



Lasso at the ready

September 11, 2019

Josh Valdez, who works in materials management at the Laboratory, sits on his well-trained horse, one gloved hand on the reins while the other grasps a rope ready to be deployed. Valdez looks over at a metal chute that contains his quarry, a large steer. On the other side of this chute is his roping partner, who in turn looks over and gives Valdez a quick nod.

At Valdez's command, the chute's door flies open and the steer breaks out running. Seconds later, Josh sprints his horse forward and lassos the steer's horns or neck, tightening the other end of the rope against the saddle's horn. Valdez then uses his horse to turn the steer slightly sideways, enough so that the animal kicks up his hind legs. That's when his partner who comes from the other side launches his own rope, catching the steer's kicking legs.

"Team roping is the one true team competition at a rodeo," explains Valdez. "It requires close cooperation and timing between two ropers and their horses. The goal of team roping is to catch a steer in the quickest time possible."

Although amateur and professional rodeos feature team roping as a sport, the skills learned to rope and control cattle remain an integral part of ranch life. "Team roping started back in the day when cowboys needed to catch steers either to treat injuries or to brand their hides," says Valdez. "Large steers are much too tough to handle for one person, so that's why two ropers and two horses are used."

Valdez was 14 years old when he started participating in team roping. "My uncles were team ropers, and I learned the basics from them. As I got older and started to participate in the rodeo circuit, I picked up more techniques and skills from professional team ropers across the southwest."

A handful of seconds

The success of a team-roping pair comes down to precise timing, both with each other and with their corresponding horses.

"I remember when my parents bought me my first team-roping horse," says Josh with a laugh. "He was a real bronco, undisciplined, and it made it hard to learn the basics of team roping. Still, I learned a lot from that experience—it really takes a well-trained horse, one that does things automatically, for you to be at your best as a roper. Your horse is your closest team member—you rely on him to do his job so you can do yours."

Team-roping pairs spend long hours perfecting timing from start to finish. For example, when a steer is released from the chute, the animal is given a few-second head start.

A timer is used to restrain both ropers from moving until it goes off. If a rider “jumps the gun” before the timer goes off, the team is assessed a five-second penalty.

“Timing is also more than just minimizing time,” Josh says. “For example, my job as a ‘header’ is to catch the steer by the horns or neck. I then use my horse to turn it slightly, so that the steer kicks up both his rear legs. At that moment, my partner, known as a ‘heeler,’ must rope both of those legs. If he gets just one, then we are assessed a 5-second penalty. So, I must time the turn—known as a good handle—so that both heels go up and my partner must time his arrival precisely so he can lasso both hind legs.”

The winner of a team-roping competition is the team who can lasso and control a steer in the shortest possible time. “I’ve seen runs as short as four seconds with no penalties,” says Josh. “Now that’s smoking fast.”

A family affair

Although Josh enjoys the competition in rodeo team roping, he finds that what really keeps him getting better in the sport is that his entire family is involved.

“It’s really a family affair,” he notes. “Every weekend, we’re on the road transporting our horses and gear, and it can be a long haul, but when we get there it’s more than worth it. You get to see your friends. During the day you get the barbecue going and spend time talking about horses and roping. Then you get some training time in before the event either that afternoon or evening.”

Now a veteran of team-roping competitions, Josh really enjoys watching his family participate in such events. “I haven’t done as many competitions this year so that I can focus on my son who’s really blossomed in the sport. My goal is to have him qualify for the Junior National Finals Rodeo, which this year will be held in Las Vegas, Nevada. It’s great to see the countless hours of practice finally paying off for him.”

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