



Black rodeo provides entertainment, history lesson

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The only African-American touring rodeo in the country is making a stop in the Southeast Valley on Feb. 10, bringing a history lesson about how Black cowboys helped shape the West.

Lu Vason, founder and president of the Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo, said he attended his first rodeo in Wyoming in 1977. Vason said he realized a rodeo is an event that could shed light on an important part of Black history that was absent from movies, television and history books.

"I had never seen a rodeo," said Vason, who found his first experience exciting, but lacking one significant component. "The only thing that was missing, after watching the rodeo, was Black cowboys and cowgirls."

Vason, who started his career producing concerts, said he took his enthusiasm from the experience and an idea to produce an all-Black rodeo on the road when he learned that an African-American cowboy named Bill Pickett had invented one of the events seen in every rodeo today.

"He invented the art of bulldogging, and that's one of the mainstays of all rodeos," said Vason. "He's the only one that you can actually trace back to a rodeo event and it's origin."

Pickett's invention is better known as steer wrestling in rodeo arenas today.

Steer wrestling is an event in which a cowboy rides his horse alongside a steer, leaps from his horse at the right moment to grab the steer by the horns and attempts to wrestle him to the ground.

Vason said Pickett, who was born in 1870, worked on a ranch where he watched the cow dogs successfully herding loose steers, calves and bulls. He said Pickett noticed that the cow dogs gained control of the animals by biting the tender part of their upper lip.

"He saw that and he tried it and it worked," Vason said. "It became an entertainment factor for the ranch he worked for."

Although steer wrestling has been modified over the years, Vason said there are still a few that compete in the Black rodeo who choose to do it the Bill Pickett way.

"It's what we call the bite-'em style of bulldogging," said Vason who is in his 23rd year with the professional rodeo that draws anywhere from 75 to 125 competitors.

The Feb. 10 rodeo will also help commemorate the celebration of Black History Month.

The rodeo, which made its last Valley appearance in 2003, will be contested at Rawhide at Wild Horse Pass on the Gila River Reservation.

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Events will include bull doggin', bareback riding, tie-down roping, ladies steer undecorating, barrel racing, pony express relay racing and bull riding.