

Gold-Medal

A Winter Olympic experience like no other.

Article and Photographs by
Gavin Ehringer



Stone's victory lap inspired a standing ovation.

INTERNATIONAL rodeo pitting Team USA against Team Canada provided a great excuse for me to go to the Winter Olympic Games. And I was not alone...everyone from the staff of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association to reporters to the cowboys themselves buzzed about the events they had attended and the tickets they still held for more. And, of course, the pressroom was an active site for Olympic pin trading in the moments that preceded each of the three evening rodeo performances.

With so much going on throughout the greater Salt Lake City area, you'd think a rodeo would garner very little attention. And to some extent that was true. Taking place in suburban Farmington, some 20 miles north of Salt Lake City, the Olympic Command Performance Rodeo was hardly in the thick of the Olympic party.

Nevertheless, it drew packed houses and more than its share of dignitaries, including Utah Senator Oren Hatch, Governor Michael Leavitt, and dignitaries from both the United States Olympic Committee and the International Olympic Committee. One prominent player in the Olympic Games, Salt Lake City Organizing Committee President Mitt Romney even had a family member take part in the rodeo: His wife, Ann, performed in a special "halftime" dressage exhibition in the spanking-new Legacy Arena.

The Command Performance Rodeo was part of the Cultural Olympics, a series of arts and entertainment events held in conjunction with each Olympic Games. Given Utah's western heritage, it was a cinch that rodeo would be included amid such things as a Mormon Tabernacle Choir concert, modern dance performances, and concerts by top touring rock and hip-hop acts.

The '88 Precedent

Olympic Rodeo had its precedent at the Calgary Olympic Games of 1988 when a team from the United States faced off against an underdog team of determined Canadians, mainly from Calgary's home province, Alberta. Of the 80 competitors from the two nations who faced off at the Utah event, only

Rodeo Competition



Left: Blue Stone's Olympic debut was golden. **Below:** Rides like this put Canada's Denny Hay atop the medals podium.



three had also competed in Calgary: bareback rider Darryl Cholach, saddle bronc rider Guy Shapka, and former saddle bronc ace turned team roper, Mel Coleman, all of Canada.

Each held fond memories of the first event, particularly Shapka. Nearly retired from active competition, Shapka, 38, made an extra effort to take part in qualifying events for the special Command Performance Rodeo.

"To make two of these competitions, when I thought that the last would truly be my last, that makes this one really special," said Shapka. "I knew it would be the last of my career."

"In the Calgary rodeo I was battling with the flu. So I didn't really get to enjoy the atmosphere. But here, I can be a tourist — something we rodeo cowboys don't often get to do. So, I feel pretty darn lucky and grateful to be here."

Cholach remembered best the wonder of his first

Winter Games. "At Calgary, we were right downtown by the hockey arena and the ice skating rink. Walk out the door, and you were rubbing shoulders with world-class Olympic athletes," he said.

The Security Gauntlet

In the post Sept. 11 Olympics, shoulder-rubbing was a bit more difficult. At every venue spectators passed through a security gauntlet of police officers, Olympic volunteers, and metal detectors, which made casual strolling difficult. That was even the case at the rodeo, where helicopters buzzed overhead, police checked



Lan Lajeunesse had looked forward to his "hometown" rodeo all year.



Darryl Cholach, proud Canadian.

cars for valid tickets, and FBI agents and bomb-sniffing dogs patrolled the arena grandstand.

One reason for such high security was a particularly vigilant anti-rodeo protest by the animal activist group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. This year's Olympic torchbearers were preceded throughout most of the country by a PETA-funded van featuring three 60-inch television screens showing alleged animal abuse at rodeos. The van parked in front of the Legacy Center each night, and roughly 60 protestors stood along the roadside, picketing the event and chanting anti-rodeo slogans at the arriving carloads of spectators.

But the rodeo cowboys and fans took the extra security and the needling protestors in stride. Their payoff was a spectacular rodeo worthy of the Olympic Games. Notably, the rodeo was marred by nary a single animal injury requiring veterinary care.

The Medal Winners

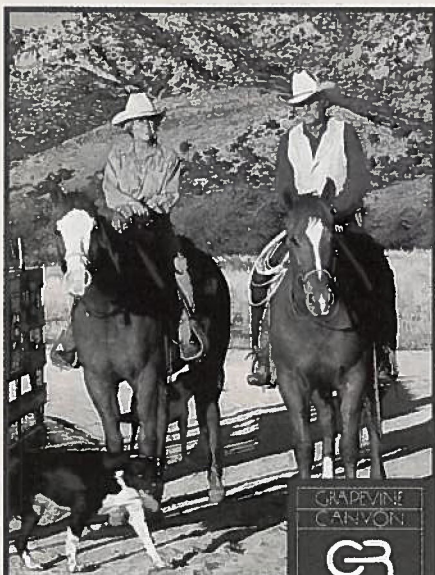
Although American athletes at the official Olympic Games were on their way to winning more medals than in any previous winter games, it was evident that the big winners in Utah were the Canadians. Our sister nation produced the wonderful skating couple David Pelletier and Jamie Sale, whose graciousness in both defeat and ultimate victory earned them unforgettable recognition. And people stood in line for hours to buy Canadian-made, red-white-and-blue berets.

Canada's triumphant showing at the Winter Games might have been predicted by Canadian success at the special rodeo. At the Calgary Games, Team Canada produced but one gold-medal event-winner among the seven standard rodeo events. The fortunes of the Maple Leaf cowboys proved much greater in Utah.

Canada has long been a powerhouse in saddle bronc riding, so a victory by three-time Canadian saddle bronc champ Denny Hay came as no surprise to many. With a 92-point ride the final night, Hay outrode both Team USA captain Tom Reeves, the reigning world champion saddle bronc rider, and five-time champion bronc rider Dan Mortensen to claim the top spot on the podium.

Amid waving Maple Leaf flags, Hay said of the victory, "The thing about this rodeo is, you get up there and claim your medal in front of a bunch of Canadian fans, and you feel like you are riding for Canada. That's not a feeling you get too often in this sport."

Many rodeo fans think Molly Powell, like many Canadians who ply their trade in the United States, is from the States. Born in Alberta, Powell now makes her home in Texas, and so appears at the National Finals Rodeo as a Texan. But she wore Canadian red-and-white in Utah and claimed another gold for her native country. ➡



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Powell narrowly defeated two-time world champ Sherry Cervi in the finals to score the second of what was to become a Canadian hat trick. Powell's time of 14.96 seconds was a mere two-hundredths of a second faster than Cervi's.

Perhaps it wasn't the biggest upset of the Olympics — an Australian short-track speed skater laid claim to that — but this might have been a close second. Canadian team ropers Murray Linthicum and Rocky Dallyn topped Team USA's Speed Williams and Rich Skelton, who have together won five consecutive world titles. The Canadian duo dropped the hammer in 5.1 seconds, and Williams and Skelton tied for second place with fellow Americans Clay Tryan and Caleb Twisselman in the time of 5.2.

Rope Myers of Texas, the reigning

world champion steer wrestler, spoke for all the Olympic rodeo champs when he looked at his gold medal and said, "As a cowboy, you don't dream of winning an Olympic medal. You grow up dreaming of winning a world championship or winning the average at the National Finals Rodeo. But once you've done that, this is pretty cool."

Myers placed second in the final round to teammate Jeff Babek, but won the award based on his cumulative point total from all three rounds. Babek claimed the bronze medal, and Canadian team captain Lee Graves won the silver.

American's swept the podium positions in the calf roping, an event that is typically dominated by warm-weather cowboys. Jerome Schneeberger, Ponca City, Okla.,



Canadian fans proudly flew Maple Leafs — some on their faces.

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took the gold medal by winning the final go-round in the time of 7.6 seconds to bring his point total to 70. A tie-breaker decided the next two medal placings, as Blair Burk of Durant, Okla., and Ricky Hyde, Mt. Vernon, Ark., ended up with identical point totals. Hyde won the first round, while Burk won the second; neither cowboy placed among the top three in the final round. Burk ended up with the silver based on the tie-breaker formula, while Hyde had to content himself with bronze.

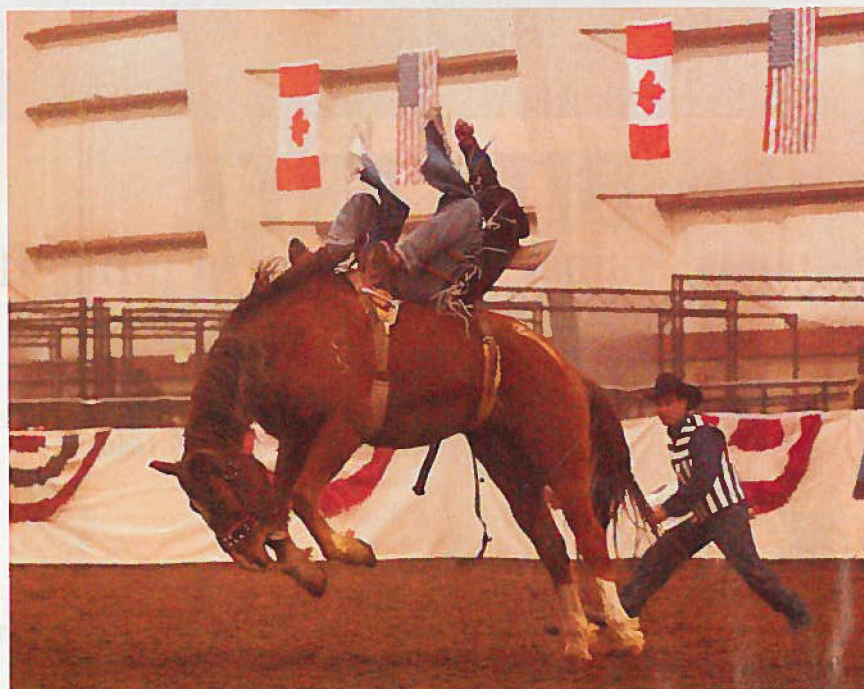
This was the Utah Olympics so, of course, Utah athletes were particularly beloved by the crowds. At the rodeo two Utah natives gave fans reason to cheer. Lan Lajeunesse of nearby Morgan handily won the bareback riding, putting together an astounding string of three 90-plus point rides. Many top riders go their

entire careers without a single 90-pointer, making Lajeunesse's triumph all the more sweet.

"It's been a great week. This has been the ultimate in rodeo for me," said the two-time world champion. "This is probably the first and only Olympic rodeo I will ever go to, so I was tickled to ride so well."

Also claiming gold for Utah was reigning world champion bull rider Blue Stone, whose home in Odgen is mere minutes from the arena. Stone got tapped off on his final bull to win the closing round with a whopping 96-point score. After the ride, the cowboy got a standing ovation from the packed crowd of Americans. Fittingly, the bull was also from Utah, and the win brought that familiar chant heard throughout the Olympic Winter Games: USA! USA! USA!

The bull's name? Mr. U-S-A, of course. 🐮



Lan Lajeunesse pleased the Olympic judges, who gave him three 90-plus scores.



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