

Rodeo's Best & Brightest

# Battle in Vegas

The Wrangler® Pro Tour Finale put the spotlight on early contenders for 2002 world titles.



Justin Andrade's bid for the Cup earned him a concussion, despite a picture-perfect effort.

**T**RIVIA question: Who was the last cowboy from the Northeast to contend for a pro-rodeo world championship?\*

You'll have to get out your rodeo-history books and go back nearly 20 years for the answer. (Hint: He was from the Bronx, New York.) That's how rare it is to find a true contender from the rodeo-poor states of the Northeast.

But this season, eastern rodeo fans have a new reason to cheer in the form of New Jersey's humble hulk, bulldogger Joey Bell Jr. Despite coming from Tony Soprano's home state, the 29-year-old downplays his East Coast origins, pointing out that he attended Panhandle State College in Oklahoma on a rodeo scholarship before turning pro.

Still, Bell's Cinderella story is so irresistible that you'd likely be hearing it even if the cowboy hadn't just won the biggest rodeo event so far this season — the Wrangler® Pro Tour Finale held at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in June. After knocking around in professional rodeo since high school, Bell caught fire this year and was leading the world standings long before his triumphant coming-out party at the \$425,000 Finale, the concluding event to the 10-rodeo winter tour. His successes this season — plus his unusual birthplace — had already captured the attention of both *Sports Illustrated* and *USA Today*, along with dozens of newspapers and television and radio programs. Bell's is a good story.

Without the advantage of a community of bulldoggers to study, Bell learned his trade from his father, who mastered the sport by watching videotapes of 1980 world champ Butch Myers.

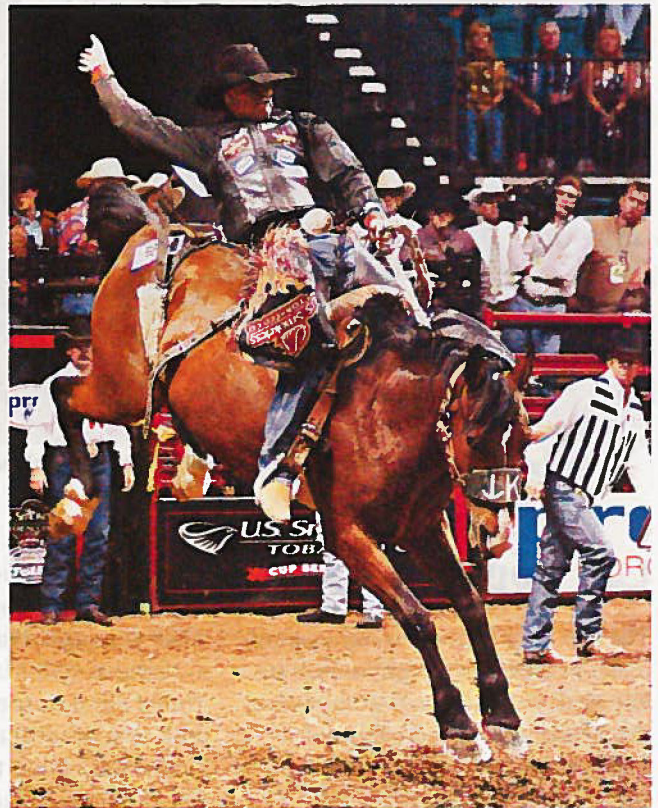
In a way, then, Butch Myers not only fostered the careers of his two boys, Rope and Cash, but of their new traveling partner and buddy — Bell. Indeed, in an ironic twist of fate, Bell now finds himself competing with and sharing hotels with Myers' sons — and so far, at least, he's beating Myers' offspring at their own game.

"I guess you could say things have come full-circle," Bell said of his relationship with the Myers family.

Rather than regretting that he ever made that tape, Butch Myers is glad for Bell's success. "I like it because it kinda proves itself," Myers said.

The Finale proved a good measure of Bell's talent and consistency. Bell put on quite a show in Las Vegas, winning the first round in a scorching 3.7 seconds, splitting the semifinal victory three ways with Colorado's Kyle Hughes and Wyoming's Randy Suhn with times of 3.8 seconds each, then sealing the deal with a 4-second time in the final.

Notably, it was Cash Myers who captured second overall, dropping his final steer in 5.5 seconds. As Bell took his victory lap, the crowd embraced their newfound favorite with a standing ovation. According to Bell, who



**Two-event phenomenon Jesse Bail put the pressure on the world-title race with a win at Las Vegas.**

plied his trade at a tiny weekend rodeo at the historic Cowtown Arena in New Jersey before stepping up to the big leagues, he never expected to come so far, so fast.

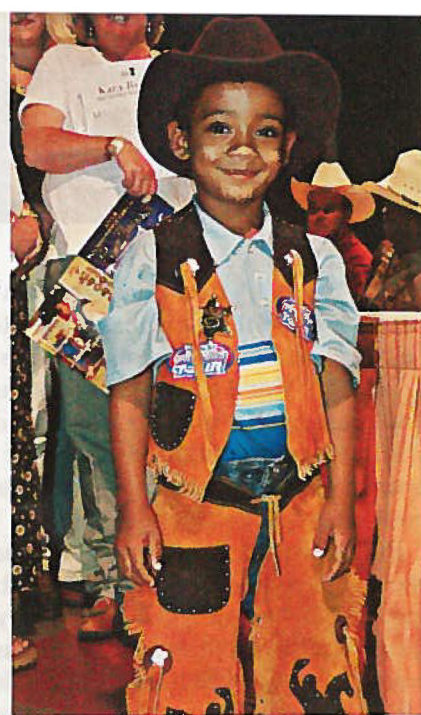
"The odds of winning some money here were really high," said Bell, one of 12 competitors in the steer-wrestling event. "There was a lot of money to take a run at, and it was spread pretty evenly throughout the (four) rounds. But even if I hadn't won a nickel, I'd have had a good time here. It was a great event."

The first Pro Tour Finale took place two years ago in Las Vegas; since then, a second Finale event was added in Dallas, with a third Finale event to be added next year. These mid-season rodeos are second only to the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo in prestige, and the formula is much the same: Take the best cowboys and barrel racers and the best livestock in the rodeo business and turn them out in an indoor arena with a state-of-the-art sound system and explosive entertainment.

But the Tour Finales differ in that they have a sudden-death format not seen at the NFR: After two initial rounds, in which all 12 contestants in each event compete, the top eight riders advance to the semifinals. Then, the top four riders in each event move ahead to the sudden-death round, where the winner emerges as the champion. ➔



**Cody Hancock connected for 95 points and the win with Mr. USA.**



**Fan Kayre Smith working the MGM autograph line.**

## Calf Roping

The Pro Tour formula is one custom-made to create overnight sensations like Bell, but also one that showcases the steady nerves and talents of superstar athletes such as five-time world champion calf roper Fred Whitfield. After knocking at the door at last year's winter Tour Finale, the Cypress, Texas, cowboy rebounded from near defeat at this year's Finale to take the winner's crystal cup. In the semifinals, Whitfield got hung up in his stirrup as he dismounted, took a misstep and stumbled, then got tangled in his rope as he went to his calf. He still somehow managed to tie his calf down in 10.1 seconds to squeak into the final round.

But with the slate wiped clean, Whitfield blew the field away with a record-smashing 7.3-second run — the fastest time in the short history of the Pro Tour Cup championship.

"I was runner-up to Joe Beaver here last year," Whitfield said. "It just goes to show you, if you give a guy enough chances, he might just catch some luck."

## Bull Riding

To steal a phrase from Yogi Berra, it seemed like déjà vu all over again for bull rider Cody Hancock,

the 2000 Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association world champ. One year ago, Hancock drew the notorious bull Mr. USA in the final round of the Finale, riding the bull to a breathtaking 94 points and establishing the record mark for the competition. But the ride wasn't without its price: Hancock was cold-cocked by the bull after the whistle sounded and ended up with 50 stitches in his boyish face.

At the 2002 Finale, Hancock unbelievably ended up drawing that same bull on the final night. This time the rider bested the bull for a record-breaking 95 points and walked away unscathed.

"That bull has been real good to me," Hancock said, unconsciously reaching up to touch the big white scar on his chin. "I won the rodeo here last year on him, then I drew him at the NFR and was 96 points, and then I came back to win tonight."

"Cyndi Gilbert owns the bull, and she's pretty proud of him," he continued. "She was glad I drew Mr. USA, and I was darn sure glad she brought him here."

Just before the rodeo, Hancock had spent the day visiting Las Vegas firefighters, and when he was invited to climb a 150-foot truck ladder, the Arizona cowboy didn't hesitate. But he admits that

when he was nearly at the ladder's top rung and it began swaying in the wind, his stomach got a little queasy. And you thought bull riders were fearless.

## Barrel Racing

Charmayne James took the Finale's barrel-racing championship with a 13.59-second run on her horse Cruiser. Although that time was equal to that of final-round rider Dolores Toole, James won the tie-breaker based on her faster time in the semifinal round.

With winnings of just more than \$25,000 in Las Vegas, James is building a war chest toward the world-title battle set to take place at the NFR. Her commanding lead in the world standings at mid-season has already marked her as the favorite going into the championship-determining rodeo.

## Saddle Bronc

Another world-title contender, rough-stock ace Jesse Bail of Eagle Butte, S.D., took a big step forward with his victory in the saddle bronc riding. Bail clinched the win in Vegas with an 89-point effort aboard Comotion of the Beutler & Son Rodeo Co. ⚡

# Winter Pro Tour Finale Results

June 13-15, 2002, Las Vegas, Nev.

## Bareback riding:

### Final round:

1. Forest Bramwell (Pagosa Springs, Colo.), 89 points on Kesler Rodeo's Pack Rat Dip, \$10,675.
2. Scott Montague (Wall, S.D.), 88, \$7,050.

**Finale Champion:** Forest Bramwell, \$14,200.

## Steer wrestling:

### Final round:

1. Joey Bell Jr., (Salem, N.J.), 4.0 seconds, \$10,675.
2. Cash Myers, (Athens, Texas), 5.5, \$7,050.

**Finale Champion:** Joey Bell Jr., \$23,013.

## Team roping:

**Final round:** (tie) Jason Handy (Billings, Mont.)/Randon Adams, (Logandale, Nev.) and Speed Williams, (Jacksonville, Fla.)/Rich Skelton, (Llano, Texas), 4.2 seconds, \$8,862 each.

**Finale Champions:** Jason Handy/Randon Adams, \$13,562.

## Saddle bronc riding:

### Final round:

1. Jesse Bail, (Camp Crook, S.D.), 89 points on Beutler and Son Rodeo's Comotion, \$10,675.
2. Rod Hay, (Wildwood, Alberta), 84, \$7,050.

**Finale Champion:** Jesse Bail, \$18,704.

## Calf roping:

### Final round:

1. Fred Whitfield, (Hockley, Texas), 7.3 seconds, \$10,675.
2. Blair Burk, (Durant, Okla.), 7.5, \$7,050.

**Finale Champion:** Fred Whitfield, \$15,767.

## Barrel racing:

**Final round:** (tie) 1. Charmayne James (Athens, Texas) and Delores Toole, (Manter, Kan.), 13.59 seconds, \$8,862.50 each.

**Finale Champion:** Charmayne James, \$18,263.

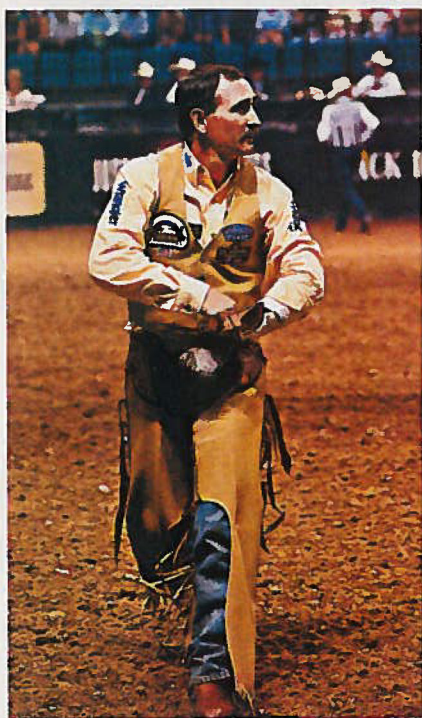
## Bull riding:

### Final round:

1. Cody Hancock, (Taylor, Ariz.), 95 points on Diamond G Rodeo's Mister USA, \$10,675.
2. Vince Stanton, (Weiser, Idaho), 89, \$7,050.

**Finale Champion:** Cody Hancock, \$18,900.

"I got on that same horse at Tucson. He bucked me off before I got done nodding my head," Bail said with a wry smile. "Here, I shortened up on my rein a bit. It made me happy to get my revenge."



With a win in the opener, 40-year-old Clint Corey proved he is bareback's "Iron Man."

The witty yet quiet-spoken cowboy is emerging as a fit successor to now-retired all-around champ Ty Murray. Bail not only won the saddle bronc riding in Las Vegas, he also qualified in the bull riding, but was eliminated prior to the semifinals and blanked at the pay window. But the money he earned in the horse event boosted Bail to second place in the mid-season saddle bronc and all-around world standings.

## Bareback Riding

In other final-round action, bareback rider Forest Bramwell of Pagosa Springs, Colo., scored 89-points on the unfortunately named bronc Pack Rat Dip of the Kesler Rodeo Co. But before he iced down the champagne, Bramwell had to endure a long wait as reigning world champ Lan Lajeunesse of Morgan, Utah, was awarded a reride following the lackluster performance of what was to be his final horse. But Lajeunesse failed to capitalize on the opportunity, and Bramwell was able to celebrate.

His \$17,700 in earnings helped boost Bramwell to the world standings lead in June in the hotly contested bareback riding, which may very well prove to be the most competitive of rodeo's standard events this coming fall.

## Team Roping

Rounding out the rodeo action was the team roping duo of Jason Handy, Billings, Mont., and hometown boy Randon Adams of Logandale, Nev. The pair drew tight in 4.2 seconds to match the time set by five-time world champs Speed Williams and Rick Skelton. The decision to award the crystal to Handy and Adams based on a tie-breaker earned a thundering roar of support from the Las Vegas audience.

(\* For those who are still looking for the answer to the trivia question, the answer is bull rider Bobby Delvecchio.)

Gavin Ehringer, author of the WH book *Rodeo Legends*, writes our monthly column "Rodeo Arena." 🐾