos offer so much in the way of subject matter that one could spend all day filling up memory cards and hours at home latter ignoring the family. What a way to pass a spring day.