

Fair pays tribute to black rodeo history

By **Sylvia Mendoza**
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DEL MAR – Tiphani Carter was the image of the American cowgirl, decked out in red, white and blue with fringe on her sleeves and carrying an American flag as she rode her horse into the Del Mar Arena at the San Diego County Fair yesterday.

It was part of the opening ceremonies for the Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo and the first time the nation's only touring black rodeo has come to the fair.

Dubbed "The Greatest Show on Dirt," the rodeo features more than 70 African-American athletes in events such as barrel racing, bulldogging and calf roping.

It also pays tribute to African-American cowboys and cowgirls of today and throughout history, including Bill Pickett, the first black cowboy inducted into the Rodeo Hall of Fame in 1971.

"Black cowboys and cowgirls helped shape the West, but there's so little knowledge of them that black rodeo is still a new and special entity," said Lu Vason, event founder and president.

Vason fell in love with rodeo when he visited Cheyenne Frontier Days and then learned of Pickett through the Black American West Museum of History in Denver in the early 1980s. Now in its 21st year, the Pickett rodeo makes about 12 stops a year.

Vason said it's important to incorporate history into the rodeo. Participating cowboys and cowgirls perform as Pony Express riders, Buffalo Soldiers and others.

Tiphani's mother, Carolyn Carter, 46, of Oklahoma City, has been part of the Pickett rodeo for 21 years.

She finds teaching others about black cowboys' contributions and history one of the most meaningful things she does.

She also passed on her love of barrel racing to her daughter and granddaughter, Justini Carter, 6. Both compete in the event.

"It gave Tiphani something to do beyond traditional high school sports and taught her responsibility and a chance to travel," Carolyn Carter said.

Tiphani Carter, 26, said she hopes to follow in the footsteps of her mother, who is a nurse.

"Mom is my motivation. It's an amazing feeling, doing something good for our community. This is a big part of our heritage."

To keep the spirit of rodeo alive, the Bill Pickett Scholarship Fund has been established for high school and college students interested in pursuing careers in rodeo or animal science.

The rodeo was part of the first San Diego Gospel Festival and Soul of San Diego Day at the fair yesterday. The rodeo continues today with shows at the arena at 1 and 5 p.m. The event is free with fair admission.

■ Sylvia Mendoza is a freelance writer in Encinitas.

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