

best show. But back at home, they are essentially peaceful, albeit wary, animals out grazing in a field. Jerry will even hand-feed them and walk among them, but cautions, "as soon as you confine them in a small pen you won't dare do that. You won't even step down in the pen with them. They'll come get you."

In fact, when it comes time to work these cattle up, "the only people who are there are my wife and I because if you're not used to them and don't know how to handle them, somebody can get hurt. These cows are worse than the bulls, because they don't get handled nearly as much as the bulls."

He points to Secret Simon. "I bought him strictly on genetics. He had never been bucked, and I was going to breed my cows to him before we ever tried him, as a two-year-old. But, because he bucks pretty good...the first time I took him to a practice pen, that bull was awesome...he bucks AND he has genetics. He's a better sire than a bull



Peering over the back of one of his children, Secret Simon seems almost complacent out in the field. (Photo by Susie Audibert)

with all the genetics in the world who doesn't buck, or a bull that bucks and doesn't have any genetics."

It has taken Jerry eight painstaking years studying the family history of bucking bulls to carefully build his herd and reputation as a serious player in this niche business. There are some 2,000 bucking bull breeders listed with American Bucking Bull Inc., which DNA samples every animal before listing it on its registry. Secret Simon came from South Dakota, line-bred back to a bull named 224 Spook, who himself goes back 75 years to the beginnings of the infamous Plummer line, which came from an obscure European breed called White Parks that was imported to the King Ranch...Well, you get the idea. Bucking bulls aren't just

rank cattle that you pick up in the knacker man's line at the local livestock market. This is big business.

And it's big bucks too. Jerry bought an almost all-black pregnant female some time ago that produced Kermit. Jerry sold Kermit in Las Vegas for \$11,000, and, "in my opinion"...Jerry says that a lot... he was undersold.

Did you know, for example, that at Jerome Davis' North Carolina facility...Jerome Davis is a paralyzed ex-bull rider... that at the futurity that he hosts, top bull won \$8,000? Did you know that Jerome's bull at the American Heritage Futurity in Oklahoma won \$95,000? And he did that without a rider on his back! Did you know that if he goes on to the Classic in Las Vegas, if he wins, he'll pull down a quarter of a million? And he's not even five-years-old yet! That's more than an average bull rider will make in his lifetime!

There is a whole other behind-the-scenes world out there where bulls compete and are tested for their bucking talent long before they ever show up at a rodeo with a real rider on their back. "At those competitions they score them on how well they buck. How high they kick, how fast they spin," says Jerry. They don't need a rider to see that.

Jerry hauls out a strange looking contraption from a shed on his farm on Monrovia Road. It's a black box, containing a 12-volt battery, to which is attached a trunk release like on your car and a run-of-the-mill cowpony girth, a car seatbelt, and a cow bell. It is a mechanical dummy. You can actually train bulls to buck with this thing. And no, the battery is not used to shock the animal; it powers a release mechanism instead.

Weighing only 25 pounds, because these are young bulls being tested, the dummy and the flank rope can be released by remote control. The bull comes out of the chute, he kicks high and spins, they key the remote that releases the girth from the trunk latch, and the dummy and flank rope fall harmlessly to the ground. Almost by Pavlovian association, the bull learns the harder I kick and spin the sooner I'll rid myself of this annoyance on my back. It's self rewarding!

Now get this: "They like to perform," claims Jerry. "They enjoy it. If I catch Simon in a pen, I can back that trailer up and I sometimes have to take a stick and push him away; he wants to get on. I've taken him to six bull rides and every time he wants to get on worse. He knows when he gets on there he's going somewhere. If he hated it, you'd have to beat him on there. The past three times I've loaded him, I open the gate and he runs on."

Rodeo stockmen take great pride in caring for their animals. The famous bulls, "have been handled so much and they travel around so much and see so many people, a lot of them you can pet. Honestly, the superstars, I've got pictures off the Internet of people with their three-year-olds sitting on their back in the pasture. But these bulls when they get in the bucking chute, it's all business and they know it."

Everyone has heard of the most famous bull of all, Bodacious...only ridden eight times in hundreds of outings. He was a Char-Bray, short for Charolais-Brahma cross with "no genetics... none." Then there are bulls with names like Blueberry Wine who has reportedly made more money at the concession stand in beanie babies than in the arena; Mossy Oak Mudslinger, and last year's Bull of the Year, Chicken on a Chain. Where do they come up with this stuff?

Chicken on a Chain is "extremely wild and unpredictable." But that's what they're looking for. Jerry points to a small young bull who he has portentously named "Trouble." Trouble bosses around a brindle bull almost twice his size. "I think that's what you can breed into them... heart," says Jerry.



Jerry Atkins' most famous bull, Kermit, shows he's made of the right stuff when it comes to bucking. Note the mechanical dummy on his back. The dummy can be released remotely, thus rewarding the bull if he bucks well. (Contributed photo)

Temperament also plays a role in the females. "The crazier the cow is the better the calf performs, and all of Simon's calves, when you handle them, are extremely hot." Simon himself seems to be cool about it. He stands amongst his harem and blinks benignly. Still, it's easy to understand why artificial insemination is not an option here. Can you imagine actually trying to collect semen from Secret Simon?

Jerry gazes out at the brood cows and their calves in the pasture. "My heifers, in my opinion, are my best genetics," he says sagely. These are Secret Simon's daughters, and if they come from a proven producer cow, they become even more valuable than a sire. "Heifers these days are almost worth more, in my opinion, than bulls, because you don't have to prove them." Jerry's plan is to out cross these daughters to a different bull. It might be that large brindle beast that he bought back from BLM. "He's really tall and I just want to put some size back in those Plummer calves." Or it might be to a new bull altogether. Either way, the goal is to raise them to age two, enter them in the futurity competitions, and then sell them.

"I enjoy the heck out of it," says Jerry of the whole process. "When those calves start hitting the ground, it's enjoyable. But there's nothing more enjoyable than seeing a calf you raised do well." He thinks back to Kermit, and realizes that he might be his once-in-a-lifetime bull. "I've got 14 chances this time. When he (Kermit) was born I only had one chance...There's a lot of luck involved; you can have the best cow and the best bull and there's no guarantee." But then he adds, "I do know for a fact that if you breed to good bulls and have a breeding program, you'll increase your odds dramatically."

With all the hard work and research they've done, Jerry and Erin Atkins' odds should be close to even.



Above, in order to score points, bull riders must hang on for eight seconds, which seems like an eternity. Obviously, this rider couldn't quite hang on long enough. (Photo by Susie Audibert) Top photo, brood cows warily watch intruders in a pasture in the lower end of the county. (Photo by Phil Audibert)

Eight seconds is an eternity.

Count it out. One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand, four one-thousand, five one-thousand, six one-thousand, seven one-thousand, eight one-thousand...

Now imagine spending that amount of time on the back of a skittish, one-ton, kicking, spinning hump-backed, horned beast. Those seconds turn to hours.

In case you've been away or asleep this summer, the all-American sport of rodeo, more specifically bull riding, has come to Orange County. And thanks to Hurricane Hanna, the fifth and last event of the season was postponed to this coming Saturday night, Sept. 20. If you haven't already, check it out.

The right proper English equitation riding ring at Oakland Heights Farm on Route 15 between Orange

and Gordonsville has undergone a transformation into a yee-haw wild west show complete with mustachioed bowlegged cowboys in stiff jeans, long-sleeve shirts, droopy straw hats, and boots with heels suited for hooking over fence rails. The show, and it is indeed just that, also includes its share of corny

BUCKIN' BULLS

jokes, practical pranks, flag waving, anthem singing, heads bowed in prayer, out-of-tune twang, burgers and dogs, big diesel duelles, hair-raising excitement, bravery, foolhardiness, danger, dirt, dust, mud...and, of course, bulls.

What is it about bulls anyway? We've been pitting ourselves against them ever since homo sapiens faced the aurochs and painted his image on a cave wall in France. Greek athletes were leaping over the backs of them on the island of Crete before Christ was born. And of course in Spain they run them in the streets and then fight them in the arenas... to the death ...still.

Bull fighting has crossed the Atlantic, existing in various forms from Mexico to Brazil. But riding bulls? Where in the world did that come from?

Probably a combination of exuberant one-upmanship, too much spare time and not enough women. We caught up with former rider and current bull riding judge, Daniel Gaither behind the chutes at Oakland Heights Farm.

Is it true bull riders get more girls? "Yeah, it probably is," he drawls with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "I know I used to not have any problems." He pauses and adds ruefully, "Now I can't seem to get one to talk to me. I done got too old...no hair. I get half price on a haircut." He waxes wistful. "It's a young man's game. You can't do it forever."

Bull riding is as American as it comes, and the Proud American Tour organized by BLM Bull and Rodeo Company is out to prove that rodeo is not just for west of the Mississippi anymore. "Rodeo is a family-oriented sport," continues Daniel Gaither. "It's based for the family to come and watch, for the kids as well as the older people. It is probably the only totally American-based sport." This opinion is backed up by the fact that PBR sells more tickets on the east coast than it does in the Midwest, says former rider and now widely respected local breeder of bucking bulls, Jerry Atkins.

Part of that reason is that in the mid-west, they are oversaturated in rodeo. Why pay for a ticket to PBR when "in Texas and Oklahoma, you can go to a bull riding literally within an hour's drive of your house just about every night." Out there, every tiny community, even ones the size of Unionville or Barbourville, host their own rodeo events and field their own rodeo teams. We're not close to that level here...yet. But if BLM's success this past summer is an indicator, the sport will continue to grow locally.

BLM is led by farrier and former rider,

judge and announcer, Wes Begoon. How's that for a classic cowboy-sounding name? Wessss B'goooon. He is joined by Orange County native and local cattleman Matt Lamb, and former rider and current stockman Scotty Michaels. Wes is pretty much the organization guy; Matt's parents own Oakland Heights Farm, and Scotty takes care of a herd of bucking bulls over near Keezletown...a pretty good combination of an idea, a place to make it happen, and the right livestock.

BLM is sanctioned by Southern Extreme Bull Riding Association, who Jerry Atkins, the local bucking bull breeder, calls "a super, super well-run organization." It runs bull riding events from Michigan to Florida. Under its wing, BLM quickly became more than just a bunch of guys hanging around a corral with too much spare time on their hands.



A bull rider prepares to loop his rope around a bull's chest. (Photo by Susie Audibert)

This is a big deal. There are rodeo-strength metal panels, bucking chutes and pens to erect, an arena to secure, grandstands to set up, posters to post and ads to place, traffic control and parking to organize, a P.A. system, and an



A bull fighter's job is to distract the one ton animal from harming the fallen rider. (Photo by Phil Audibert)

announcer, like Daniel Lanier, who readily admits, "my job tonight is to entertain."

And then behind the scenes, there are the turn-back riders to recruit, like John Schlichting whose job is "to escort any bulls out of the arena that don't want to leave." And then there are the bull "fighters," who have assumed the role that you would normally associate with

clowns, just without the funny. Sam Crawford, whose Dad is an old bull rider from way back, describes his job. "After the rider falls off, I distract the bull so they don't hit the rider." Has he ever been hit by a bull himself? "Oh yeah, that comes normal," he says nonchalantly. And then there are the riders. Standing in the pouring rain behind the bucking chutes and pens July 4th weekend, Scotty Michaels summed up what it takes to stay on board a bucking bull for eight seconds. "All

the try in the world will ride one before all the ability will. Ability is nothing if you don't have the try." By the looks of them, these lean, and wiry young men, coming from places as far away as Pennsylvania or as near as

Lynchburg, have plenty of "try," and then some. They have all paid a \$100 entry fee on the off chance that they actually will hang onto the back of a randomly drawn bull for eight seconds to come home with the prize money. Some wear protective masks and vests, others not, but they all have one thing in common...a rope.

A bull rider's rope is the only aid he has for sticking to the back of the beast. Jerry Atkins explains the rope is looped around the bull's chest, pulled tight but not too tight, and comes across a gloved hand, usually the rider's left (if he's right-handed), to form a sort of handle. Rosin is applied to the rope to make it sticky, and then the tail of the rope is turned through the space between the pinky and the ring finger. "In theory, when you make that 90-degree turn it won't slip," explains Atkins. There's another rope involved as well...a flank rope. Jerry hastens to dispel the widely held misconception. "There is not a rope tied around their scrotum," he insists. "There is a flank rope and all it does is go literally across their flanks...right where his legs meet his stomach. When they kick," continues Jerry, "they're trying to kick that rope off. That's what makes them kick." Then Jerry says something that only us guys can truly appreciate. "If you tied something around their scrotum, they wouldn't buck because it would hurt them." Darn tootin', I wouldn't buck either!

Anyway, with that little uncertainty neatly out of the way, we'll continue our story, with a deep sigh of relief.

So, rope secured, the rider gingerly eases down on the back of the bull in the chute. With a quick furious nod of the head, he signals Jerry Atkins to pull the rope that opens the gate. Only then does the clock start its agonizingly slow eight second count.

The bull usually explodes out. He will jump, kick and spin, sometimes all at once and in different directions in an effort to rid the rider from his back and the rope from his flank. The rider will try his darndest to say on, but if he even as much as touches that bull with his free hand, he is disqualified. When the eight

seconds are up, if the rider has not already been pitched, he will open his hand, and theoretically, the rope will loosen. He'll let go of his "handle," and he'll pop off. Experienced riders often land nimbly on their feet. They pick up their hat, dust it off, and casually walk out of the arena with an imperceptible swagger...or a limp.

The bull will normally settle down and allow a turn-back rider to escort him to a gate that leads to a pen where he will calmly munch on some hay, his night's work done. Not bad for eight seconds worth.

That is the perfect scenario. Sometimes things go wrong... like getting hung up. Talk about an eternity, remaining attached to a bucking bull after a rider has been dumped is a jaw-dropping 'Ohmigod' moment for the audience. Now, just think what it's like for the rider. Jerry explains that usually, if you go off the left side of the bull, "you just open your hand up." But if you fall off the right side, "your hand folds over and guess what? You can't open your hand. That's when you see people get h u n g - u p bad." Many pros will grab the tail of their rope with their free hand and pull it loose.



Former bull rider, Wes Begoon organized this summer's bull riding series with partners Scotty Michael and Matt Lamb. The BLM Bull and Rodeo Co. events are sanctioned by the Southern Extreme Bull Riding Association. (Photo by Susie Audibert)

"Those guys are thinking in milliseconds," he says. Still injuries occur... serious ones... even deaths. "People get killed kinda one every couple of years," says Jerry softly, "but you also gotta think nowadays there's lots more people getting on bulls than there was 10 years ago."

That was about when Jerry got started. He remembers his first bull ride. The Orange County native and grandson of the deeply loved and respected Lindsay Gordon, was attending Virginia Tech at

the time, earning a degree in dairy science. He remembers going to a bull riding event in Lynchburg and becoming instantly hooked. "I'm going to learn how to ride bulls," he remembers saying to his buddies.

He enrolled in a bull riding school, "and two weeks later, I was riding their bull rides...First ride, I rode 7.9 seconds. But I'll be honest with you," he turns a tad sheepish, "I was not very good. I mean I did it a lot and I went Friday night, Saturday night, Sunday afternoons, and I won a little money, and I absolutely loved it. I would still do it today if I didn't need to work for a living and pay bills, because I was not good enough to make a living at it."

Jerry also remembers in milli-second detail his last bull ride. He was the final rider to go, and no one had made a full eight-second ride yet. So if he could just stay with him for eight, he'd win the prize money. "Seven seconds I'm getting in bad shape off to the side, and I said, 'well I'm going to hold on.' I sort of got underneath of him and he spun and I fell on the ground." The next thing he knows the bull steps on Jerry's upper arm above the elbow. "And you see that scar?" He points to a jagged white line running the length of his triceps from elbow to armpit. "A plate and 15 screws later, a week in the hospital," continues Jerry flatly, "the same time he did that compound fracture with both bones sticking out of my skin... he tore my calf muscle off the

bone. He pulled it away from the bone...and after that I decided I couldn't afford to get hurt again because I couldn't afford to not pay my bills. I had to make a decision: pay my bills or keep riding bulls and get hurt. It didn't work."

And so, Jerry Atkins, bull rider, OCHS and Tech graduate, dairyman since age 13, decided to hang up his bull rope to...breed bucking bulls.

And herein lies a whole other story...

the secret life of SIMON



"Whaddya lookin' at?" Secret Simon, owned by Jerry Atkins of Orange, settles in at the bull pens at Oakland Heights Farm. A proven bucking bull can fetch big money. Below, The grandson of longtime Board of Supervisors Chairman, Lindsay Gordon, Jerry Atkins has been around cattle all his life. A former rider, he now directs his attention to breeding bucking bulls. (Photos by Susie Audibert)

It all boils down to "how well a bull performs and how well a guy rides it," explains bull riding judge, Daniel Gaither. It's simple really: two judges have 50 points each to award rider and bull. No one is ever awarded 100 points, but scores in the low 80s are pretty good. The important thing to remember is no matter how much "try" the rider has, he won't score well if the bull doesn't buck, because the bull accounts for at least half of the points.

In fact Jerry Atkins maintains the bull's role is more than half the score, "cause if that bull doesn't perform like he ought to, the rider can't even get 50 points, because he wasn't having to work very hard to get it. But if the bull has an outstanding trip, he enables that rider to score more points for himself; he's making that rider look good."

Welcome to the secret world of bucking bull breeding and yes, training. At the Atkins Bull Company farm in the lower end of the county, Jerry

points to his unabashed pride and joy. His name is Secret Simon. He is surrounded by his extended family, 24 wives who stare back suspiciously and a passel of calves scampering at his feet. They are his children, and they are Jerry and Erin Atkins' future in this business.

Secret Simon is not so mean looking. In fact he seems kind of...well...wise. One thin wire separates him from us. Although we are seated safely in a truck, he holds our undivided attention.

"When he was younger, if you got out of the truck, he'd run you back into the truck. He was mean," says Jerry matter-of-factly, adding that his attitude has improved as he has been handled more. Jerry explains that cattle that are raised and trained to an electric fence, and this one is no more powerful than most...about 5,000 volts...will respect that electric fence. "That one wire will hold them." But he quickly adds, "If you corner them and pressure them, they're gone."

These cattle are, what's known as, "hot," and that's the way he likes it. Nothing cuddly about them; this is about as close to wild bovines as you can get, extremely high-strung and nervous. Coming out of the bucking chute they put on the

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