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Copy: Equestrian Diary (take on Stampede changes) + Linda Lavis tack sale (breast cancer angle) + Jesse Cook at the Stampede and thrilled with that....

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This year sees significant alterations to the Stampede format, and as always with change, there are strong opinions floating around local Cochrane ranchers and cowboys on this *we're-almost- there* week, of the black or white variety of straight talking 'yes' or 'no' approval.

Changes began to happen around October of last year when it was decided by the Calgary Stampede Committee members - after suggestions by Rodeo Manager Robin Burwash - that the six main events (bareback, saddlebronc, bull riders, barrel racing, steer wrestling and tie-down roping) become purely "invitational, by qualification", with numbers restricted to 20 riders in each.

"That's right," confirms Barry McGrath, Rodeo Administrator spokesman, "those 20 will include the top ten from the NFR (National Finals Rodeo held in November in Las Vegas), the top five from the Canadian finals in Edmonton (the CFR), and then out of the remaining five there's one position for the champion at the Rodeo Royale. The other four are chosen by a Selection Committee, where riders are asked to send in resumes of their performances and career."

"The bull-riders," he adds, "are a bit different, as we work closely with the PBR (Professional Bull Riders). Here we have the top four from the Canadian finals (CFR), the top six from the NFR, plus the top six from the PBR ratings. That leaves four spots, an invitation going to the Rodeo Royale champion with the remainder being invited contestants.

"Rodeo," Barry McGrath finishes, "is very traditional. We're trying to do something that really promotes and showcases our talent." Winnings throughout the Stampede, at daily events and the final Sunday, will not count as contributed earnings towards either CFR or NFR standings, and the Stampede will in fact be operating outside the CPRA umbrella (Canadian Professional Rodeo Association).

"They're trying to make the equivalent of a Superbowl," remarks retired competitor Dave Shields, who began rodeoing aged 8 with steer riding before progressing to 17 years on the professional circuit in bareback bronc events (it's evident he adores and misses competing. "Fun when you're traveling," he

enthuses, “a blast with other people in one spot, a camaraderie, and a total adrenalin rush; every day counts as new day. Mind, the older you get,” he grins outrageously, “the better you were.”). Shields firmly believes, “it’s about time to pay the professional cowboys the equivalent of professional athletes, they’re rodeo athletes these days.”

“It could, “ he feels, “be the beginning of a new series. Promoters of American events will definitely be up here watching.” Of the short, elite format, Shields believes “statistics at other sporting events proves two to 2 ½ hours is what works for fans, how long they’re comfortable with sitting.”

Lynn McLeod is a member of the Calgary Stampede Rodeo Committee, and also office manager for the Canadian PBR (www.pbrcanada.com), the sanctioning body and vital link between promoters, sponsors and bull-riders (who have their own set of standings, finals being held at the Calgary Saddledome November 24th-26th , with Friday already on sold-out capacity).

“The Stampede this year is history in the making,” she remarks, “it’s a great thing and totally new, with \$1.6 million total in prize money. The final Sunday with \$1 million makes it the richest one-day rodeo in the world, with \$600,000 [distributed] throughout the other nine days. It’s like any profession,” she nods, “where the cream rises to the top, a showcase of our top athletes.” The World Final PBR, held at Las Vegas, she adds, has \$3.2 million up for prize money.

“Fans didn’t have a chance to know their heroes, meet them,” Rodeo Manager Robin Burwash explains, “they’d [cowboy contestants] be on the road 200 days a year, onto over 160 head a season. Traditionally they’d roll into Calgary half an hour before competing, ride and be out on the road again to another rodeo. Fans never knew when they’d be riding either, because of the draw system. This way there’s nightly awards, four days in a row their heroes will be definitely riding, and there’s much more public interaction.”

“We’re trying to treat them much more as professional athletes,” he continues, “there’s medical insurance, no entry fees plus we’re paying expenses money, and I believe this is going to change the way rodeo is done.”

In recent years the traditional opening afternoon event has been the Wild Cow Milking event, an outrageously chaotic event that, according to one long-term competitor, “had the spectators who’d only just sat down standing back up again cheering.” Mid-way through the day’s rodeo programme the Wild Horse Race (a team of three people and one reluctant horse, an event won no less than five times by Dave Shields - once with the impossible time of six seconds) was another feature that included non-pro ranchers and cowboys, often of local Alberta communities, and a good reason for rural connections (and local media) to trail into Calgary as avid supporters.

Both these events have been pulled. “They’d previously taken us out of the final Sunday,” Wayne Leask, a former spokesperson for the Wild Horse Race and

Wild Cow contestants Committee, “with us in the equation, the time element possibly ran too long, and perhaps we should have seen this coming.”

“Right now the Stampede definitely want a different direction,” he remarks thoughtfully, “The thing is, these are two heritage (“methods ranchers would have used before there was animal handling equipment”) events – I can remember my dad competing in the 40s at Calgary, perhaps even the 30s – but the only way I can see [our events] coming back is if there are a lot of vocal comments, a lot of letters written in. ”

He pauses and you can feel memories crowding his thoughts. “Stampede,” he concludes wistfully, “was the place you wanted to go, everyone shot for it.”

THE END