

WHETHER YOU
CALL THEM RODEO
CLOWNS OR BULL-
FIGHTERS, THESE
MASTERS OF THE
ARENA ARE NO JOKE

FIGHT

or *FLIGHT*

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE SHAFER

TO WARD OFF COWARDICE, NEVER WEAR YELLOW OR EAT CHICKEN ON THE DAYS YOU RIDE.

This was one of the rodeo axioms my mother taught me as I was growing up. Placing your hat on a bed was a sure invitation for bad luck. And always respect rodeo clowns: They're the best athletes in the arena, and they save lives.

The last one perplexed me when I was young. Clowns were the guys who strutted around dusty small-town rodeos in ragged outfits while carrying out groanworthy banter with the event announcer. Sometimes they performed tricks with dancing burros or hoop-jumping dogs. Other times, they might drive around in a tricked-up old

car with an exploding muffler and a radiator that could spew water like Old Faithful.

The athleticism of rodeo clowns was lost on me until I got older and realized their work is just as dangerous and exciting as the bull riders they're employed to protect. Working in teams, their job is to distract an enraged bull from attacking the rider who's just been catapulted to the dirt. The clowns working on foot—as opposed to manning a barrel—have come to be known as bullfighters. You can watch their feats of agility, speed, and strength at bull-riding events across the country.

"A human's instinct is to run away," says Weston Rutkowski, of Haskell, one of the best bullfighters in the business. "That's the worst thing you can do in this particular sport. A bull's got four legs. We've got two. So they're going to run you down in a straight line. You have to be ready to move in the moment a rider starts to fall off. If you don't come in until they hit the ground, you're four steps late."

While their job has little in common with the matadors of Mexico and Spain who share the "bullfighter" name, rodeo bullfighters must also overcome basic safety impulses.

"Bullfighters, without hesitation and at any given moment, will step in harm's way

to keep a bull rider safe," says Tuff Hedeman, a four-time world champion bull rider who lives outside Morgan Mill, north of Stephenville. "That's why we call them bullfighters."

Bullfighting runs in the family for Brandon Dunn, a rodeo clown from the North Texas town of Petrolia. Dunn fought bulls until injuries from a car wreck in 2003 robbed him of his speed. Now he entertains audiences as a clown and barrelman, working in tandem with his 17-year-old son, Brendall Dunn, a bullfighter. The father-son team works about 20 rodeos a year.

"It got to where I was put together by bailing wire and duct tape, and I just couldn't fight bulls anymore," Dunn says. But that didn't dissuade Brendall, who worked his first rodeo at age 12. Brandon says he has coached his son carefully.

"There's a mental maturity you have to reach, no matter how athletic you are," he says. "We would bring him up with some slower and older bulls and transition him to faster bulls. Now he's fighting anything that comes out of the chute."

Clowns began showing up at American rodeos around the turn of the 20th century when the primary events were saddle bronc riding, steer roping, and bulldogging. Their job was to entertain the crowd as an arena was being reconfigured between competitions. But then in the 1920s and '30s, bull riding became a popular addition to the rodeo lineup. Pickup riders on horseback could assist a bucking bronc contestant in a graceful dismount. But bull riding was a whole different matter. It was too dangerous for a pickup rider and his horse to get in close with a bull. Bull riders inevitably hit the dirt with an angry animal anxious to attack. The best way to protect a fallen rider was for another person to distract the bull. That responsibility eventually fell to the clown.

As a hotbed for rodeos, Texas has produced a prominent line of influential clowns. Ralph Fulkerson, a bull rider from Midlothian, 25 miles southwest of Dallas, changed the game when he switched to bullfighting in the 1920s. He developed a cornball humor act that involved his mule, Elko. After numerous injuries, Fulkerson came up with a way to protect himself by introducing the clown's barrel to bull riding. His first barrels



were made of wood reinforced with metal. Fulkerson would draw the bulls away from the bull riders and toward the barrel. Then he'd hop inside the barrel and allow the bull to bang away at it with its horns.

Clown barrels became standard at rodeos and remain so today. But they never provided complete protection. Fulkerson was gored several times by bulls who were able to pierce his barrel. Even if the horns don't get to the man inside "the can," a bull attack is a harrowing experience.

Bullfighting began to take off as an art form in the 1970s. Skipper Voss, from Crosby, became a crowd favorite with athleticism and speed when pulling bulls away from fallen riders. He took the sport to a new level by extending the contest. Bullfighting itself became performance art.

Probably the most famous rodeo clown in history is Leon Coffee of Blanco. He tried his hand at other rodeo events before taking up bullfighting in the 1970s. Coffee proved to be an innovator, adding flourishes such

as disco moves to his bull-distracting routine. But when the injuries mounted up, Coffee became a barrelman to continue his career. The 67-year-old makes occasional rodeo appearances these days.

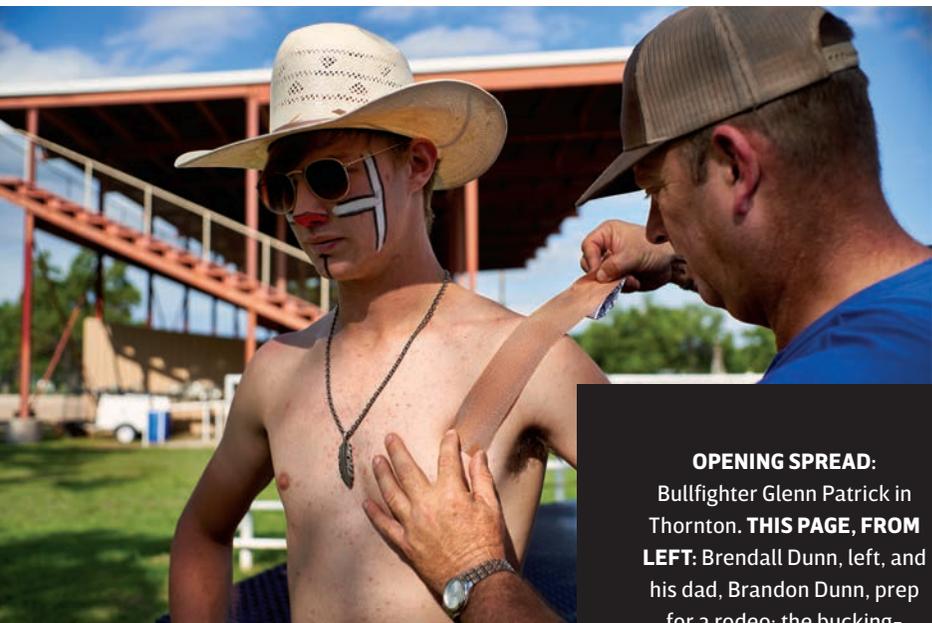
While you'll still see clowns working out of barrels and bantering with the announcers at traditional rodeos, modern bullfighting is light-years beyond the days of Voss' and Coffee's prime. The sport went through a radical change in the early 1990s when Hedeman and other top bull riders broke away from the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) to form the Professional Bull Riders (PBR). The speed as well as the bucking and spinning ability of the bulls increased dramatically.

Bullfighters have adapted accordingly. At some rodeos, the trappings of the rodeo clown have disappeared. Bullfighters' work has become so refined that it developed into a sport itself—freestyle bullfighting, in which bullfighters show their stuff while challenging real fighting bulls. The Bullfighters Only

(BFO) tour showcases their skills—no bull riders involved. "It's myself versus a Mexican fighting bull for 60 seconds," Rutkowski says. Judges score fighters on technique and wow factors, including leaps over the bull.

The jalopy-driving rodeo clowns of my childhood in the 1960s would be dumbfounded by what occurs at BFO events. These bullfighters practice acrobatics reminiscent of the Minoans: They've been known to jump completely over a bull and perform flips. Though some of the participants wear clown makeup in homage to the past, freestyle bullfighting has an X Games vibe.

The satisfaction bullfighters receive from their sport comes at a cost. Rutkowski has an injury list that includes a fractured orbital bone in his face and a head laceration that cut to his skull. Yet he keeps at it. I asked him if he'd ever experienced anything else in life quite like the adrenaline rush that comes with fighting bulls. He answered with the understatement typical of the rodeo world: "I can't honestly say that I have." 



OPENING SPREAD: Bullfighter Glenn Patrick in Thornton. **THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT:** Brendall Dunn, left, and his dad, Brandon Dunn, prep for a rodeo; the bucking-horse chute in Bowie.



CLOCKWISE: A pre-rodeo prayer at the Thornton Homecoming Rodeo; rodeo clown and barrelman Brandon Dunn; bullfighter Glenn Patrick paints his face for the Thornton rodeo.





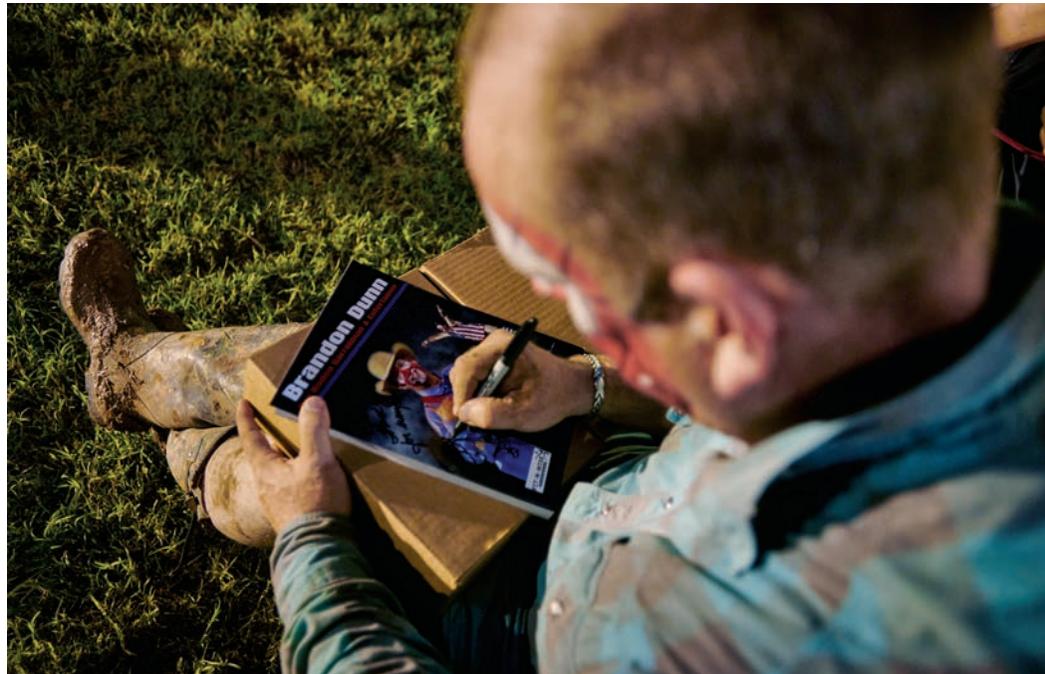
Bullfighter Brendall Dunn puts on protective equipment, including knee braces and a padded vest, for the 4th of July Rodeo in Canadian.



Bullfighter Trent King distracts a bull at the Jim Bowie Days Rodeo in Bowie.



CLOCKWISE:
Brandon Dunn takes the barrel in Canadian; his son, Brendall Dunn; Brandon Dunn signing autographs.



FROM LEFT: Brandon Dunn presides over the calf scramble in Canadian; junior clown Riffin Garrett in Bowie.



Want to check out traditional rodeo clowns and bullfighters in action? Texas provides plenty of opportunities in upcoming months.

Barrel clowns working in tandem with bullfighters is a standard feature at **Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association** events. The biggest PRCA rodeos in Texas occur in

the early months of each year in San Angelo, Fort Worth, Austin, San Antonio, and Houston.

This fall, **PRCA rodeos** worth checking out include Abilene (Sept. 10-18), Stephenville (Sept. 24-26), Waco (Oct. 8-16), and Lubbock (Nov. 5-6). prorodeo.com

The Professional Bull

Riders tour has several fall events scheduled in Texas: Belton (Sept. 4-5), San Antonio (Oct. 2-3), and Llano (Oct. 16). pbr.com

Bullfighters Only (BFO) contests featuring bullfighters going head-to-head with Mexican fighting bulls are slated for Dallas (Oct. 9) and Waco (Oct. 17). bullfightersonly.com

