

Rodeo comes to Villa Grove during Ag Days

Competitors hail from all over the United States

By Tony Hooker

For years, Garret Miller and his buddy Kaleb Barrett had a dream.

Of all things, they wanted to form a rodeo company, and not just any rodeo company, but one that hosted IPRA, the international Professional Rodeo Association, events.

Two years ago, they made their dream a reality and now they're traveling every weekend, hosting events such as the one that will be held in Villa Grove Aug. 4-5 under the guise of their company, the South Plains Corporation.

Though the corporation is only two years old, Miller and Barrett have been associated with hosting rodeo shows for much longer than that.

"This is only the second year of South Plains Corporation, but Kaleb and I have been putting on rodeos for about 10 years now," Miller said.

Even veteran cowboys like Miller and Barrett were surprised by how quickly their rodeos have grown.

"It's taken off like crazy. We're thankful for the opportunities that have been given to us and for the people who have helped us along the way, because without them we wouldn't be here today," Miller noted, thankfully.

For Miller and Barrett, bringing the rodeo to new areas is one of the most appealing aspects of their company.

"The Midwest in general has a very good rodeo presence. We're drawing an outstanding group of contestants wherever we're putting one on. We expect the same thing here in Villa Grove and we'll find out this afternoon once they get done entering. There's a lot of people around Villa Grove, Champaign and Danville and that area that are heavily involved in rodeo, but a lot of people don't know about it," Miller related.

As South Plains has grown, so too has interest from around the US.

"I want to say we have competitors from 25 or 30 states who are represented at our competitions. They come from Texas, Oklahoma, Florida, New Mexico, Alabama Tennessee and Kentucky. We've got competitors from all over who come to compete in South Plains Rodeos," Miller said.

According to Miller, one of the biggest factors in their continued success is the kindness and generosity of the towns that host them.

"The communities that we go to are extremely welcoming to the contestants," he said.

Even though they're growing, Miller, Barrett and their team are constantly fighting to earn the confidence of the participants in their events.

"Contestants a lot of times get really nervous when someone gets their card. 'What kind of rough stock are they going to have? How are they going to prepare footing for the barrel racing?'" Miller stated.

One such example happened just this past weekend, when a downpour left the arena under an inch of water.

"We just put the work in to get the footing right, and there wasn't a single person who had to wear rubber boots to compete in that rodeo. They had a great crowd there, and I think the contestants noticed that we're in it for them and we'll make everything right and do the best that we can," Miller stated emphatically.

As everyone knows, word of mouth is the best form of advertising, so they work extra hard to go the extra mile for their contestants.

"These cowboys and cowgirls spend a lot of time on their phones conversing about what rodeos they're going to



Photo courtesy of South Plains Rodeo Co.

next, and you want to be the producer or subcontractor that they want to go to. They start picking out the South Plains rodeos and fill their schedules first, and that's where you want to be," Miller commented.

The two men can't do everything by themselves, naturally, so they've put together a top-notch team to assist them.

"We carry about 15. South Plains brings in the announcer, the funny man, it's a full production. The rough stock,

the cattle, all the guys who set up and tear down the arenas and work the event," Miller relayed. "One thing Kaleb and I have always taken great pride in is having great help, and that great help helps in our success."

For South Plains, the plan is to put together a show that will hold an audience's attention for the entire duration, and Miller recognizes that without a top-notch team, that can't be accomplished.

"When we start a show, we

want it to be two hours of action packed, no down time entertainment. That's our goal, and our crew is what makes that," Miller emoted. "Our crew has to know what everyone else is doing. It's sort of like a pro football game. For those two hours, it's go time!"

Because this is a sanctioned pro rodeo event, Miller anticipates a large number of contestants.

"Friday night will be a IPRA event, co-sanctioned by Mid-states Rodeo, and we'll have

somewhere between 150 and 180 contestants there. We'll have a full performance that we'll complete in about 2 hours. We have so many contestants now that we can't run them all so after the performance is over, we'll run them in the slacks so that they can compete for that main total purse," he said.

Saturday's rodeo will be a different type of event, called a Ranch Rodeo, where teams compete in events that take place every day on working cattle ranches. Although not all of the IPRA cowboys and cowgirls stick around to compete, some do.

"It's about 50/50. Some of our international and Mid-states card holders love to compete in our ranch rodeos, so they'll stick around and put their teams together," Miller said.

Saturday's event will include competition in ranch bronc riding, "Double Mugging," where teams get two cows on the ground and get three legs tied together. Trailer loading, where they actually have to get two steers loaded on a trailer, shut a cut gate and load two horses behind them before piling into a pickup.

"All of the cowboys have to get in a pickup truck like they're doing a cow catch," Miller said with a laugh.

They will then do a cattle

"Branding" event, where they will get a cow on the ground and apply a paint brand with a marker. They will then do a wild cow milking competition, which is exactly what it sounds like, before finishing up with an 8 to 10 head bull ride.

Unfortunately for Miller and Barrett, their thriving rodeo company doesn't give them very many opportunities to jump on horseback these days, but Miller says he can still get after it when he needs to. Both he and Barrett keep livestock at their homes, so they have to use some of their techniques from time to time.

"We competed for many years, but it's hard for us to put on the kind of show we want to put on with us being on horseback anymore," Miller lamented.

Miller did note that last winter, at the Midwest Youth Rodeo Association, he was able to take part in a team roping event and that he enjoyed the experience immensely.

"Last winter I got to join in and man, did I have a blast!" he said.

For their part, the loss of saddle time is more than made up for by the success of their endeavor.

"I never in a million years thought it would happen this fast. We woke up with a dream and kinda put that plan into motion."

INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONAL RODEO ASSOCIATION (IPRA)

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- Bareback Riding
- Saddle Bronc Riding
- Cowgirls Breakaway
- Calf Roping
- Steer Wrestling
- Team Roping
- Cowgirls Barrel Racing
- Bull Riding

AUGUST 5TH RANCH RODEO

- Ranch Bronc Riding
- Wild Cow Milking
- Double Mugging
- Trailer Loading
- Bull Riding

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