Angola inmate Terry Hawkins, lower left, won $100 by grabbing a token from the bull's horns in the Guts & Glory contest at Sunday's Angola Rodeo.

Rodeo brings out the cowboy in city slickers

By BARBARA S. SCHLITCHTMAN
Special to The Advocate

ANGOLA — Inmate cowboy Cliff “Smurf” Bowman thinks the Angola Rodeo's Guts & Glory contest is aptly named. In this popular event, cowboys try to grab a $100 token from between a 2,000-pound bull's horns.

“Guts, sweat and mud, and packed the stands to watch the novice cowboys compete adorned in cowboy boots and hats or football cleats and kneepads,” Bowman said. “If you win Guts & Glory, $100 is a lot of glory.”

Inmates from the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola volunteer to ride and rope every Sunday in October for reasons as varied as the events, but they all have one eye on the prize money.

On Sunday, spectators ignored the rain and mud, and packed the stands to watch the novice cowboys compete adorned in cowboy boots and hats or football cleats and kneepads.

“I won $100 in the bust out and wild horse ride,” said Bowman, a veteran of the rodeo. “Inmates have little income. A regular inmate who works in the field makes $4 cents an hour, so they really want the money.

“Even the inmates with no livestock or horse experience are willing to put their bodies on the line for a $50 win.”

Another reason inmates risk their limbs is the thrill of riding a bucking horse or bull.

“We've seen everything from broken bones to serious injuries like crushed chests,” said Joe Smith, an emergency medical technician. “The bulls are the most dangerous, but they're also the most popular.”

Smith said he attends the rodeo every time he is not working as an EMT because it is “completely different” from any other rodeo. He enjoys the rodeo's quick pace, and the fact that the inmates are not real cowboys and do not know what they are doing.

“We may have inmates from New Orleans who don't know what end of the horse to get on, but they all love it,” said Warden Dwayne McFatter.
Cowboy John Sheehan grew up riding horses, and has competed in the rodeo since 1968. He has only suffered one knee injury and, as an experienced cowboy, he gives the novice cowboys three pieces of advice.

"I tell them, 'always think when you're in the arena; if you're thrown from a bull, find the fence and get to it, and in the wild horse race, hold on to the rope until your rider is on,'" Sheehan said.

In the wild horse race, two cowboys make up a team. One holds on to a rope that's tied to the harness while his partner tries to mount the running horse.

Sheehan's favorite event is the wild cow milking, in which six small cows are released in the arena and the goal is to grab one of them and milk it. He was the wild cow milking champion for two years, and hopes to reclaim his title this year.

The Angola Rodeo is in its 30th year, and is the largest inmate rodeo in North America, McFatter said.

The inmates attribute much of its success to the prison staff and security workers who volunteer time to promote the rodeo.

The rodeo proceeds go to the inmate welfare fund, which pays for items such as sporting equipment and television for the inmates.

"The public has the wrong impression that we have all this great sports equipment and color televisions, but we don't. What we do have is paid for by this fund, not tax money," Bowman said.