Mitchell Brown, top photo, leads Angola inmates in pursuit of the bull in the "Guts and Glory" event. Above, two others try to wrestle a steer to the ground during bulldogging. Veteran rodeo cowboy Mitchell Brown, right, explains his winning techniques.

INMATE LASSOS RODEO FAME

By MADELYN LAMB
Associate editor
Mitchell Brown boldly dives at a bull charging from a chute and makes a grab for the horns. The crowd shouts "Get him! Go! Go!" as they press forward for a better look at the 50-year-old cowboy.

When the event ends, Brown walks away with a toothy grin, a chit worth $100 in hand and the applause of the fans ringing in his ears. The kids holler at him. They know him, and the fame, however limited, makes him "feel pretty good."

Actually it overwhelms Brown, who for almost the last decade has dominated action at the Angola Prison Rodeo. He's won the title of All Around Cowboy for 10 years, almost missing the mark last year because "he didn't get enough events."

The most amazed person of all is Brown, who until the early '70s had never entered an arena, much less milked a wild cow or rode a bull.

Brown's success at rodeo events violates conventional reason about what makes a cowboy great. "I'm a city boy. Grew up in the big city of New Orleans. Never even been to a rodeo. It never crossed my mind," he says. "I was never even around animals."

Why then could a guy who kicked around most of his working years doing "different kinds of work; anything I was capable of getting" excel at rodeo events? "It's a challenge really," says Brown, leaning back and adjusting his white and burgundy-colored golf cap. "Sort of an outlet. The boys, too, there's the kids. I have kids, and I try to get out there and do as much as I can to satisfy them. They like the excitement, the danger."

Brown doesn't seem to pay either one much mind. The threat of being gored by a charging bull or kicked by a bucking bronc holds little fear for the muscular man, who quite frankly feels he doesn't "have much to lose." Since 1959 he's been serving a life sentence for the murder of Salvador Zuppardo, shot during a holdup attempt at a New Orleans barroom. He and accomplice Harry Dozier were convicted twice of the murder and narrowly missed death sentences.

Over the last 13 years, Brown has had two operations as a result of what happened in the rodeo arena. Being kicked and gored by a bull and stomped by a "wild bronc" sent him to the hospital for nine days each time.

"I got stitches all over from being in the rodeo events," he says, revealing his bald head to show the scars left by some. "But most of the time I just come away with bruises and bruised pride. My pride's bruised when I don't get enough events."

Some of the 300 or so inmates who participate each Sunday in October aren't as lucky as he says. Brown tells of one guy who had a collar bone broken and another who "got paralyzed because he didn't know what he was doing." Usually not a whole lot of injury occurs though, he adds.

"I'm not like some of these guys around here, afraid of competing. If they don't like the event they've drawn — the barrel (bull riding) or the wild cow milking — they think it's too dangerous, I'll take what they don't want. The more events I get the more points and money."

Every dollar counts for one point, with a first-place win netting $50; second, $40; third, $30; and fourth, $20. Winner of the "Guts and Glory," the final event of the rodeo, takes away $100, but not before risking life and limb. For the event, a chit worth $100 is tied to the horn of "the most vicious bull." What follows is a scramble by all the inmate contestants to retrieve the chit from the bull.

It's not uncommon for Brown to come away with several hundred dollars. And, since he doesn't "have any habits," he uses a majority of his winnings to buy savings bonds. The rest, about $100 a year, goes toward buying necessities like shaving powder and toothpaste.

The self-styled cowboy has his own method of going about taking the big dollars. Prior to competing, he prefers solitude in order to psych himself up. Relatives, who still live in the New Orleans area, used to come see him, he says, but "it breaks my concentration. I don't care for no visitors now. We live in two different worlds. They have their problems and I have mine."

M any of his techniques were developed by trial and error during competition, since inmates don't have the opportunity to do practice runs. He shares his methods with fellow inmates, but emphasizes that what works for him doesn't necessarily work for others.

For "Guts and Glory," his "best event," he rushes in. "Some of the guys wait for him (the bull) to run two and a half minutes to get tired. Not me. I go right for the $100. I charge him. A lot of people say I'm crazy, but I don't know."

In the Buddy Pick-Up, his horse sense pulls him through more times than not. The event requires the rider to retrieve his partner who's waiting on top of a barrel and race back across the finish line. "When I get on him (the horse) I get a feel as to whether he likes to turn to the left or the right. I use that to decide which way to take him around the barrel," Brown says.

The inmate picked up his feel for animals while at Angola. After an initial stint in the field cutting cane and picking cotton, he was transferred to the ranch crew. There he spent 12 hours a day, seven days a week performing many duties that dealt with cows and horses. It was his fellow workers there who suggested he try the rodeo.

But the ranch crew experience doesn't necessarily give him an edge over his competitors, he says, since rodeo horses and bulls are "different animals and they don't usually act the same. They're a lot like human beings, and they have different personalities." Brown has since become a farm laborer. It's work he doesn't relish near as much because of the shorter hours, eight hours a day, five days a week. "I liked the ranch crew because I don't like to lay around the camp," he says. "At least work is something to keep your mind occupied."

Off hours Brown devotes to hobby crafts and to keeping in shape. "I take care of myself, I play football," he says. "I work all year round to stay in shape." It pays off. At age 50, the inmate-cowboy has the build of a man half his age.

"You know," he adds, a smile crossing his face, "if I stay healthy and get enough events, I'll be All Around Cowboy this year, too."