

## Lifestyles: Utah Couple's Hopes Ride on Raising Prize Rodeo Bulls

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*by Michael Yount*

Jul. 4--TOQUERVILLE, Utah -- One of the biggest stars in rodeo struts around his picturesque ranch in this tiny southern Utah town, always surrounded by 20 or more female admirers. Mr. USA isn't a cowboy. No, he's a cowboy's best friend and worst enemy wrapped up into 1,800 pounds of bovine piss and vinegar.

Bulls like Mr. USA on the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) circuit are among the stock "superstars" as Cyndi Gilbert says. Cyndi and Steve Gilbert own Mr. USA and run Diamond G Rodeos just outside Zion National Park. Diamond G is one of two Utah-based PRCA stock contractors that provide animals for rodeos nationwide.

Cyndi Gilbert got involved in rodeo in the late 1980s when she unknowingly married a cowboy. She now runs Diamond G's successful bull-breeding program. "I had to find some way to fall in love with this stupid sport," Cyndi Gilbert said with a laugh. An attorney, she had never been to a rodeo before the couple honeymooned in Vegas during the National Finals Rodeo in 1988.

When the bulls came out at the NFR, she saw Steve's eyes light up and knew, "there's some nondisclosure here."

The next year at the NFR's stock market, the couple purchased their first superstar, Ricky, along with four other bulls and a bucking horse for \$54,000. Fifteen years later, the couple's ranch house is filled with rodeo paraphernalia marking the success of their bulls.

The Gilberts have owned, or own, plenty of big name bulls -- The Mailman (a tribute to Karl Malone), Wanna Dance, T-Bug -- and some elite bucking horses, but Mr. USA is the marquee name.

"Have you ever seen an uglier bull? He's just a bull only a mother could love," said Cyndi Gilbert. Mr. USA doesn't have the silky coat or the striking muscular ripples like Wanna Dance, who lives with his small harem just across the road. But in the arena, it's a different story.

At the 2001 NFR, Ogden's Blue Stone scored a 94 (out of 100) on Mr. USA for a win in the first go-round. In the final round, Cody Hancock rode him for an arena-record 96 points.

Diamond G's best bulls are given star treatment complete with private pasture and plenty of female companionship. Twenty to 25 heifers seems to be the optimal number, Cyndi Gilbert explained.

"It's kind of like owning a Porsche," said Steve Gilbert, explaining that the better you treat it, the more you get out of it. "You don't dent it and you always change the oil."

But with some 300 bulls at Diamond G, most reside on larger pastures surrounded by other bulls. A bunch of hot-blooded bulls penned together leads to rough-housing. Occasionally, a bull is injured, or in the case of The Mailman, even killed when tempers flare.

Bucking is a trait, not a given. Today's rodeo stock is bred to buck. As prize money has increased, a premium has been placed on quality stock, stiffening competition to provide elite animals.

"Animal athletes are so much more superior than they were 15 years ago," Steve Gilbert said.

Today's contractors work harder than ever studying genetics and applying advanced breeding techniques to produce bucking superstars, keeping better pedigree records and verifying offspring with DNA testing. Artificial insemination is another option and "It seems to be more and more widespread every year," said Jeff Hall, an animal sciences professor at Utah State University. Owners of many of rodeos' top retired bulls sell semen.

One example keeps the Gilberts using natural breeding. When Ricky retired, vets thought he was impotent. But after some time away from the rodeo circuit, Ricky sired more than 100 calves before he died.

Colorado State professor Dorian Garrick, a breeding and genetics specialist, pointed out that the biggest obstacle in streamlining the rodeo-breeding industry is record keeping. Detailed data, like the kind he uses to analyze beef cattle, would help breeders achieve the desired results.

Meticulous pedigree records are something Cyndi Gilbert has used to her advantage especially on the mothers' side. If daddy bucked, junior likely would as well, so the theory went.

By tracking both lines, breeders can get closer to that perfect blend of kick and spin -- and get a higher percentage of offspring who acquire mom's and pop's rankness.

"It's more important to have the cow than to have the bull," Cyndi Gilbert said. "The mother of Mr. USA, essentially all of her line has bucked."

To the rodeo novice, the sport -- especially the roughstock (bucking) events -- has a certain simplicity. Hang on 'til the horn blows. Only, it's not that simple.

During each ride, cowboy and animal are judged equally. Stock is drawn on a random basis. So, great rides -- 90 points or more -- are a combination of pairing a great bull with a great rider.

Just last month in Reno, Nev., bull rider Matt Austin scored a 91 on Werewolf and an 88.5 on Joe Hopper and took home \$32,900 for his 16 seconds of work.

That doesn't always translate to bigger paychecks for the contractors. Contractors provide stock to a rodeo for a flat fee except at a few prestigious events like the PRCA's tour finales and the NFR where animals can earn performance bonuses.

"It's not a real lucrative business," Cyndi Gilbert said. The Gilberts are in an enviable position among contractors. Cyndi Gilbert still practices law and Steve Gilbert runs a handful of other businesses, mostly industrial hauling and leasing companies. Without needing rodeo to pay the bills like many of their fellow contractors, the Gilberts can limit their travel, rest their animals and strive to raise elite stock.

"The rodeo was supposed to be a hobby for all of us," Cyndi Gilbert said. "It wasn't supposed to engulf our entire life."

Instead of 20-plus rodeos a year, Diamond G now works about eight PRCA rodeos a year. Their current schedule and financial situation allows the Gilberts to bask in the success of their animals without the headaches of nonstop travel.

"You've been gone a month by the time you get back," Steve Gilbert said. "You're wore out, the truck's wore out and the horses and bulls are wore out."

Instead, bulls like Mr. USA keep a lighter schedule. He's only competed five times in 2004, scoring 93 and 95 the two times he was ridden. The rest of the time he's back in Toquerville, trying to sire the next Mr. USA.

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