



# Cowboy Down

America's original tough guys, pro rodeo wranglers happily meet their match on the slopes at Steamboat's annual Cowboy Downhill.

By Paul Tolme  
Photographs by Joshua Paul

**COWBOY COUNTRY** As a break from the pressures of the National Western Stock Show Rodeo in nearby Denver, nearly 100 cowboys and countless rodeo fans head north and stampede Steamboat's slopes during the annual Cowboy Downhill. For a day or two, the most popular Steamboat ski accessories include chaps, a Stetson, an occasional braided rope, a pinch of chew and, more often than not, a can of beer.

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**BOW-LEGGED AND TEETERING** on the edge of chaos, Will Lowe lets out a “Ya-aaa-hoooo!” as he charges down a beginner trail at Steamboat, Colo. Caked with snow, Lowe—who skis maybe once per winter—could use some instruction. But to a pro rodeo rider, well, lessons are for sissies. He prefers the cowboy method. “I notice good skiers turn lots,” he says. “Me? I just point ‘em downhill and haul balls.”

For one day every winter, cowboys rule the slopes at Steamboat. They wear leather chaps with rawhide fringe, 10-gallon hats and silver belt buckles big enough to plate a T-bone. Hailing from Gillette, Wyo., Canyon, Texas, Elko, Nev., and just about everywhere where the sky is big and cattle outnumber cars, they are the sons of rural America. Ropers and riders, they’re rodeo stars, card-carrying members of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association and the Professional Bull Riders.

The occasion is the Cowboy Downhill, a 33-year-old annual race that celebrates Steamboat’s cattle-country roots. Timed to coincide with the National Western Stock Show and Rodeo in Denver—the year’s first major stop on the pro rodeo circuit—the Cowboy Downhill allows rough and ready rodeo stars to kick off their season with a day of lighthearted competition on a foreign but forgiving substance: snow.

If you ride 2,000-pound buckin’ bulls for a living, wiping out on snow presents little in the way of intimidation. And wipe out they do. Skis jettison. Stetsons roll. And cowboys hit the slopes—laughing. Sure, there are a few ringers, but most of the competitors look as natural on skis as bulls would on a chairlift.

“This is about drinking some beer, hanging out with friends and having a good time,” T-Bone Clark says before the start of the 2006 race. Entered in the Legends division for retired rodeo performers, Clark has raced in 25 downhills. He sports a Colonel Sanders beard and wears a full-length custard-colored wool poncho—Southwest cowboy chic. “These Montana kids and Canadians, some them boys can clean it up,” he says, downing a beer. “But them Okies and Texans,” he shakes his head. “They can’t ski for beans.”

Hank Williams yodels from loudspeakers as 60 competitors

gather. For many, the prerace warm-up consists of chugging a couple of cans of Bud Light, the sponsor. Hundreds of spectators line the course, cameras ready, alongside television crews. The Hahnenkamm this is not. The dual GS course runs about a quarter mile down a beginner slope, usually mobbed with city slickers learning how to snowplow. There’s a three-foot jump built midcourse to ensure maximum carnage. Just before the finish, the racers must stop, rope a cowgirl (nobody will ever confuse a cowboy event for an ERA rally), toss a saddle onto a horse and then somehow ski across the finish line.

“This is a beautiful slope, or course, or whatever you call it,” says Lowe, 24, as he sits on a pile of crash pads at the end of the course and reloads his lip with a hefty pinch of Copenhagen. Chewing tobacco is the vice of choice for rodeo cowboys, and by the end of the day the snow is pockmarked with brown stains and spent tobacco wads.

The previous evening, Lowe, a Texan, could be seen struggling to stay upright on an icy sidewalk in tall leather-soled cowboy boots, his face a study in bemused concentration. Lowe—all 150 pounds and five feet, five inches of him—is racing in the first heat. He straight-lines the course, misses several gates, loses a ski on the jump and, unable to stop, wipes out at the finish line. The judges disqualify him for failing to complete the roping and saddling portion of the race, but the world-class athlete couldn’t give a hoot. Lowe just came off his best year ever as a pro, winning the bareback world championship in 2005, his second world title, which puts him at the top of his profession. “The Lord has been good to me,” he says, letting fly a stream of dip juice.

Like a lot of aspiring young ski racers, many of the cowboys turned to rodeo as a way to see the world. Charles Sampson grew up on the rough streets of South Central Los Angeles. As a scrawny teenager, he met some rodeo hands who encouraged him to bull-ride. “I could have ended up in jail,” he says, “but instead I became a cowboy.”

He became more than a cowboy. Sampson, 48, is a former world champion bull rider and is enshrined in the ProRodeo Hall of Fame. He’s also easy to spot. First, he’s the only black person in the downhill. Second, he’s got a prosthetic ear—an uppity bull removed his real one. To the younger cowboys, he’s a living legend—the Hermann Maier of rodeo. Retired after a 20-year career, Sampson now counsels at-risk kids and preaches the gospel of rodeo. “It’s the wildest thing you can do,” he says of bull-riding. “You’ve got to overcome your fear, get into the zone and clear your mind.”

Sampson never misses the Cowboy Downhill, and his skiing ability has improved since getting a lesson from Steamboat icon and former Olympian Billy Kidd a few years back. “He told me

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**LOOK OUT BELOW** The Stampede competition—a crowd favorite—features all the contestants simultaneously racing downhill, with a three-foot jump built midcourse to ensure maximum cowboy carnage. The Stampede usually generates the winner of the Best Crash award, the event’s most coveted honor. The race operates under an Old West, laissez-faire philosophy: “If you ain’t cheating, you ain’t winning.”



**STEAMBOAT SERENADE** Clockwise, from top left: Michael Sisk, three-time winner of the all-hands-on-deck Stampede. His secret to success: Get in front at the start and never look back; cowboy at heart: downtown Steamboat; a sign of the times: a snowboarding rodeo star; ski pants of choice: colorful chaps. Opposite: the Stampede, from a safe distance.

to get out over my skis, just like on a bull. The other thing he told me was, "The hill only hits you if you fall."

T-Bone Clark is on course next. Approaching the jump at a breakneck pace, he squats low, lands in a heap and double ejects. No worries. Clark stampedes down the hill in his ski boots, then belly-flops at the line as the crowd roars. Rodeo riders are born performers. Unable to stop and saddle the horse, J.D. Garrett, a bareback rider from Rapid City, S.D., skis underneath the surprised animal. "It's all about the show, man," he says later, cracking another beer.

Steamboat, more than any other former cow-town-turned-winter-resort, revels in its cowboy heritage. The town holds 10 pro rodeo events every year, more than any other ski town. Through the early 1900s, Steamboat was a major cattle exporter, and cowboys from across Colorado drove their steers into the Yampa Valley to be loaded on trains headed east to Chicago's slaughterhouses. Cattle drives clogged Steamboat streets into the 1960s, but the birth of the ski resort and the influx of tourists in the 1970s convinced town leaders that cattle on Main Street might be a liability. Now the town stages a single cattle drive every July just for the tourists.

The Cowboy Downhill, first held in 1974, has evolved over the years. There are now snowboarding cowboys. In 2006, two women participated. Kelley Lacy and Lexie Bath compete in barrel racing, the sole women's event on the pro rodeo circuit. Women in a male-dominated sport, they share that bond with female ski racers. They hug after crossing the line together. "We grew up with rodeo, so it was just a natural thing to get into," Bath says. "In fact, I'm more scared skiing than barrel racing."

From here, the cowboys will head to San Antonio, Tucson, Fort Worth and other stops on the pro circuit. It's a tough life. Maybe one percent of the pros make enough to pay the bills. "It's not bad if you're single and don't eat," says one bareback rider. The prize for winning a small competition can be \$500. Winners at Denver's National Western Rodeo, which has some of the biggest purses on the circuit, can pocket \$16,000. To put gas in the tank and pay the hotel bills, most pros have second jobs as truck drivers, ranch hands or construction workers. Many have no health insurance.

"Rodeo is the most dangerous sport out there," says Michael Sisk, a saddle bronc rider and Steamboat resident. "Bar none." Growing up in the small Colorado town of Rifle, Sisk learned to carve turns at Sunlight Mountain in nearby Glenwood Springs. Summers were spent breaking horses on a ranch. He started a rodeo team at the University of Colorado, then went to medical school and became an orthopedic surgeon—a handy trade for a rodeo rider.

RODEO RIDERS ARE BORN PERFORMERS. UNABLE TO STOP AND SADDLE THE HORSE, J.D. GARRETT, A BAREBACK RIDER FROM RAPID CITY, SOUTH DAKOTA, SKIS UNDERNEATH THE SURPRISED ANIMAL. IT'S ALL ABOUT THE SHOW, MAN,' HE SAYS LATER, CRACKING ANOTHER BEER.



Sisk, also an accomplished skier, has been thrown to the dirt, stomped, bucked and kicked during his 20-year rodeo career. Approaching 40 years old, he's considering hanging up his spurs. Last year, one of his best friends snapped his neck and died after being bucked off.

There are no injuries on the slopes today, however. Kyle Bowers, a bareback rider from Alberta, wins the dual giant slalom event with a time of 31.5 seconds, while saddle bronc rider and Steamboat local Andy Kurtz finishes in 32.28—beating Sisk by less than a tenth of a second. But it's saddle bronc rider Jeff Willert who wins the most prestigious award—Best Crash—for a head-over-heels spill that sends both skis into orbit. The afternoon concludes with the Stampede, a crowd favorite, in which all 60 competitors take off down the course simultaneously. "If you ain't cheating," the announcer says, "you ain't winning." The cowboys nudge and elbow for position, and they pile up after the jump. Sisk gets out in front to avoid the ruckus, takes the course in a tuck and skids to a stop with a spray of powder, winning for the third consecutive year.

It's a kick, and Sisk is clearly enjoying himself. But still, it's just sliding down a hill of snow. "I've climbed Mt. Everest, raced dirt bikes and done some insane things over the years," he says. "But nothing compares to riding a horse that's trying to throw you off and stomp you. Just thinking about it," he pauses and pats his chest. "Makes my heart race."

A lifelong skier, Kurtz thinks rodeo riders and ski racers have a lot in common. "You have to control your fear and focus. Both sports require intense concentration," he says. Spectators see the bucking broncos and bulls and think rodeo must be the most dangerous sport out there, but it's difficult to comprehend the insanity of downhill ski racing, he says. "I remember seeing Hermann Maier crash going 60 miles per hour," he says, shaking his head. "He got right back on his skis. It doesn't get any crazier than that. He'd probably make a good rodeo rider." ♦