

by Kathy Thornton

Sitting in the Thomas and Mack Center in Las Vegas looking down on the arena I wonder how many rodeo fans understand what goes into preparing this venue for competition. Most aspects are apparent; the bucking chutes, the timed event chutes, the yellow Wrangler banners that line the arena and the placement of advertising all done with great professionalism.

The one component that ties all of this professionalism together is the ground, "rodeo dirt." Dirt, as old as rodeo itself, has gone through changes like the quality of contestants and livestock through the years.

Livestock breeding programs and championship clinics for the contestants have helped the cowboy evolve into the professional you enjoy watching today. The same could be said for rodeo dirt. From dusty main streets and circled wagons out on the range to what we see from our seats at the Thomas and Mack, rodeo dirt has made advancements. But we can't become complacent - we must be diligent in pursuing the best strategy for ground preparation to benefit all rodeo athletes and stock.

With any professional sport the players make their task look effortless from where we are seated. The hours spent practicing and traveling go unnoticed. This is also true of the knowledge and experimenting with the ground at thousands of amateur and pro rodeos, barrel races, team ropings and bull ridings throughout the United States.

All rodeo events depend on and react to arena dirt. With the high level of competition at today's rodeos the consistency of the ground is a determining factor on how well the contestant and the livestock perform. Arena dirt is one of the most overlooked and under appreciated factors of the sport of rodeo.

It used to be cowboys on cow horses. Now it's professional athletes on race horses. The rodeo cowboys and cowgirls depend on quality equipment in order to execute their individual event at a demanding level. They also depend on the producers/committees to prepare the ground and sometimes they just don't get the job done. With the extreme level of competition at today's rodeos, the consistency of the ground is a determining factor on how well the contestant and the livestock perform.

The ground can change from the first performance to the last of an event allowing all the money to be won in a single performance. The ground should remain constant throughout an event and in optimum condition for safety and fairness.

The PRCA rodeo committees and

producers everywhere have the opportunity to raise the bar of excellence for the safety and fairness for all contestants and livestock.

Wrangler National Finals Rodeo Dirt Shawn Davis

Shawn Davis, the General Manager of the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo has many jobs and one of the most important is the ground preparation for the NFR. Ground is important to all contestants in their specific events but none more so than the WPRC barrel racing.

Time is so important when producing an event of this caliber. Most big barrel racing events have the time to drag the arena every five runners. Davis can't stop the NFR and drag the arena three times. He has to make the ground as consistent as possible for 15 contestants for 10 days in 7 events - quite a challenge.

Sherry Cervi set an arena record of

over the action packed 10 day WNFR.

"Working the ground is like working a race horse; you have to work your horse enough to know what it takes to get winning results. The same goes for ground preparation. Knowing "how" to work the ground is as important as the amount of time spent working it. The rodeo committees should start early and work their ground, with a knowledgeable ground person, for winning results," says Davis.

Davis's high standards for the WNFR have set the bar high for rodeo committees to aspire to.

Helping Committees/Producers Prepare Dirt varies from arena to arena.

The more sand you have, the more moisture you need to work the ground and hold it together for competition. The more clay you have the more the ground will pack or hardpan. You have to rip the hardpan. It doesn't matter what it looks like on top you have to



13.49 in the 8th round during the 2010 WNFR. Jill Moody set a record on 10 runs of 138.26 last year to demonstrate Davis's hard work and attention to the ground continues to pay off.

Davis, realizing the importance of his job, has tabulated the runs from past NFR performances to see how much money was won on each run position of the top 15 barrel racers. Those reports have proven basically equal in all positions across the board - quite a surprise. The WNFR competition is rigorous to say the least - to compete once a day for ten consecutive days stretches most limits set by a professional athlete or event.

Davis and England's foremost expert on dirt formulation, came up with a mixture that has proven to hold up for 150 runs from the world's best barrel horses as well as the 1050 contestant appearances

worry about what is 6-18 inches down. Sometimes the hardpan has to be watered deep in order to get a good rip.

Aggregates (sands and clays) are everywhere, but not all aggregates are created equal. A concrete sand (Spec C44) on the west coast may be different than a concrete sand on the east coast. A river sand may not compact like we need it to, even though it feels good, and looks clean.

Moisture is key to manipulating the ground. It doesn't matter if your arena is outdoors, indoors or covered, moisture must be applied to maintain good footing. Even indoors, if it is raining outside and 100% humidity, you will need less water than if it is 100 degrees and 0% humidity. Once again, the key is to know your ground and know when you need to add water for consistency. You need to evaluate how your dirt reacts to water and weather conditions.

SAF (Safe Arena Footing Committee)

WPRC President Jimmie Munroe, Barrel Racer News and Steve Thornton, Reveal 4-N-1 and TexSand Equestrian Services and Jim Brown have been working together to establish ground standards for the rodeo industry. They are proposing a solution that would educate producers and facility management while setting basic guidelines for arena surfaces.

ASTM International, formerly known as the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM), is a globally recognized leader in the development and delivery of international voluntary consensus standards. Today, some 12,000 ASTM standards are used around the world to improve product quality, enhance safety, facilitate market access and trade, and build consumer confidence. SAF will be a subcommittee of the following ASTM committees. SAF will be tied to the F08.28 Equestrian Surfaces, the F08.64 Natural Surfaces, and the F08.80 Test Methods/Practices committees formed by the ASTM. The ASTM chairman is Michael DePew and he is working with Tex-Sand's Jim Brown.

In the near future we will invite rodeo committees, producers, trainers and tractor drivers to join forces with SAF. Your event can be stamped SAF. This will lend a higher level of consciousness to the ground preparation.

The guide lines will be set by SAF according to actual experience by many specialists in the field. With the help of Jim Brown from TexSand Equestrian Services, the group will have access to the technical information obtained in horse racing studies from universities across the U.S.

Recently a long-standing amateur rodeo in Texas made the switch to a PRCA rodeo. The rodeo committee wanted to make a big impact and went all out trying to make improvements. They changed their arena dirt, spending thousands of dollars and volunteer time and effort. What they ended up with was too much clay and a barely workable surface that was both dangerous to competitors and livestock. If this rodeo committee had gotten the right information from the start they could have avoided some major mistakes and financial mishap.

Some committees might be dealing with a member who insists they know the correct way to prepare the ground when in fact they end up using inferior tools that produce inadequate arena conditions. This is a reflection on your rodeo or event.

When you get sick, you don't take the advice of your neighbor, you go to the doctor. The same rule should apply when you plan your rodeo, barrel race, team roping, bull riding or any other event. Seek professional advice.