Angola inmates, bulls have first Sunday skirmish

Warden Cain: Rodeo brings normalcy

BY MARK F. BONNER
Advocate staff writer

ANGOLA — Through the Tunica Hills, at the end of La. 66, there is an arena where man and beast — corralled behind barriers for reasons poles apart — brutally clash.

To Israel Ducru, a convicted murderer and two-time Angola Prison Rodeo champion, the experience is more than just a test of guts and glory — it is a ritual between a 1,750-pound bull and a 2,000-pound raging bull.

It is an intoxicating moment, he said Saturday from the arena at the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

"It's just you and the animal," Ducru said from the sidelines. At 45, he's retired from the sport.

"You don't hear anything. You don't hear the crowd or the announcer. You black out everything. It's just silence. Nothing matters."

Thousands of spectators filled the grandstand Sunday to watch the bulls toss inmates skyward. With the rodeo scheduled every Sunday in October, people have four more opportunities this month to make the one-hour drive from Baton Rouge to watch the rodeo and browse through hundreds of arts and crafts tables.

Ducru, who is serving a life sentence at Angola, said his days of being bucked from the back of a bull are over.

"Time to let some of these young guys have a win," Ducru said, as he tapped the hard soil of the arena with his boot.

"They are going to have a rough day," he said, laughing as he looked at the first-timers sitting by the bull chute.

In 1997, Levisette, an inmate from the Jefferson Parish West Bank community of Terrytown, wasn't nervous about getting in the arena with a bull — he was worried about his family.

"I'm a little frustrated being in here, knowing I can't go home to help, but I put my faith in God that it will all work out," Levisette said of the effect of hurricanes Katrina and Rita on his family.

"My family said they were safe. I know they are OK," he added.

Sixty percent of Angola's inmate population is from the New Orleans area, prison officials said Sunday.

As Warden Burt Cain watched "The Wildest Show in the South," he sympathized with those inmates who have families in the areas devastated by the hurricanes.

"This rodeo is the first normal day we have had since Katrina," Cain said. "Many of their families were displaced, but so were they. They had to give up their beds to all the inmates who came here from the affected regions."

At one point, the prison housed more than 1,800 displaced inmates from Jefferson, Orleans, Terrebonne, St. Bernard and Calcasieu parishes, prison spokesman Cathy Fontenot said.

"We even had women prisoners here for the first time since 1961," Fontenot said.

Cain said that with the women being housed where his own inmates normally live, he had to place the men in the hobby shop — where the inmates create their artwork.

It made for a good joke, he said.

"I said, 'Boys, you got a woman sleeping in your bed; problem is, you can't be there,' " Cain said.