Angola Prison rodeo offers hope where it is lacking

BY MOLLY HENNESSY-FISKE
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ANGOLA — In the middle of the rodeo arena, the four men could smell manure from the animal pens and cracklings and caramel corn from the stands as they steadied themselves in their plastic lawn chairs, spread their hands on the red card table in front of them and planted their feet in the mud.

They were bracing for the bull.

Once it was turned loose, the last one sitting in this game called Convict Poker would win.

They looked almost identical in their black helmets, protective vests and striped uniforms. The one known as Timmy Lo said a silent prayer. Juggernaut hoped his injured ankle wouldn’t slow him down if he had to run for it. The man next to him, Tiger, wanted to reclaim the title. The last one, Bucket Head, longed to make his family proud.

Each wanted the $250 in prize money and the big belt buckle proclaiming the wearer champion. But as the crowd of 11,000 watched the four men as they competed at the country’s longest-running prison rodeo, each wanted something more: a little bit of respect.

“All the stories they might have heard — ‘These are animals!’ When I’m in the arena, I’m not a demon with a pitchfork — I’m me,” Todd “Tiger” Plaisance said as he unloaded horses in the cool sunshine before the gates opened one Sunday in October. He was wearing his championship Convict Poker belt buckle from 2010.

Louisiana State Penitentiary was once a plantation. Angola, named for the origin of its slaves. Inmates work the fields for 2 cents an hour at what is now the largest maximum-security prison in the country, an 18,000-acre compound about 50 miles north of Baton Rouge that’s home to the state’s death row and more than 6,200 other prisoners, many of them murderers, armed robbers and rapists (who aren’t allowed at the rodeo).

Through sales of tickets, food and prisoner-made crafts, the rodeo, held twice a year, helps pay for the prison’s educational re-entry programs. This fall, it will generate about $2.5 million.

“It brings the taxpayers in to see they can really change people’s lives,” warden Burl Cain said. “Most places just lock and feed. Our greatest challenge is to give people hope who don’t have hope — that’s what this rodeo does.”

Hope is often in short supply at Angola. About 80 percent of prisoners don’t receive visits, the warden said. About 95 percent of the inmates will die here, many buried in inmate-made wooden coffins in a potter’s field on prison grounds.

But each April and October, they can be stars in what’s billed as “The Wildest Show in the South.” (Inmates often get injured, though no one has been killed.)

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the announcer boomed, “you’re going to see a lot of things here you won’t see anywhere else.”

There are conventional rodeo events, such as bull riding, but also competitions for those city boys who, though short on roping or riding skills, have plenty of nerve. In Guts & Glory, inmates try to snatch a red disc tied to the horns of the meanest, toughest 2,000-pound crossbred bull available.

And then there’s Convict Poker.

Travis “Bucket Head” Johnson, 33, said some inmates believe certain competitors are protected by an invisible force field, “like an aura.” Johnson won Convict Poker in April, but thinks that had more to do with will than magic.

“You got to make up your mind how bad you want it,” Johnson said.

He scanned the rodeo program.

“That’s a tough one,” Johnson said of his competition.

“We’re gonna let the bull decide who comes up a winner and who gets a little dirt in his shirt.”

The winner of today’s contest would advance to the finals a week later.

Some spectators said they sympathized with the men in the arena, even though they were unaware of their crimes: Timothy “Timmy Lo” Gay and Casey “Juggernaut” Weeks were doing time for armed robbery; Johnson and Plaisance for murder.

“I can’t imagine those inmates sitting at that table how they feel, because my heart’s pounding in the stands!” said office manager Teresa Kolder, 48.

Terri Johnson, 51, a hospital worker who brought her family, said, “It’s more exciting because they’re not professionals. I think they’re crazy sitting there waiting for the bull to hit them.”

Down in the arena, as Timmy Lo, Juggernaut, Tiger and Bucket Head waited their turn, the first four inmates took their seats at the red card table. An enormous black bull exploded from the chute and went straight for the men, tossing the table and its occupants like a house of cards.

No one was seriously injured.

“What do you think about Convict Poker?” the announcer shouted. The crowd erupted with cheers and applause.

Seats at the table are assigned. Weeks, 39, would have his back to the chute when the bull emerged — the most dangerous seat.

“It’s not a skill — it’s the luck of the draw,” Plaisance said.

“You just hope the bull doesn’t knock you out of the chair. One time I felt the bull’s breath on my neck, then I was up in the air.”

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Inmate Danny Young pets his horse before participating in the Angola Prison Rodeo at the Louisiana State Penitentiary on Oct. 21 in Angola. The Angola Prison Rodeo opened in 1965 and is the largest maximum security prison in the country, with 5,000 prisoners.