



# Features

## Rough Riding

Black cowboys saddle up for rodeo and defy others' expectations

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The Press-Enterprise

Reuben Haynes spends his weekdays spraying hydro seed on barren landscapes in and around Riverside, wrestling with heavy equipment.

At the end of the day, he goes home and wrestles with his two young kids.

And on weekends, he wrestles 600-pound steers, sliding from the saddle of a running horse, wrapping his arms around a set of horns, driving the heels of his cowboy boots into the soft dirt of the rodeo arena, and turning the struggling animal headfirst into the dusty ground.

If he is lucky.

While he lives in the middle of the city of Riverside, Haynes, 31, is all country at heart, as any good rodeo cowboy would be. And, like many other rodeo cowboys, he is also black.

While it may not square with the popular image of the cowboy, there is a long history of black cowboys going back to the beginning of American ranching. In southern states, such as Texas, slaves were often used to work cattle. After emancipation, they continued doing the work they knew. Certain areas in Texas and Oklahoma still boast plenty of black ranchers and cowboys.

The all-black Bill Pickett Rodeo -- named after the first famous black rodeo rider -- makes its annual stop in Los Angeles in two weeks, part of its national circuit of events. Haynes, along with a number of other black cowboys and cowgirls from the Inland Empire, plans to be there.

Some of the Bill Pickett riders compete in only the black rodeos. Haynes wrestles steers in open Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association events as well.

In the PRCA rodeos, Haynes says, "Sometimes you feel you're out of place. You're the only (black cowboy), especially in California. I have been to places where it could have been a problem. But I let it slide off of me. My mom was white and my dad, he's black. So, it doesn't hurt my feelings."



William Wilson Lewis III / The Press-Enterprise

Kevin McKinney, of Los Angeles, participates in the Bull Doggin' Event at last year's Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo in Burbank.

Originally from Houston, Haynes' father is still an active rodeo cowboy and has been one for as long as Haynes can remember.

"My dad always had a job," he says, "but (rodeos) brought us more money than the job did."

## Early Start

Photos

By the time he was 8, Haynes says he was roping calves.

[The Bill Pickett Rodeo](#)

"Then I started steer wrestling and I got pretty good at it," he says.

He was 14 or 15 when he wrestled his first rodeo steer. His father had entered him in the event without telling him. It was a rocky first outing.

"It took longer than it should have," he says, "but I got it throwed down."

He now competes in 30 to 40 rodeos a year and has been making the Bill Pickett circuit for the last decade. He recently placed fourth in the black rodeo's event in San Diego and will wrestle steers in Oakland and Bakersfield before the show hits Los Angeles. Last year, he traveled to Washington, D.C., for the Bill Pickett National Championships, but was disappointed in his performance.

He wasn't very happy about his fourth-place finish in San Diego either, but it's the best he's done in a while.

Many of the cowboys who compete in the Bill Pickett events say they earn enough prize money to pay for their expenses and then some, even when it means traveling thousands of miles. It's not just a hobby, they say. It's a lifestyle.

"This is something I've always wanted to do," said Reginald Vance, sitting next to his motor home in the preparation area behind the arena at last year's Los Angeles rodeo. "This is part of me. It's part of us, my family, my children, cousins. It's always been a part of my family."

Vance, 41, of Perris, learned to ride working on his grandfather's ranch in Texas during the summers of his youth. But it wasn't until he turned 30 that he became serious about bareback and bull riding. He attended a rodeo school in Arizona to sharpen his skills.

## 'Ambassador for Rodeo'

Wearing the badge of a cowboy is an honor, Vance said, particularly as a black man.

"I love being an ambassador for rodeo," he said. "I will hear a lot of children say, 'Are you a real cowboy?' I love telling them, 'Sure.' I like kids to see it doesn't have to do with color."

But at the Bill Pickett Rodeo, it is about color. Organizers say the events are intended to promote and sustain the history of blacks in the West. The show begins with a tribute to key contributions by blacks helping to settle the West.

Vance said the rodeo is also about community.

"It's like a big family reunion," he said. "It's more friendly and fun as well as competitive. It's more homey."

The atmosphere is unique. Beyond the horse stables, participants lounged in folding chairs next to big cab trucks and RVs. Horses, either led or ridden, moved on the periphery along with kids on bicycles while speakers blared hip-hop and rap music. Cowboys and cowgirls in western wear mixed with young people dressed in the loose-fitting gangsta fashion.

Most participants say they appreciate the exclusiveness of the black rodeo. But some black cowboys think such events are detrimental.

Jim Brooks cowboied in Montana and Wyoming during the 1960s and 1970s and earned a lifetime PRCA card. Brooks said he never competed in a black rodeo and never would.

"It's not right," Brooks said. "It's racism. America means inclusive. If you're not included, it's anti-American."

Brooks said he doesn't think even Bill Pickett would approve.

"Bill Pickett never worked in an all-black rodeo," he said. "Every rodeo he went to there was Tom Mix and Will Rogers. There was no all-black association then. I think somebody came up with that to make a few bucks. I think that's what it's all about. If they want to feature black cowboys that's fine. But open it up so anybody that wants to enter it can enter it."

## **Educational Tool**

Others feel just as strongly about maintaining the events.

Eddie Bird, of Beaumont, Texas, is a two-time Bill Pickett champion. He said the black rodeo is an important educational tool.

"I don't think it's so much that whites don't know, but a lot of African-Americans don't know (about black cowboys)," he said. "They don't put out enough in the history classes about black cowboys and ranch hands."

Even younger participants, such as bull rider Dameon Tilley, 20, of Murrieta, say their generation is largely ignorant of blacks in western history. A student at Riverside Community College, Tilley said most of his friends don't know he rides rodeo.

"Because I'm African-American," Tilley said, "they would never have a clue."

Part of a rodeoing family, Tilley began riding young steers when he was 13.

"Bull riding is a rush to me," he said. "It's like a baby having a piece of candy."

Neysha Harden, 36, of Romoland, is Tilley's mother. She was pregnant at the time of last year's Los Angeles rodeo and unable to compete. This year she will participate in barrel racing and steer undecorating.

Sitting out last year's event, she said, "has been the hardest thing I've ever had to do." Her affinity for the black rodeo has kept her coming back. She said she feels more welcome there. With open rodeos, she said, she never knows what kind of reception she'll receive.

"I've been to some rodeos where people were really, really friendly," she said. "And I've been to ones where it was like, 'What are you doing here?'"

"It's amazing to other people that there are black people that ride horses," she added, noting that that's one reason she feels the Bill Pickett circuit is so important.

"It lets everybody know that we are here," she said. "That it's not just a white thing."