

Poly Royal Rodeo returns this weekend, putting animal abuse on full display | Opinion

BY MARK HAWTHORNE SPECIAL TO THE SAN LUIS OBISPO TRIBUNE

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Cal Poly Rodeo Team member Leland King competes in the Poly Royal Rodeo on Saturday, April 15, 2023. The 81st annual Poly Royal Rodeo was held Friday and Saturday, April 14 and 15, 2023, at the Cotton Rosser Rodeo Complex in San Luis Obispo. LAURA DICKINSON
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The Cal Poly Royal Rodeo will soon be returning. With it, we are reminded of the horse who [died at last year's event](#) after sustaining a spinal injury. For those of us who vigorously oppose the mistreatment of animals, rodeos serve as a reminder that horses, calves, bulls, steers, goats and sheep are sentient beings, not objects to be used for entertainment.

People with a vested interest in rodeos may tell you the animals they use are “treated like world-class athletes,” “pampered by their owners” and that “anyone who loves animals should support this sport.”

Yet the results of rodeo events tell a very different story.

In a 2022 investigation, the [Los Angeles Times](#) documented more than 125 animal injuries in California rodeos since 2001. Injuries include crushed skulls, shattered legs, gored flanks, broken necks and snapped spines.

OPINION

For rodeo fans, such abuse doesn't diminish their appetite for spectacles like bull riding, team roping and steer wrestling. These rodeo apologists will say such events are a tradition or that it's all in good fun. But it's certainly not fun for the animals. In steer wrestling, for example, a steer is forced to run at top speed while a contestant leaps from their horse, grabs the horns of the steer and twists his neck until he collapses.

The claim that rodeos are a tradition is equally false.

“I grew up on a cattle ranch in North Dakota and spent eight years as a ranch veterinarian there,” says former bareback bronc rider [Peggy Larson](#). “My ranch clients did not ride bulls, speed rope calves or make their expensive horses buck. Rodeo is not American ‘tradition.’”

Rodeo supporters also defend their events by saying they no longer use (or at least limit the use of) cruel implements like electric prods, metal spurs and bucking straps (a claim many animal advocates dispute). But one of the most abusive rodeo tools is unquestionably on full display: the rope. The cruelest rodeo competitions are the [roping events](#), including team roping, steer tripping and calf roping, the latter of which involves forcing a calf to run at full speed, only to be stopped short — or “clotheslined” — with a choking rope around the neck, snapping back a calf's head before slamming them to the ground and tying their legs together.

A study published last year in the international animal welfare journal [Animals](#) found that calf roping causes “distress, fear and the risk of injuries or even death throughout the various stages of the event.”

Sadly, we'll probably never know exactly how many animals perish in service of rodeos. But these so-called “world-class athletes” certainly don't retire to a sanctuary or get a hero's burial once they die. No, they end up at a slaughterhouse, and it's there that the physical damage they've suffered is tragically laid bare. The late [Dr. C.G. Haber](#), a veterinarian with 30 years of experience as a USDA meat inspector, observed that by the time animals used in rodeos reached the slaughterhouse, they have endured massive internal injuries.

“I have seen cattle so extensively bruised that the only areas in which the skin was attached was the head, neck, legs and belly. I have seen animals with six to eight ribs broken from the spine and at times puncturing the lungs.”

Rodeo lovers argue that since these events are legal, animal advocates should mind their own business. Rodeos may be legal in SLO County, but they are exempt from the federal Animal Welfare Act, which provides for the humane treatment of animals used in other forms of commerce and exhibition.

Rodeos are self-regulated — professional rodeos are generally overseen by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, while Cal Poly's rodeo is governed by the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association; both groups permit animals to be confined during transport [for as long as 24 hours](#) without food or water.

Fortunately, society has begun to reevaluate our treatment of animals, and laws protecting them are evolving. As more people learn about these cruelties and speak out, cities, states and countries are passing bans on fur, puppy mills, animal testing, cat declawing, circuses that use animals and rodeos.

Every compassionate person should take a critical look at rodeos and recognize that these inhumane performances have no place in an enlightened society.

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