

# MemphisFlyer

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## In the Saddle

By PRESTON LAUTERBACH

The "greatest show on dirt" stampedes into town Saturday. The Bill Pickett Rodeo -- named for the inventor of bulldoggin', a high-risk technique for capturing stray cattle by leaping from horseback onto the steer -- celebrates the black cowboys and cowgirls who blazed trails into what was then the New West, only to be left out of that chapter of the history books.

Aside from the fact that all participants, from bulldoggers to the rodeo clowns and announcer are African Americans, the Bill Pickett is not unlike other rodeos. Participants with cool handles like Billy Ray Thunder, Gladstone Valentine, and Sedgwick Haynes, from across the country -- okay, mostly just Texas and Oklahoma -- compete in bareback, tie-down ropin', bulldogging (of course), and bull-riding events. Cowgirls, including champion Kaneshia Jackson, vie for the championships of steer undecorating and barrel racing.

Lu Vason founded the organization 23 years ago, and since he's the man who assembled the 1970s singing group the Pointer Sisters, we know he wouldn't steer you wrong. Though a few black pioneers had broken the color barrier in rodeo's professional circuit, Vason learned that they had been cheated out of winnings and relegated to the undercard despite possessing ample talent. Today, the Bill Pickett stops in 13 cities and has kicked off its season in Memphis in each of the past 10 years. "My charge is to eliminate the myth that there were no blacks in the Old West," Vason says.

Bill Pickett Rodeo, 1:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m., Saturday, February 3rd, AgriCenter Showplace Arena, 105 S. Germantown Rd. (877-9999; 487-4722), \$10 in advance, \$15 at the gate

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