

Rider Bucks His Way Into Farm Show Competition

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York County Correspondent
DOVER (York Co.) — Josh Hoffman hopes to sit out his competition at the Farm Show — all 16 seconds of it.

Where he wants to stay seated is in the saddle of the bucking broncs he'll ride in two eight-second go-arounds during the Farm Show rodeo. Hoffman will ride in both the 2 p.m. and 6 p.m. rodeo rounds scheduled for Saturday, January 9, in the large arena.

An 18-year-old senior vo-ag student at Dover High School, Hoffman took his first ride into the rodeo arena after joining the Pennsylvania High School Rodeo Association (PHSRA) in late summer. He is the son of Mike and Jean Hoffman, who raise livestock and grain on their farm on Davidsburg Road.

"I stayed on for two seconds," chuckles the slender, lanky saddle bronc rider as he recounts his first ride. "But the fall didn't hurt as bad as I thought it would."

That first tumble off a bucking rodeo horse was just part of the training Hoffman received during his initial rodeo/clinic held in October at Wellsville. Rodeos have held an almost lifelong fascination for Hoffman since he watched his first one on television as a child. His interest deepened recently while tracking the rodeo activities of a high school acquaintance.

High School Rodeo Association competition is a high school sport, open to students in grades nine through twelve. Participation must be approved by the student's high school principal and the participating student must be passing a minimum of four subjects.

Both Pennsylvania and Ohio have state associations, which are affiliated with the national association. Pennsylvania has been organized for four years and currently has 65 members, according to state association secretary Susan Kroll. Students in New Jersey, New York, Maryland, West Virginia, and Virginia, which do not have their own associations, also

may participate through the PHSRA.

Fourteen PHSRA-sanctioned rodeos are held within the state during the year, usually once-monthly, except in April when several are scheduled. Participants can enter one or several of the 10 separate events in a PHSRA rodeo and earn points that accumulate through the year. A first place win earns 10 points, with lesser placings earning fewer points.

Events for girls include barrel racing, pole bending, goat tying, and break away roping, while boys compete in riding bulls, bareback or saddle bronc horses, calf roping, and steer wrestling. Both boys and girls may compete in team roping.

At the end of the season, participants with the highest cumulative points in each event ride in the state finals rodeo. State winners are then eligible for the national finals in Wyoming.

"It's a sort of 'minor league' for rodeo competition," explains Hoffman.

His first tumble from a real horse during the two-day rodeo/clinic at Wellsville came after a few hours of initial training on a mechanical bucking machine.

"Horses are easier," figures Hoffman. "The machine is a steady pace, but I haven't seen anything to replace the real action of a horse."

Still, the machine taught Hoffman a lot. Saddle bronc riders must learn to instantly twist and wedge their legs and feet over and around the shoulders of the horse as it leaves the chute, a maneuver called "marking out." By properly leveraging his legs, the bronc rider tightens his body into the saddle to better withstand the horse's efforts to dislodge him.

"The saddle is very important," emphasizes Hoffman, demonstrating the "marking out" technique on the floor of the family's living room. "It's the only thing that keeps you there on the horse."

Because of the unique purpose it serves, a bronc saddle is de-

signed with the stirrups much farther front than those on a western saddle. Instead of the horn which protrudes from the top front of a western saddle, the bronc saddle has about a three-inch-high padded curb on the top front, known as the "swell." This feature also helps stabilize the rider atop the bucking horse.

Bronc saddles are "real hard to come by," according to Hoffman, who was able to acquire a used one in good condition. And, because each rider is different in size, most are custom designed. New, custom-made bronc saddles from the most skilled craftsmen may cost up to \$1,000.

Given the crucial safety role of the saddle, bronc riders value them highly and regularly inspect and replace any weakened leather parts that might tear under the riding strain. Other "rigging" includes the "bronc holder," a halter fashioned from very heavy nylon with thick, wooly padding on the nose guard which fits over the horse's muzzle.

The "bronc rein" is a flexible, braided, nylon rope of graduated thickness, slender where it fastens to the bronc holder and well over an inch in diameter where the rider wraps a single hand around it during the brief competition ride. Saddle bronc riders grip the rein bare-handed, while bareback and bull riders wear gloves.

As with any sport, physical fitness is imperative for rodeo competitors. For bronc riders like Hoffman, leg muscles must be strong as well as those of the arms and wrists. While some competitors train by weightlifting, Hoffman stays fit through the normal work routine on the family farm.

Safety is a continuing emphasis, for both rider and horse. A mouthpiece is a required piece of equipment to protect the rider's teeth. Heavy chaps cushion the legs. Parts of the rigging that make contact with the horse are all well padded to protect the horse. And a pair of pickup men rides alongside the saddle bronc competitor at all times, one to collect the rider when his time elapses — or he falls — and the other to instantly release the bronc's cinch when the ride is over.

"What other high school sport puts you against a 1,500-pound horse, or an unpredictable bull?" philosophizes Hoffman. "It makes a lot more sense to me to compete with a horse than going head-to-head with another person."

"Mind control is one of the most important things in saddle bronc riding," he believes. That includes learning to concentrate solely on the horse, the upcoming ride, and blocking out all else — including spectator noise — while waiting for the chute to open and the ride to begin during rodeo competition.

"I was very scared, very nervous on my first ride," remembers Hoffman, adding with a laugh, "and I didn't do anything right."

He climbed back on a little later, stayed in the saddle a fraction of a second longer, and again sailed off into the dirt. It was a harder, more bruising fall. Though he walked away with no assistance, later he could not remember that his friend had carried the saddle for him.

Despite aching muscles and sore bruises, Hoffman returned for the second day of the clinic with no hesitation.

After two more "go 'rounds," Hoffman had doubled his saddle



Garbed in the classic gear of ten-gallon hat, protective chaps and colorful shirt, Josh Hoffman is "unliformed" for participation in the Farm Show's only high school sporting event — the rodeo.



The thick, braided nylon "bronc rein" is grasped by the rider with one bare hand for the duration of the eight-second ride in rodeo competition.

time to four seconds, gained confidence and became visibly more relaxed to his teaching coach. He had also learned that he could climb right back in the saddle after a fall and build on the lessons learned each time it happened.

"Mind control," he says again. "You have confidence that some day it will all come together."

When it does, when a saddle bronc rider is properly "marking out," correctly "screws himself into the saddle," and stays on the violently gyrating horse for the full eight seconds, then he has "covered the horse."

Two judges score the ride, one each on the right and on the left; each tallies a separate numerical score. While 100 is a perfect score, only professional rodeo riders are likely to garner as high as a combined 85-point average on a saddle bronc ride.

After high school graduation, a PHSRA member can finish that

season of competition, but must move on to higher professional levels to continue rodeo participation. East Coast competition is usually within the American Professional Rodeo Association, with events up and down the eastern seaboard and in Canada.

Westerners are more likely to compete in the national association's events. At a top professional rodeo, a winning competitor might earn up to \$11,000 for placing first in one day's competition; a national rodeo might offer 10 days of competition.

One of Hoffman's dreams is to move West, a part of the country he came to admire and appreciate during visits there as a child and again while attending the national FFA convention in Kansas City. He would like to eventually continue the family farming and livestock-production tradition of the Hoffman family at a western, less populous location.



Designed of heavy nylon materials, the bronc holder is the halter which fits on the horse and to which the bronc rein is fastened. Heavy wool padding on the nose piece protects the muzzle of the horse. All rodeo "rigging" is designed for the safety of both rider and mount.

Homestead Notes