Angola's 'cowboys' ready

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ANGOLA — Why would a man who had never even been on a horse climb onto the back of a raging bull and try to stay there? "Personal pride and prize money," is the answer according to Louisiana State Penitentiary Warden Ross Maggio Jr.

More than 400 of the 4,600 inmates at the state's maximum-security penitentiary here will be trying for the prize money as the 19th annual Angola Prison Rodeo gets under way this Sunday. Their pride may get a little bruised in the process.

The rodeos are held each Sunday in October at the prison, which is in the northern part of West Feliciana Parish at the end of La. 66. Gates open at 11 a.m., and the rodeo starts at 2 p.m.

The majority of the competitors have never been in a rodeo before. "They've never even been on a horse," according to the warden. "They don't get any practice. They just get out there and do their best," Maggio said. "It allows them to let off a little frustration, and they get to compete for the prize money."

The inmate-cowboys compete in 10 different events, ranging from bareback bronc riding to bullwrestling and barrel racing. In each category, first place brings a $60 prize, second gets $30, and the third place finisher gets $20, the warden said.

About 5,000 people cheered the inmates on each Sunday last year. Some people had to be turned back after the bleachers surrounding the arena were filled, Maggio said.

"We're at capacity as far as the crowds go," the warden said. "Until we construct some new seating, we will have to continue turning people back. If we had the seats, I'm sure we could fill them."

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The rodeo, the largest public event sponsored by the prison, brings fans from throughout the South.

"Many people plan their vacations around it," Maggio said. "It's something they look forward to almost as much as the inmates do."

Fans are cautioned that the route to Angola — La. 66 — is now undergoing extensive work, but highway department officials do not think traffic will be hindered.

The work is a $3,759,000 project to straighten and widen a six-mile segment of the road between Bayou Sara and Wayanoke, said state Department of Transportation and Development District 61 engineer S.W. Arnold.

He said about two miles is gravel, where blacktop has been torn up and replaced with the aggregate foundation for the new road.

"You won't be able to go 60 miles an hour," Arnold said, "but you should be able to get there without any problems."

The contractor on the project, Tidelands Equipment Co., will have a water truck nearby to help keep dust to a minimum, Arnold said.

At the rodeo, professional clowns will be on hand to entertain the crowds, as will several prison bands. Various arts and crafts booths will be set up outside the rodeo arena and will offer for sale oil paintings, hand-crafted jewelry and other craft items made by the inmates.

Baton Rouge entertainer Floyd Brown is scheduled to perform during the first rodeo on Sunday.

Tickets are $4 for adults and $2 for children 6 to 12 years old. Children under 6 will be admitted free.

Proceeds from the ticket sales go to the Inmate Welfare Fund, which is used to purchase recreational equipment, musical instruments and other items for the inmates.

The rodeo is a cooperative effort of the inmates, employees of the penitentiary and the state Department of Corrections.