



Rodeos

by Linda Rapp

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The International Gay Rodeo Association is a thriving group with more than thirty affiliate members across the United States and in two Canadian provinces. The association has, since its inception, been actively involved in raising funds for charity.

The first gay rodeo event in the United States was held on October 2, 1976. It was the brainchild of Phil Ragsdale of Reno, Nevada. Organizing it was not easy, but despite a lack of cooperation from local ranchers, Ragsdale eventually managed to secure five cows, ten calves, a pig, and a Shetland pony for the rodeo at the Washoe County Fairgrounds, in which 125 people took part. The event concluded with the crowning of the King of the Cowboys, the Queen of the Cowgirls, and "Miss Dusty Spurs" for best drag queen.

Ragsdale's goals in creating the gay rodeo were threefold: in addition to establishing an enjoyable event for the participants, he wanted to raise money for charity and change people's stereotypical images of gay men and lesbians. Money raised by the early rodeos benefited the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA).

Other gay and lesbian rodeo groups began forming and joining the competition. Strong showings were made by teams from California, Texas, and Utah over the next few years.

With the toll being taken on the gay community by the AIDS pandemic, participants in the rodeo felt that it was inappropriate to make charitable contributions only to the MDA. Accordingly, the leadership of the rodeo changed the rules to give half of the funds to the MDA, with the other half assigned to the selected glbtq charities of the Mr., Ms., and Miss (drag) National Reno Gay Rodeo champions, most of whom designated the money for the AIDS Foundation.

In 1985 the Arizona Gay Rodeo Association, the Colorado Gay Rodeo Association, the Texas Gay Rodeo Association, and the Golden State Gay Rodeo Association combined to form the International Gay Rodeo Association (IGRA), of which Wayne Jakino was elected the first president. Although the IGRA membership is mostly male, among its presidents has been one woman, Linda Frazier of Kansas. From modest beginnings IGRA has grown to become the third largest rodeo association in the world.

IGRA members compete in typical rodeo events such as bull riding, bareback bronco riding, calf roping, and barrel racing; however, in contrast to traditional practices, in IGRA rodeos both men and women may compete in all events. People in the process of becoming transgendered "can pick what best suits them" when deciding to compete either as a man or a woman, explained Barry Luke of the Florida Gay Rodeo Association.

Gay rodeos have special "camp events"--steer decorating, goat dressing, and wild drag race.

Steer decorating requires one member of a two-person team to tie a ribbon on a steer's tail while the other removes a rope from its horns after it has been let out of a gate.

Goat dressing is another two-person event, in which the team must get a pair of jockey-style underwear onto a goat and then run back across the start/finish line to establish a time for completing the maneuver.

The wild drag race, always a fan favorite, involves a three-person team consisting of a man, a woman, and a person of any gender in drag. At the beginning of the event the cowgirl holds a 25-foot lead rope on a steer that is released from a bucking shoot. The other two participants, stationed 40 feet away, rush forward, and "the team tries to direct (or harass) the steer toward the finish line." Once there, the team member in drag must mount the steer and remain astride until all four feet of the animal recross the finish line.

In addition to the events involving animals, IGRA holds the International Country Western Dance Competition at its annual convention. There are four levels of competition, and member associations may enter one couple in each.

IGRA is strongly committed to "the careful and humane treatment of animal athletes" in its events. Certified specialists "are required to inspect the livestock to assure that only animals which are fit, healthy and meet specifications for weight" in the events participate. IGRA rules also mandate the presence of a veterinarian at all meets.

IGRA has an imperial court system. The royalty titles are Mr. IGRA, Ms. IGRA, Miss IGRA (male drag), and Ms. Ter IGRA (female drag). The last has never been awarded. The members of the royal court serve as ambassadors for the community and are actively involved in fundraising.

IGRA member associations have raised over two million dollars over the past twenty years, benefiting a wide variety of causes, including AIDS charities, camps for children with life-threatening diseases, food banks, youth groups, and gay history projects.

IGRA contestants perform at a high level. Some members also compete on the mainstream rodeo circuit. In a 2006 interview in the *San Antonio Express-News* a gay cowboy identified as George stated that heterosexual participants generally are not bothered by the knowledge that some of their competitors are gay, "as long as you don't flaunt it." He went on to cite several gay champions whose names were not revealed by the reporter. "It's an open secret," George declared.

But it is still a secret. Some participants in gay rodeos, like George, use only first names or choose pseudonyms. IGRA member Jamie Lodzinski, who proudly competes under his own name, stated that some others "are open when they are among us, with their friends, but when they're competing, they can't take that chance of their names getting out."

Lodzinski's partner, identified only as K. W., commented, "We have competitors and attendees that are schoolteachers and military. They just can't afford to expose who they really are, in fear of losing their jobs."

The threat is sometimes of physical danger as well. In 2005 an IGRA member from Oklahoma was battered by a gun-wielding assailant after participating in a gay rodeo in Fort Worth, Texas.

Rodeo directors report that despite good attendance at their competitions, they have sometimes failed to receive sponsorship from businesses "because it's a gay event."

For IGRA participants, however, the rodeos are deeply meaningful. Brian Helander, the president of IGRA, called "gay rodeo . . . a big, wonderful family of people. For participants, it's about being outdoors and

around animals. It takes a lot of persistence to perfect your skill, and it's a great lesson in not giving up."

For gay men and lesbians who moved from rural areas to larger cities in order to find a more tolerant atmosphere, gay rodeo presents an opportunity to celebrate both their cultural heritage and their glbtq identity.

"I used to go to rodeo as a child. It was one of my favorite things," said Duane Evans in a 2005 interview. For Evans, then 79, attending an IGRA event was a chance to enjoy a part of Western life that he has always loved and also to chat comfortably with a friend about "Hollywood's cutest cowboys."

IGRA member Bailey Kier first competed as a woman but subsequently began the process of gender-reassignment. Kier, who grew up in the state of Washington, "definitely ran away" to Washington, D. C., where he still found "a lot of tensions" despite its larger glbtq population. He credits the support of his rodeo companions for giving him strength in his decision to become a man.

Former IGRA champion Sonny Koerner was at first put off by the idea of a gay rodeo, fearing that it would be an excessively campy show, but, upon investigation, discovered that it was not so different from his activities on his grandparents' farm and the rodeos in which he had competed since childhood. Koerner, a Washington-based security consultant, summed up what it meant to him to be able to participate in gay rodeo: "I would not say that the rodeo is any more important than anything else, but it's important for the gay community to show that it's as varied as any other community. We are just as diverse as the straight community."

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About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtq.com.