

September 02, 2007

Setting The Bar With Bulls

By Morris Workman



Out Of The Chute
Photo by M. Workman

Cyndi Gilbert leaves the chutes after Friday's PCBRA bull riding event at the CasaBlanca Event Center. Gilbert does "flanking" in the chutes with bulls she owns, a job which involves holding the bull's "pull flank," a fleece-covered rope and leather strap which wraps around the bull's flanks. When it's time to open the gate, the flanker pulls the rope on the 2,000 pound animal, which entices the bull to buck.

While watching professional bull riders, whether live or on television, you'll occasionally see a particularly slender cowboy working on the hindquarters of the bulls in the chute, doing a job called "flanking."

If you look closely, you might realize that this cowboy is out of the ordinary, if not out of place.

You would be half right.

Because that cowboy is actually a woman.

Mesquite resident Cyndi Gilbert is the only female professional flanking handler on the pro rodeo circuit.

She is certainly out of the ordinary.

But working the bulls is definitely her place.

While the others in the chute area are helping the cowboy prep for the ride, Gilbert has the dangerous job of hanging on to a “pull flank” and occasionally reaching out to swat the bull on the butt to get him active and out of the chute.

The pull flank is a rope and leather apparatus covered in fleece that wraps around the bull’s abdomen.

Since that is one of the more sensitive areas on the thick-skinned animal, the pull flank is used as a training device to let the bull know it’s showtime.

“I call it ‘Mother’s Love Tap,’” the attractive 49-year-old handler said on Friday.

She explained that the technique, which has been a part of rodeo bull riding for decades, in no way harms the animals.

“These animals are incredibly expensive,” Gilbert said.

She would know.

One of the bulls she has bred and raised is White Magic, a five-year-old which has been described by Justin McBride as one of the two toughest bulls on the circuit today.

McBride is one of the top professional bull riders in the world.

White Magic threw him in less than two seconds.

Gilbert explained that she and her husband were offered a million dollars for the animal because of his bucking ability and his superior breeding lines.

She has been breeding and raising rodeo stock for nearly 20 years with her husband, developer and entrepreneur Steve Gilbert.

The couple owns the Diamond G ranch in Toquerville, which features more than 300 bulls used by the Professional Cowboy Bull Riding Association, the Professional Bull Riding circuit, the National Rodeo Finals, and several other professional and amateur rodeo organizations.

Gilbert also bred and raised Mr. USA, which was named one of the top bulls in 2005, and set an Arena record during the 2005 National Finals Rodeo.

While it’s amazing enough to find a woman doing a tough man’s job, her story gets better.

On the weekends, she flanks bulls, and has been spotted on TV while working some of the most prestigious rodeo events in the country.

During the week, she is a corporate attorney who practices in Utah.

She flies between her home in Mesquite and one in Toquerville, UT on her husband's helicopter, which can occasionally be seen landing on a private helipad behind their gorgeous home in Vista Del Monte, a Mesquite PUD that Steve developed.

Here longtime marriage to Steve is a unique story as well.

Among his many talents, he is also a former bull rider, bareback rider, and even did a stint as a rodeo clown, protecting other riders by distracting bulls and putting himself between the angry bovines and downed cowboys.

"I didn't know when I married Steve that he was a cowboy," Gilbert recalls. "At the time, I thought all cowboys were drunken bums."

That's because Gilbert grew up in a different world after being raised outside of Cedar City, where she studied to be a concert pianist.

"I had no interest in being dirty," she said.

Later, as an attorney, she became more accustomed to diamonds and furs, two things she still enjoys.

She met her future husband in the course of a legal proceeding, unaware that he had cowboy blood in his veins.

Soon after their wedding, Steve took Cyndi to her first rodeo.

While at that event, she learned of his bull riding past.

Since then, after nearly two decades of raising competitive bulls and spending hundreds of hours at rodeo events, she has changed her opinion of cowboys.

"Steve is one of the most brilliant men I've ever met."

It's a remarkable statement from a woman who spends a lot of her time in the presence of high-powered lawyers, business professionals, and incredibly smart people.

In fact, current Mesquite mayor Susan Holecheck was once Cyndi's paralegal.

It's also a testament to her husband, who has exhibited incredible business savvy and enjoyed enormous financial success, in spite of the fact that he never made it past the seventh grade in school.

And in spite of all the corporate success, Steve can still be found on the back of a horse, as he was during this weekend's rodeo in Mesquite where he worked in the arena to help direct and corral bulls after each cowboy's ride.

While her opinion of cowboys has changed, Cyndi still likes fine jewelry and fashion.

"I hate being filthy, hate being covered in manure," she said, wiping the dirt and mud from the sleeve of her white shirt following Friday's PCBRA rodeo at the CasaBlanca Event Center.

However, she loves raising bulls.

"I didn't think I'd get so connected to bulls," she said. "They're not just commodities to us, they're like family. Those animals have personalities. I have trouble giving them up."

While the hectic rodeo schedule and busy legal schedule combine to create a near-frantic pace, Cyndi still makes time for her family and to talk to rodeo fans.

Best of all, whether conversing with fellow lawyers or hanging out with cowboys in the chute, she is the same likeable person who simply trades her Rolex for a cowboy hat every weekend.