The Glory Riders

A day in the life of the Angola Prison Rodeo. Page 15
The beast is huge.

There is an audible groan from the spectators as the animal is released onto the arena floor and stands motionless in the bright October sunshine. The sheer size of the monstrosity is both breathtaking and undeniably appealing, a fascinating example of nature's darker design. But there is more to this malevolence than mere mass and it takes but a moment for the thousands of eyes secluded in the safety of their seats to allow their gaze to fall upon the sparkle that reflects off the sharpened tips of the beast's horn.

The beast has no interest in those behind the wire fence that surrounds the arena. Its attention is focused solely on the dozen or so men scattered about the oval, their feet slowly sinking into the softened dirt and sand. Clad in costumes of striped shirts and denim pants, they will perform their dance of survival as conscripted gladiators armed only with their wits and speed. And as the spectators of this modern Coliseum rise to their feet in anticipation of what is to come, I can't help but wonder what thoughts must be racing through the minds of these men, these warriors of desperation.

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The Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola was created Jan. 1, 1901, when the state resumed control of prisoners leased to private profiteers for the preceding 55 years. Located on 18,000 acres in West Feliciana Parish, some 60 miles northwest of the state capitol in Baton Rouge, the prison currently houses 5,101 inmates. Of this number, about 4,700 will never leave the compound alive.

Violent criminals comprise 87 percent of Angola's population. Almost half of the prison's denizens are serving their time for homicide and 61 percent are under a life sentence. Those serving 20 years or more have an average sentence length of 51.4 years, which means that their earliest release date exceeds their life expectancy. For these men, there is no hope that they will once again enjoy the privileges of what they term a "free person." For these men, life is a numbing daily routine consisting only of work and sleep.

For these men, Angola is forever.

Their one break in the drudgery and sameness of prison life occurs every Sunday in October when the Angola Prison Rodeo is held. First opened to the general public in 1967, "The Wildest Show in the South" has now grown in popularity to the point where film crews from foreign lands show up on a regular basis to document the activities. A new arena with a seating capacity of 7,500 was constructed by inmates this summer — 200 convicts working double shifts built the facility in a span of only two months — and the spectacle is now a far cry from the events of 35 years ago. For the price of admission, a person may now enjoy "a full blown, all-day arts and crafts festival complete with entertainment and food galore."

But it's the rodeo that draws the crowds.

The beast has a name and it is appropriate. No Duty.

It is a name not given, but earned. Any inmate injured by the Brahman bull can anticipate at least a few days of peace in the prison hospital. What would be a terrible and inhumane price to pay on the outside seems a mere nuisance to these men, and no wonder, when you have nothing, what is there to lose?

"When I got here in 1994, it was bad, a fight every day," says Morgan Ezell, the country twang in his voice marking his childhood home as somewhere north of Alexandria. "Now it seems like there's a fight maybe every two or three months. People here are tired ... they just want to go home."

But few of them can, and less than one in five prisoners ever will. Convicted of aggravated burglary, the 32-year-old Ezell is one of the chosen few; he's up for parole May 11, 2003. Today he appears thoughtful, benign, contrite and even pious. It's not uncommon for the convicted men of Angola to discover Jesus after incarceration; Rev. Cain has made religion a priority since his appointment as warden in the mid-90s and the number of Angola residents who claim to be studying the Bible is staggering.

"They broke me, no question about it, they broke me," says Ezell today. "I used to be a wild child, but I found God and changed my life. I've worked hard to do the right thing and now they trust me enough to come over here and talk to you. I just feel real blessed right now."

I wonder if he'll feel that way in an hour. The affable Ezell has been competing in the rodeo since 1995 and has seen No Duty charged and ram a foot-wide, steel pole simply because it was there. The bull weighs almost 3,000 pounds; he is mean and he is stupid, a frighteningly dangerous combination to consider under the best of circumstances, which, for the men of the arena, are certainly not. But the cycle of violence at the Angola Rodeo is never-ending and Morgan Ezell, on his way to salvation and freedom, has his part to play ...

The final 15 miles or so to the penitentiary is traveled over a winding two-lane road. The prison's accessibility is by necessity, restricted, a tactic that sometimes makes it as difficult to get in as it does to get out, especially when there are thousands of rodeo fans en route to what may be the most surrealistic sporting event in the country.

Entrance to Angola is heavily guarded at all times. Corrections officers at the farm number more than 1,800 and many are in evidence this afternoon. From the time you enter the facility, the landscape appears to be one of a Kentucky horse farm with rolling green hills, white fences and attractive lakes. But the serenity quickly gives way to the reality of the guard towers speckled throughout the main compound and the unsmiling faces of the men in blue who man them.

The sunshine and festivities are deceiving and the razor-wire that sits atop the fences at Angola serves as a reality check. This is, after all, a prison where 92 percent of the inmates entered pleas of guilty. Almost half of the population was convicted of some degree of murder and there are 827 convicted rapists here. Another 88 men sit on Death Row awaiting execution by lethal injection.

The trip to Angola is not your typical Sunday drive. Parking for as many as 7,000 visitors is slow and laborious. The fields adjacent to the arena serve as makeshift lots and spectators can expect to have their bags searched — no cameras, no cell-phones, no weapons.

No kidding.

While the paying customers are more or less free to roam the arena grounds — Cain claims that the prison is safer than the streets of Baton Rouge — there are not allowed any contact with the inmate population. Conversely, the media is allowed both cameras and contact, but their movements — even a trip to the restroom — are closely monitored at all times.

Despite protestsations to the contrary, there is some paranoia evident among Angola's ruling class, a reaction perhaps to Daniel Bergner's 1998 book, God of the Rodeo. The author claimed that Cain demanded money in return for allowing Bergner to complete his research. The accusations were responsible for both men being called before Louisiana's Senate Judiciary Committee, where Bergner found no corroboration from either prison employees or inmates. Cain continued as warden while the author went home to New York and that should have been the end of it. But it's not; God of the Rodeo opened wounds at this prison and they've yet to heal.

Some believe that there is a concern among the jailers that an inmate will use the larger crowd as cover in an escape attempt. Not likely, says Cain; they know better than...
to do something like that.

“They wouldn’t run away if they could,” says the warden. “They love the rodeo and they know if they give us any trouble, then I won’t have it next year. Besides, they’re no longer a threat to society so why not let ‘em be king for a day?”

“No, no one’s going to try to escape today.”

But as you leave the arena after the dust has settled over the last event, as you and thousands of other seekers of curiosity wedge your way through the one small exit in the fence that surrounds the sporting facility, turn your attention to the dozen or so guards who are scanning the departing crowd. Even from behind the aviator sunglasses, their concentration is amazing to behold and their focus all but absolute. They’re looking for someone — and it’s not you.

In a better life, Alex Hennis might have been a model. With blonde hair and brightly piercing blue eyes, the 26-year-old may very well have graced the pages of a fashion magazine or found his way into a television sitcom playing the boy next door. Instead, Hennis, Ezell and two other inmates will sit at a metal table and play chicken with a raging bull.

The event is Convict Poker, the offshoot of a competition that’s held on the professional rodeo circuit. Four men sit in folding chairs around a table while a bull is loosed in the arena and the slightest movement is grounds for disqualification. In last year’s finals, Hennis merely turned his head and that was enough to hand the title to Ezell. Of all the events of The Wildwest Show in the South, this is the one that requires ice water for blood and branvado for brains.

You don’t have to be crazy to play, but it probably helps.

“I don’t have my mind on being hurt right now — I got winning on my mind,” says Hennis. “I’d like to send my mom on a vacation cause she works hard. And if it’s not enough for a vacation, then I’d like to get her some work done on her car. She needs that.”

Hey, the rodeo’s like Christmas here.

Hennis, originally from Mississippi, is one of about 350 inmates serving time because of a drug conviction. Like many of the other amateur cowboys, he’ll compete in several events in an effort to earn as much money as possible and well partner with Ezell in the bullfighting event. He continually searches the grandstand in hopes of spotting his mother, but she’s nowhere to be seen. Hennis must be wondering if the car in need of work finally broke down. Loved one or not, the confrontation with the bull won’t wait and both men are silently counting the minutes.

“I don’t have my mind on being hurt right now — I got winning on my mind.”

— Alex Hennis
preparing mentally
for Convict Poker

“Sure, I’m concerned when I’m out there, but I’m not scared,” says Ezell. “Fear will get you hurt. You can tell the guys that have never done this before, you can see it in their eyes. Me, I’m crazy but I’m not stupid.”

To put the event in its proper perspective, imagine yourself making a ski-jump on one of the sport’s most prohibitive mountains with absolutely no practice beforehand. The only training the inmates have ever had is the brief period of time that last year’s competition afforded them. The convicts, amateurs all, are using professional livestock supplied by Circle R Rodeo of Baker, the same outfit that often provides livestock for the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas. It’s a mismatch from the start.

No one will qualify today in either the bareback riding or the bull riding. Eight seconds on the back of one of these animals is a lengthy time for professionals and an eternity for these cowboys. But events like the buddy pick-up, the wild horse race and even the surprisingly violent wild cow milking can be conquered with some regularity. The inmates can, with luck, survive without injury and even win. Against the beast, though, they have no chance.

Ezell must have lost the lottery; his back is to the chute. While the folding chairs have seats to them, the table is no more than a red metal frame. Harry Kersey, whom Ezell claims is the craziest con of them all, Kevin Romero and Hennis complete the foursome. Each man has new gone deadly still, as though a lack of movement will somehow ensure invisibility. Apprehension goes way to determine as each man embraces the conviction that the day and the $200 prize will be his in the end.

Unable to even look one another in the eye for fear of being disqualified, they only stare at their imaginary cards and pray. The violence and suddenness of the attack is stunning. Less than five seconds after being released from its chute, the Brahman lowers its massive head and charges. The table is totally obliterated and the cowboys are scattered like so many weights kept off a shelf. The men and their props are hammered to the ground with such speed and finality that many in the audience never even see it happen. Incredibly, none of the inmates appear seriously hurt and Romero is declared the winner, even though all of them seemed to fly in different directions at the same time.

And as the rodeo clowns help scurry the competitors out of further danger, No Duty circular the...
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arena in triumph, the twisted remains of the table locked in his horns like an obscene trophy. Would his owners mount it above the stable door for him, I wonder?

If the Angola Prison Rodeo means a temporary return to society for its competitors, it also means money. While the annual operating budget for Angola exceeds $82 million, certain items — leisure and otherwise — are purchased through the Inmate Welfare Fund that the rodeo contributed some $400,000 to last year.

Concession sales also pad the fund, as does the 7 percent surcharge that the inmates who take part in the Arts and Crafts Show must pay. The items for sale are strictly convict-crafted and range in quality from amateurish to exquisite. Wallets, belts, religious paintings and jewelry are intriguing but common, while some creations — an intricate truck made of cedar that the artist claims took 840 man-hours to complete — are examples of superb workmanship.

The individual pieces are placed on tables for the visitor to admire and purchase. In many instances, the prospective buyer is invited to haggle with the artist over price, a practice so common that I couldn't help thinking that conversation with a free man or woman must be priceless here, so much so that many of the convicts appeared willing to trade value for words.

But there is a distinct difference between the cowboys of the rodeo and the artisans of the craft show. The inmates who choose to exhibit their individualism in the arena expect only the briefest attention. They are distant warriors and we are comfortable with that.

However, outside on the grounds of the fair, there is little to separate you from the artist whose fragile esteem may depend on your response to his creation. There is no applause out here and no cheering. Even in this comparatively serene setting, many of the inmate craftsmen remain confined and can only gather behind the fence that separates the lifer from the free man to stare intently at every passerby who nears their art; silently willing each person to stop, look and affirm that they actually exist.

They are warriors of a different sort and they are not distant and we are not comfortable. Just a hundred yards away, one of the prison bands on stage belts out a bouncy C&W song; a marked contrast to the reality before us now. Gaze into their faces and you will know perhaps for the first time, the despair and absence of hope that permeates Angola.

"Morale?" intones Cain. "Just look around."

Yes, look around.
Kenny Woodburn Jr. will celebrate his 27th birthday next month. He’ll endure many more here; Woodburn is serving a life sentence for murder in the second degree. But today, he’llatten his bank account by winning both the bull dogging and buddy pick-up events with partner David Creighton.

“My No. 1 motivation is the money,” says Woodburn with a grin. “I have two girlfriends I send money to.”

“My second motivation is being part of society for a day. It boosts me up.”

Woodburn’s appearance and demeanor reflect the rebel — he doesn’t even attempt to hide his infatuation with the bad-boy image — and his words are as flamboyant as his clothing. Where most of the competitors favor a cowboy hat or baseball cap, Woodburn brandishes a bandanna. His denims are duct-taped above the ankles — presumably to keep the pants from flaring — and around one thigh he has tied a “soldier rag,” a piece of cloth that bears a curious resemblance to what William Wallace carried in Braveheart. Woodburn even wears his own spurs that he crafted specifically for the occasion and they are clearly objects of pride.

Like many of his fellow competitors, the rodeo serves as Woodburn’s main source of income. While he admits that his willingness to perform in the arena is solely responsible for getting him out of the fields and “into a good job,” the bragadocio surfaces when he claims that next year when he’s older, perhaps he’ll actually start having to train to keep in shape. Hesitant at first to speak, he has apparently grown to relish the conversation and offers to chat for as long as we like.

If prison is intended to destroy man as an individual, the lesson’s lost on Kenny Woodburn Jr.

The event is titled Guts & Glory and it’s the final and most anticipated competition of the afternoon. Any inmate can enter and then withdraw at any time and there’s good reason for this. Even in prison, machismo can give way to sanity.

The prize that awaits today’s winner is no richer than any other — $200 and a guaranteed spot in the finals on the last Sunday of the month. But unlike the previous events at the Angola Prison Rodeo, the dozen brave souls scattered about the arena floor won’t be asked to bulldog a steer or cling to a bucking bronco. They won’t be asked to milk a cow or mount a horse or even deal an imaginary hand of poker.

Here, a contestant is merely required to exit the arena in possession of a single red chip in order to be a champion.

A chip that, at the moment, lies squarely between the horns of the biggest and meanest bull in God’s creation.

What thoughts indeed? Can they hear the bizarre music that echoes throughout, the ominous riff from the ancient television series, Peter Gunn? Did they sense the crowd’s anticipation and awe when the beast was loosed in the arena, or did their fear instead provide a protective and numbing cloak? What do they think of these reluctant warriors of little choice, when the beast turns its gaze on them?

Many of the men on the floor have never thought better of this insanity. Bravado has surrendered to common sense and most of the contestants have edged their way toward the relative safety of the fence that surrounds the oval. To them, celebrity has surrendered to survival.

Except for one. He has remained quietly in the middle of the arena floor, a black man whose only distinguishing characteristic is the red cap atop his head. While others inch closer toward the wire mesh, he warily stands his ground and waits for the bull to take notice, as he knows it must.

Terry Hawkins, 39, has been here before. Hawkins is a legend in this event and has claimed the chip 14 times since he began competing in 1994. The price of success for Hawkins has been comparatively cheap; a couple of fractured ribs, a gored leg and the usual bruises merely confirm the suspicion that the man actually knows what he’s doing out there.

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Any inmate injured by the bull
No Duty can anticipate at least a few
days of peace in the prison hospital.

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"The secret," says Hawkins, "is to stay in front of the bull and keep a tight circle."

He's had plenty of time to develop this strategy; Hawkins studied the event for nine years before he ever stepped out on the dirt floor. But even the best-laid plans fall on occasion and Hawkins has also been known to take the full brunt of the bull's charge in order to grab the chip.

He is an angry man, this Hawkins; one of some 2,400 convicted murderers in Angola. His visage is stern and hard and completely devoid of fear. Dressed in prison issue — immaculate in the attention given them — Hawkins represents an unwitting paradox. Despite a prison population that is 77 percent African American, he is one of the few black men who actually compete here. He does it for the money, he says, yet his reputation for recklessness and total disregard toward injury is such that one can't help but think that Hawkins is after something more profound than a red chip and paycheck.

The bull has made its first run and most of the contestants have unabashedly found their way to the fence. But Hawkins is still there, in the middle of the ring, waiting. And there comes a moment, solitary and frozen, when man and monster are but strides apart, eyeing one another in absolute stillness as the surreal rhythms of a forgotten theme song echo overhead. The scene is unforgettable and for just a few seconds, I lose track of where I am and why, totally captivated by this most primitive of confrontations.

The moment does not last. Another inmate, John Jones, has taken advantage of the dramatic respite and eased up alongside the other man. The movement triggers a charge from No Duty and Hawkins, his strategy now useless, scrambles out of the way and dives low to avoid the sharp horns, simultaneously reaching for the chip. He misses.

But the beast isn't through. It quickly changes directions and catches Jones with another charge, pins the cowboy between the horns and then gives his head a mighty toss, flipping Jones some eight feet into the air. But the cowboy is lucky; he's come down on the Brahman's back instead of the horns and tumbles to the ground as the bull rumbles away.

Luckier still, Jones has the chip in his hand.

There is a roar from the spectators when they realize that the game has been won, but little fanfare otherwise as the rodeo abruptly comes to an end. And as we begin our departure from the arena and its Wildest Show in the South, I watch as Hawkins walks slowly back to the prisoner's seating area, his head lowered in frustration and disappointment.

But he will be back. They all will, as many times as it takes to feel part of something good again.

Because the simple truth is, they are more like us than not.
Jesse is white, male and 35 years old. Like other men his age, Jesse has a set routine that gets him through life. And at night, when the lights are dimmed, Jesse thinks of what is and what might have been, just as other men do.

In 1990, outside a north Louisiana bar, Jesse shot a man. He was convicted of second-degree attempted murder and sentenced to 25 years in prison, 10 of which he's spent at Angola.

"I seen guys with no experience get runned over and stomped by bulls and horses," he writes. "I seen them get legs and arms broken and neck injuries. One guy even lost a kidney. Rookies get knocked out and hurt. So I made up my mind then, it was not worth the injuries."

My correspondence with Jesse (not his real name) began this past spring when he and another person responded to a letter I had written to an area newspaper. One response came from a prominent local attorney and the other from, of all places, Angola State Penitentiary. Jesse, who served as the inspiration for The Glory Riders, knows a lot of things about life on the inside — and the prison rodeo.

Many of the convicts who've been there for as long as two decades don't even attend the event.

"Security's rough," Jesse writes. "Even if you see someone from the streets you know, you can't holla (speak) — security'll handle you roughly, handcuff you and boot you out."

But the process also works in reverse because some get booted in.

"If an inmate can ride, he might be in working cellblock come rodeo time," Jesse writes. "He might not have days-in (eligibility) to get out of the block but security will pull him out and put him in a dorm (medium security) so he can ride. They want a show, you know, for fans to see."

The rodeo's a means to other ends as well. Inmates hope for attention from important people, perhaps a coveted "trusty" status that might include work with livestock on the prison farm. While everyone works at Angola, there's work, and then there's work. In fact, even those men who've never been near a horse will sign up for the rodeo.

"They're the funny part of the rodeo," Jesse writes. "You can see they're timid. They know they might get stepped on, get some broke ribs or arms. Then they'll go to the hospital, get a duty status and not have to work in the fields. Crazy, huh."

And while some competitors simply crave the attention, others risk themselves for the money and prizes.

"I guess it would have been different if I didn't have any income from home," Jesse writes. "The majority of the guys is in it for the money, 'cause they don't have any."

"But there's some that don't mind taking risk and don't care. They just feel like they're dead already."