

## Lassoing a legacy

**The country's only touring black rodeo, now in its 19th year, makes its way to the Florida State Fairgrounds.**

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TAMPA -- Inside the rodeo ring, the dust kicked up by fleeing calves and falling cowboys settled.

The crowd at the 19th annual Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo, the nation's only touring black rodeo, quieted.

And atop a closed gate at the Florida State Fairgrounds a group of men in chambray shirts and silver-tipped boots warily eyed the beast they hoped to best: a 2,000-pound bull named Bad to the Bone.

"They all wait for this one," said Lu Vason, the rodeo's promoter and founder.

Some of the 500 spectators had never before seen a black cowboy or cowgirl, let alone the 70 who competed Saturday and Sunday, organizers said.

"We're trying to set a legacy," Vason said. "Eliminate the myth in the movies and the history books that there were no black cowboys."

In fact, they were messengers with the Pony Express, they rode with Jesse James and they scouted for Lewis and Clark, enthusiasts said.

The Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo was named after the first African-American cowboy inducted into the Rodeo Cowboy Hall of Fame. Born in 1870, Pickett is credited as the creator of bull dogging -- an event in which a cowboy on horseback rides after a steer, leaps off, grabs it by the horns and wrestles it to the ground.

These days, the black cowboys and cowgirls are teachers, lawyers, mechanics and entrepreneurs, said competitor Samuel Perry, 68.

After 31 years on the circuit, Perry has done everything from bull riding to barrel racing, though his specialty is calf roping.

"I was ranch-raised on a big spread in Williston, Fla.," he said. "Cattle and hay is how I make my living . . . 2,000 acres."

In between, there are the rodeos -- about 60 a year, he said. Usually only a few African-Americans compete.

The Bill Pickett Invitational has a special place on his list, said Perry.

"I enjoy doing it. These people, I know 90 percent of them."

That includes his three sons, two of whom competed against him Saturday.

"I want to beat him bad," the rancher said, his hat tipped toward his son Bob, 40.

"Likewise," countered the younger Perry with a grin.

The Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo debuted in 1984. Now, more than 120,000 people travel to the event annually. It premiered over the weekend to a mix of the faithful and the curious.

"You don't see many black cowboys in Florida," said competitor Paul Wallace, 37, a Williston farmer and a rodeo veteran of 20 years. "This will help -- the exposure. The more you have the more interest you'll spark."

Most black cowboys and cowgirls are from Texas and Oklahoma, said Vason. But growing numbers are appearing in California, Washington, D.C., and Georgia.

In the stands, waiting for the bull riding to begin, spectator Wayne Miller of Clearwater was sporting the look.

"I like the boots, the hats, the belts," said Miller, 48. "I have a lot of Western apparel, but this is my first rodeo."

So far it had been a whirl of bucking broncos and galloping riders, a mix of cowry shells and cowboy hats, country music and Lift Every Voice and Sing, the black national anthem.

And when it was all over, after Bad to the Bone blasted from his gate flinging riders to the ground until tamed, Miller was a newfound rodeo fan -- but not a future cowboy.

"I wouldn't attempt it," he said, smiling. "It's too rough for me, but it's a lot of fun to watch."

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