

IT'S ALMOST THE MIRROR IMAGE OF its professional counterpart, and appropriately so. Witness the cavernous expanse of a beckoning arena, the unblinking glare of overhead lights or blazing sunshine, the wavering din of an often-fickle crowd, the thrumming reverberations of hooves both feral and tame. All are very much the same. The spontaneous whoops of triumph and yelps of frustration are the same, as are the faces contorted with fierce concentration and the calloused fingers engaged in skillful manipulation of taut, sweat-slick leather and rope. On the sidelines, loved ones and friends suspend their breathing with the same dizzying degree of apprehension and hope, afraid to watch—but more afraid not to.

Such is the world of the National High School Rodeo Association's National High School Finals Rodeo, where events so closely emulate those of professional calibre that the uninitiated observer would be hard-pressed to tell the difference. NHSFR, where the citizens and leaders of tomorrow meet in the ultimate contest of horsemanship and sportsmanship: competing against each other, against the clock, and against the oppressive tide of an outside society too quick to dismiss its young people as unruly, unmotivated, and unkempt.

The budding adults of the NHSRA do much to dispel those images. And through the scope of their rodeo experiences, many even succeed in acquiring an appreciation for the simplest elements of life—exhibiting a level of maturity that belies their impressionable ages.



BY ANNE LANG
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NORM E. CLASEN

YOUNG GLORY

*Riding high with
the teenage stars of
rodeo's NHSRA*



TANYA MCKINNON IS ONE OF THOSE KIDS. THE 18-YEAR OLD FROM RANDOLPH, Utah (population 550) doesn't view life through the eyes of a typical teenager. During her reign as 1992 National High School Rodeo Queen, Tanya saw more of America than most folks see in a lifetime. A lot of rural kids her age would emerge from that experience with grandiose plans to sever their small-town ties and fly off to test their new wings in an enticing, sophisticated metropolis such as Houston or Denver. Not Tanya. She wants to stay put in Randolph, thanks just the same.

"I got to see a lot more of the U.S. than I would have if I hadn't been chosen as queen, and I was really fortunate to have that opportunity," Tanya admits. "But it opened my eyes, too, and made me appreciate the way I grew up. I've decided I'm lucky to come from a small town."

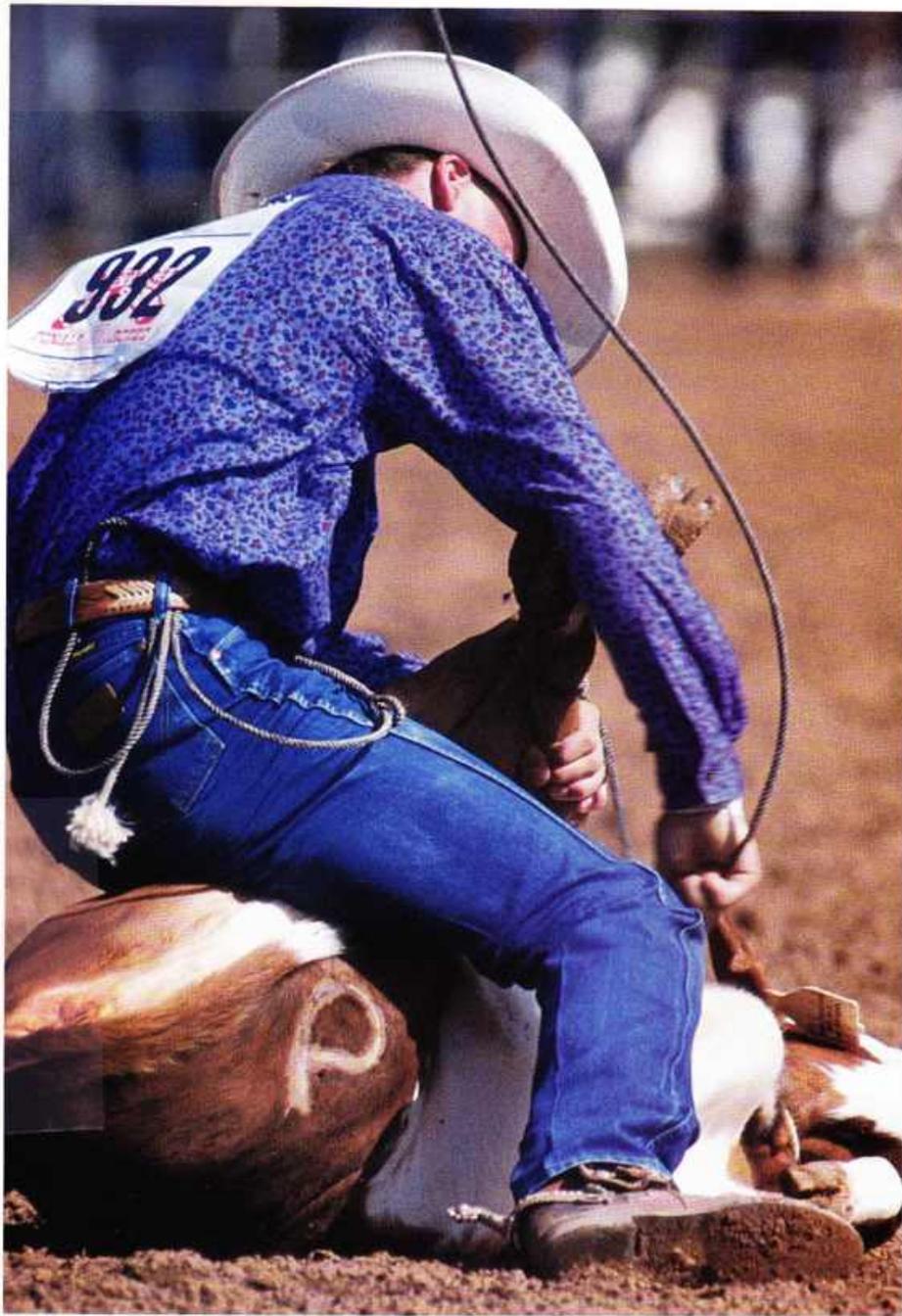
Tanya, who will study pre-veterinary science at Utah State University (for which she's earned several scholarships), has her sights set on returning home eventually to set up a large-animal practice near her family's ranch. But she vows that whatever successes she might find in life, the early influence of the NHSRA will always be included in her frame of reference. "It's the sport I'll always carry in my heart," she declares. "I love to go out and tell people about it, to get kids excited about rodeo and the Western way of life."

The particular way of life that defines a full commitment to high school rodeo wouldn't appeal to just anybody. Every weekend throughout the school season, all across the country, entire families cheerfully pile into campers, recreational vehicles, vans, trucks—anything with a trailer hitch and wheels capable of getting their contestants to various high school rodeos. All year long, in 37 U.S. states and three Canadian provinces, the youngsters compete at local, regional, and state levels, trying to qualify for the NHSRA's National High School Finals Rodeo held in July.

The hectic schedule calls for parents to sacrifice long stretches of their own lives—and often significant portions of their money. It means students must find their own ways to juggle school, homework, rodeo practice, and chores, leaving



Young rodeo riders use stamina, grit, and sheer horsemanship to gain a berth in the finals—and a chance at a college scholarship.



not much time for a social life—but not much time for mischief, either.

“The types of kids who are involved in high school rodeo are generally good kids,” explains NHSRA general manager Kent Sturman. “They’re not into drugs or gangs. Their activities keep them out of trouble and teach them a great deal about responsibility. They learn good life skills.”

Those were just the results Texas schools superintendent Claude Williams hoped for more than four decades ago. In 1949, concerned that too many rural students were dropping out of high school, he established the NHSRA as a way to keep youths interested and involved in school, incorporating the

rodeo they loved in a program that also required scholastic consistency.

Ever since, the NHSFR has been an annual event at a growing number of locations. Now billed as the world’s largest rodeo, it boasts an annual average of 1,300 contestants—freshmen through seniors, with a maximum age limit of 20. Events closely parallel those found in national rodeos. The boys compete in bareback, saddle bronc, and bull riding; calf roping, steer wrestling, team roping, and cutting. Girls’ events include barrel racing, pole bending, breakaway roping, goat tying, team roping, cutting, and the queen contest. At each state finals rodeo, the top four qualifiers in each event pro-

ceed to the nationals.

Ty Murray, who at age 23 already has earned four consecutive world-champion all-around cowboy titles, is one of the many accomplished NHSRA graduates about whom the organization’s leaders like to boast. Just as well, because the soft-spoken Murray isn’t inclined to brag on himself. But ask him what he thinks about the benefits of high school rodeo, and you’ve got a willing spokesman.

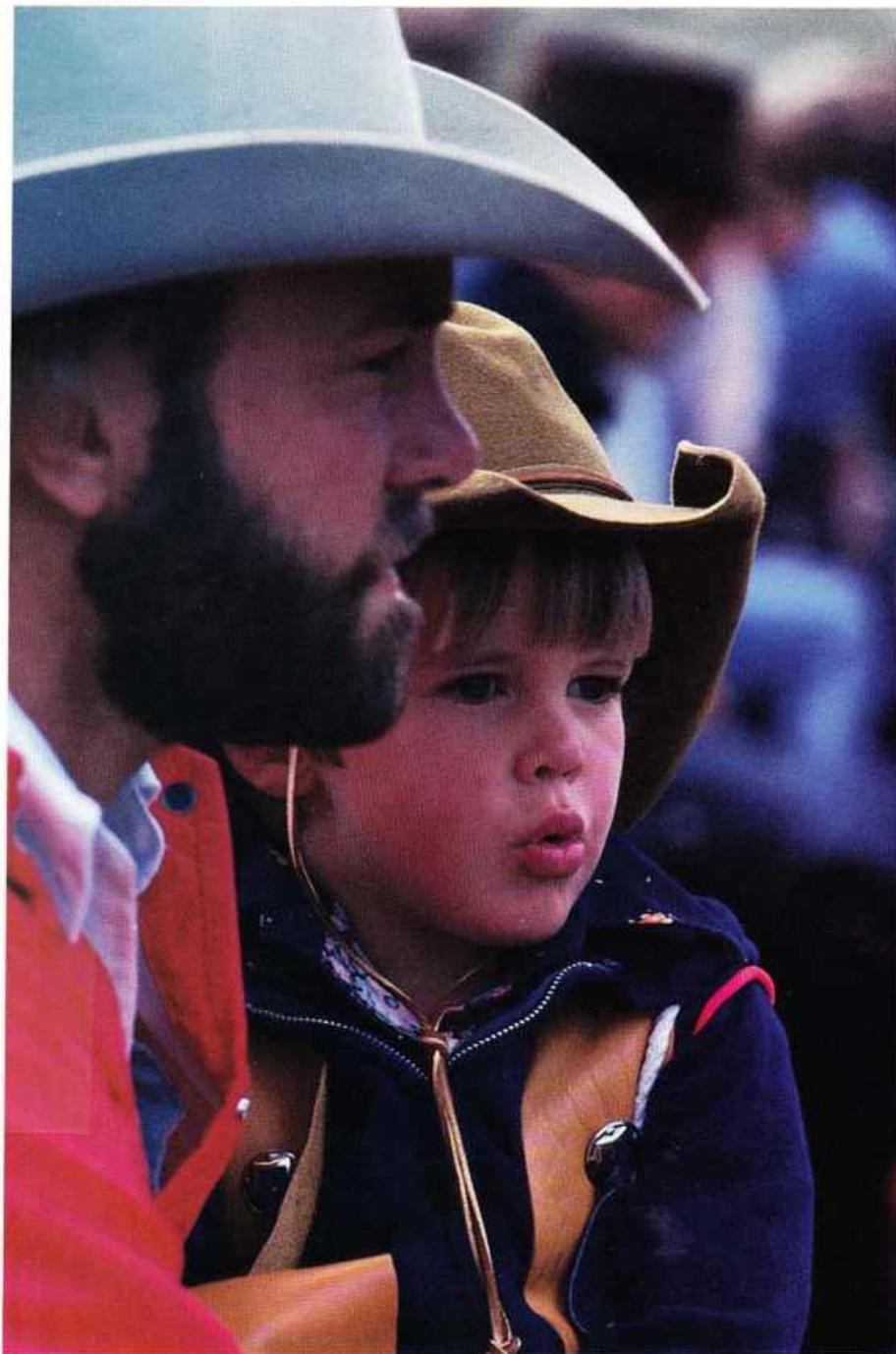
“It’s such a great program,” says Murray, who won the national high school bareback riding title and was NHSFR all-around champion at the age of 17. “It always kept me busy with something I was interested in, and it was something I could do with my family. I was real fortunate to be able to go to all those rodeos with my Mom and Dad, and they had to work hard to be able to take me. But it was worth it. When I look back, one of the greatest things I had when I was growing up was the sport itself.”

Murray, who also was a member of the gymnastics team at his Glendale, Arizona high school, was so committed to rodeo competition that he never attended a single gymnastics meet. The meets always seemed to conflict with rodeo weekends, and Murray—who used his gymnastics training to enhance his riding strength and flexibility—wasn’t about to miss a rodeo.

“Looking back now,” Murray muses, “I wish I’d skipped at least one rodeo in order to compete in a gymnastics meet. But back then you couldn’t have talked me into it. Rodeo was what I wanted to do. And it was a whole weekend thing—not like playing football, for instance, where you go in and two hours later the game is over.”

Murray was among the fortunate NHSRA participants whose outstanding skills led to a professional rodeo career. Others on the seemingly endless list include Cody Custer, Bobby Harris, Robert Etbauer, Mark and Marvin Garrett, Craig Latham, and Roy Cooper. But for many more kids, the organization helps prepare them for adult lives in which non-rodeo pursuits will pay the rent.

High school rodeo students can qualify for state-level scholarships all year long, and also may earn NHSFR scholarships available to those who advance to the national finals. Funds and donations from



individuals, corporations, organizations, and auctions provide about \$100,000 in national scholarship money annually.

Half of the scholarships go to the top-10 finishers in each of the 13 events; the other half are awarded to students chosen on the basis of scholastic merit, personal interviews, and level of need. The money can be applied toward any type of continuing education—trade school, junior college, university, farrier school, beautician academy, or the like.

"What this experience instills in these kids is that education is such a vital part of their lives," says Pat Litton, who heads up the national scholarship committee. "It impresses on them that through

rodeo they can further their education, and through education they can further their ability to become better citizens. This organization tells them there's someone who's interested in giving them the opportunity to improve their lives."

Litton says one of the best parts of her job is getting to know the students personally. "During the interview process, they're so honest, and their enthusiasm is so evident," she says warmly. "Some of these kids need the scholarships so badly—it's the only way they can further their education.

"You know," she continues, "these days it seems like the only things you hear about young people are the negatives. But

we're proud of our rodeo kids. We've got some great ones coming along. And they've got the support of Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa, sisters, and brothers. Family is so important in a young person's life, and that's why you don't see the rodeo kids getting into trouble."

Trouble is an alien concept to Stephanie Marquiss, 18, of Gillette, Wyoming, host location of the 1993 NHSFR. An honor student throughout high school, she will apply the scholarship she earned as 1991 Queen toward pre-law studies at Montana State University. While she fantasizes about becoming a big-city attorney, the ranch-raised teenager says she also wants to find a way to stay involved in the sport she loves.

"Rodeo's a big part of my life, and I hope it always will be," says Stephanie. "High school rodeo's made me more willing to meet new people, to take the initiative, and to take more chances. And I feel very lucky to live in a state that thrives on rodeo."

At the national level, Stephanie says she's met "a lot of really nice friends, a close group I'll probably stay in touch with forever." While social and scholastic gains certainly rank high in the NHSRA experience, the kids also develop special bonds with their animals—particularly the horses who act as their willing partners in so many events.

Senior Chad Miller of Nebraska credits his grey gelding, Rio, for carrying him to a sixth-place finish in the 1992 national calf-roping finals. Tanya McKinnon describes her 10-year-old barrel-racing mare, Lady, as "my little sweetheart, just one of the family—she's even in the family pictures. She'll do anything for me, and she always tries her best, no matter what."

Ray Spence, NHSRA's current adult president, is an Atlanta stockbroker whose two children, now in their 20s, participated in state and national high school rodeo. Spence feels that his own children's sense of responsibility for their animals, cultivated at the family-owned ranch, contributed significantly to the way they now conduct their adult lives.

"I never had a minute's trouble with either of my kids," he reflects. "But you wonder what might have happened if they hadn't had such a great outlet. They

CONTINUED ON PAGE 149

YOUNG GLORY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 126

were extremely busy taking care of their animals and practicing, and they also learned a lot about team spirit."

That spirit, Spence says, shines just as brightly in today's national teams as it did back then. "The kids watch out for each other," he explains. "There's not a lot of 'I' or 'me' in this sport, and that's an excellent life experience."

Tanya McKinnon supports that notion from the contestant's perspective. "The 45 Utah kids go into the nationals sort of knowing each other from state competition," she explains. "But we come out as brothers and sisters. Now I know somebody from just about every town in the state. If I was driving somewhere and had problems, all I'd have to do is get out my address book and I'd have the name of somebody there. It's unreal knowing that many people in one state," she marvels. "It's an advantage you don't get from any other sport."

Ray Spence finds it impossible to summarize all the good things about NHSRA without emphasizing the impact the scholastic aspect has had on so many young lives. "All the state directors have success stories where we know kids who stayed in high school just because of the rodeo scholarships," he says. "We've had students destined to become high school dropouts who went on to college. We're all pretty proud of those kids. The program does work."

Ty Murray, whose NHSFR scholarships helped send him through Odessa College in Texas, wholeheartedly agrees. "Not everybody who rodeos is going to be able to go on and make a living at it," Murray acknowledges. "So through the scholarship program, a guy can get a good education and have fun along the way.

"I promote high school rodeo because I truly believe in it," Murray enthusiastically concludes. "Giving kids something to try to get better at not only keeps them out of trouble, it teaches them important lessons, too. I learned that if you don't practice and try to excel at rodeo, it's like anything else in life: You're probably not going to do very good." 

*For information on the NHSRA, write:
11178 N. Huron, #7, Denver, CO
80234. Or call (303) 452-0820.*