

Shelby Rita and
Troy Gomes

Rodeo, Island Style

EVERYONE HAS A ROPE, and they all know how to use it: Parents rope toddlers' legs, 6-year-olds lasso 5-year-olds, grandparents throw lariats at anyone they want, and teenagers aim for cattle. It's a weekend rodeo at the Parker Ranch in Waimea, nestled in the saddle between the Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa volcanoes, on Hawaii's Big Island.

Rodeos like this one have helped produce champions as recently as last July, when a pair of Hawaiians made history at the national level by roping a steer in 7.107 seconds, the fastest time in the country — all while riding borrowed horses. Jordan Gomes of the Big Island and Levi Rita of Oahu, both seniors, won belt buckles and scholarship money at the National High School Rodeo Association finals, placing fourth overall in team roping. Throughout the arena in Farmington, N.M., competitors murmured that the Hawaii team's record time was a total head-scratcher.

"Hawaii. You surf there, right?" mocks Shelby Rita, Levi's younger sister, a poised 18-year-old senior. She wears a bejeweled

Surfing might be the state's best-known sport, but Hawaii's teen cowboys are rocking America's most competitive rodeo. *By Sarah Rose*

trucker hat with pink leopard spots on the brim and is this year's favorite for state champion.

How did tiny Hawaii, an isolated archipelago in the middle of the Pacific, produce some of the greatest cowboys on Earth? The rodeo might be a way of life in the American West, but to most people there's no good reason to think that Hawaii should turn out champion horsemen and horsewomen. Yet it does — and has for generations.

Hawaii is best known for its pristine beaches and azure waters, but in the spaces between the reefs there is a long-standing cowboy culture. The swagger of the cowpoke is as much the state's guiding ethic as the surfer's hang-ten. Hawaiians were roping cattle long before there was such a thing as the American frontier: The first herd arrived as a gift from Capt. George

Vancouver to King Kamehameha I in 1793. The king was so enchanted that he declared cows sacred. So they roamed free, overbred, and 40 years later, the king's grandson, Kamehameha III, invited Spanish vaqueros from California to teach Hawaiians how to manage the herds. The Hawaiian word for cowboy, *paniolo*, is a derivative of the word for "Spanish," *español*. In fact, Hawaii has produced champion ropers before: In 1908, Ikuda Purdy, a *paniolo* at the Parker Ranch, took home the world championship roping title in Cheyenne, Wyo.

Hawaii's high school horsemen and -women still compete in events that call to mind the *paniolos* and Purdy. Double mugging is an appropriately named combination of roping and wrestling, with one man on the ground and the other chasing on horseback, working as a team to rope,

throw down, pin and tie a runaway steer. The second local event, *Po'o Wai U*, places a metal tree in the middle of the arena. When a steer bolts from the chute, the cowboy threads his rope through the Y of the tree's "branches," tying the animal right to the trunk. Both events model how modern *paniolas* herd descendants of Kamehameha's cattle, which still roam the open slopes of Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa today.

At 135,000 acres, Parker Ranch is one of the largest open ranches in the United States, even if it is on an island. Beef cattle represent a \$20 million industry on the Big Island, producing more than 5 million pounds of free-range, grass-fed, salt air-finished beef annually, most of which ships to the mainland.

BY ANY NUMBER OF MEASURES, Hawaii's team would seem to be at a rodeo disadvantage. While there is an established *paniolo* culture, there is no deep pool of talent, nor is there the single-minded concentration on the sport that one might find in Texas or Oklahoma. According to Kathy Rita, president of the Hawaii High School Rodeo Association and mother of Levi and Shelby, there are only about 125 youngsters statewide who participate in rodeo events.

"A lot of kids in the big rodeo states are home-schooled," says Troy Gomes, Jordan's younger brother. In fact, Texas alone has more home-schooled children (300,000) than the entire state of Hawaii has children under 18 (297,000).

Shelby Rita also points out that home-schooled students on the mainland aren't required to spend seven hours a day inside a school. They can "study for three hours and then practice for five," she calculates, admittedly envious that any rodeo rivals might have a competitive advantage.

Following in her brother's footsteps, Shelby joined Troy as a roping team for the 2010 season. Their goal is no less ambitious than winning a second title for Hawaii.

Team roping is fast and volatile: A steer bolts from the chute, with Shelby and Troy galloping out of the gate behind. She is the header, and her job is to catch the animal by the head. She tosses her rope, but the throw is no good, looping only one horn. Gathering up the slack for another go costs precious time. But on her second try, she catches the steer clean around the neck.

She dallies up, wrapping the rope around her saddle horn. And, still running, with the steer on a leash, she turns her horse to guide the calf in front of her partner, the heeler. Each team gets only three loops — three chances — and Shelby has used two. If Troy doesn't catch both hind legs at once, the attempt won't count. But Troy pitches his rope perfectly under the panicked calf, cinching both legs together and dallying tight. Shelby and Troy face each other, backing up their horses and yanking the ropes taut. The steer falls, the flag man drops his hand, signaling time, and the calf is immediately released.

At 27.75 seconds, it's a clean run, but it's also a far cry from their brothers' seven-second win. Nevertheless, they take first place, which will count toward their annual total in the state championships.

"We're just getting started," Shelby says. "By the end of the year, we'll be in top shape."

"Hopefully," Troy says, fingering his rope.

IT WAS NO SMALL MATTER of pride, then, that Jordan Gomes and Levi Rita recorded the fastest team-roping time at nationals last summer in Farmington. Nor is it any small matter of frustration that Hawaii's news media collectively failed to note the staggering accomplishment. Rodeo, like few other sports, is prohibitively expensive, a burden shouldered almost entirely by parents. When it comes time to pass the hat, most families wish the rodeo got better press — or any press at all.

"Horses aren't cheap," says Christina Gomes, Troy and Jordan's mother. From boarding and feeding, to buying equipment like saddles and bridles, to shipping horses around the state on barges, rodeo parents face a hefty bill each season. Top winners at the high school nationals can bring back prizes worth as much as a few thousand dollars, but most take home hundreds of dollars. While the overall purse for the high school nationals is about \$200,000, according to Kathy Rita, there are 1,500 competitors all vying for a slice. That's why Christina Gomes raises money by running a volunteer aid station at the annual Ironman Marathon. Collecting empty sports-drink bottles, she recycles them for cash.

"We do rodeo because of the sacrifices of our parents," Shelby says, although dreams



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of winning big money from competing in professional rodeos (as much as \$80,000 for a single event) undoubtedly fuel the aspirations of some.

The sheer cost might also explain why Hawaii exports champion ropers but not all-around horsemen and -women. Some rodeo events, such as barrel racing or cutting, demand close knowledge of a horse's habits; a rider needs a deep relationship with his or her horse. But since shipping livestock to North America from Hawaii is so pricey (\$1,650 or more), the Hawaii team rents or borrows horses from mainland ranches (\$500 and up). Roping, on the other hand, is a quick hit: A good score is determined as much by teamwork as it is by horsemanship.

"Because it's such a small state, rodeo pretty much becomes your family. You know everyone, you learn from everyone, everyone helps each other get better," says Jordan Gomes. He explains that the teams have a strong affinity for one another as a result. Gomes will attend the University of Texas this fall, competing at the college level in hopes of joining the professional rodeo circuit someday.

Halana Bertelmann-Makanani, a lanky 12-year-old with braces on her teeth and cowboy boots on her feet, sidles up beside Shelby in the bleachers when the events are finished.

"What happened with your breakaway?" Shelby wants to know.

"I just missed." Bertelmann-Makanani shrugs. "But did you see my mugging?"

"You didn't win," scolds Shelby.

"I got a time," she pouts.

"Your dismount is slow," Shelby coaches. "But don't beat yourself up about your barrel."

"I gotta kick with my inside leg."

"You gotta change your horse," says Shelby, explaining in an aside, "She's my *hanai* — it means my little adopted sister." Shelby is showing the 12-year-old the ropes, so to speak.

"We call them rodeo babies," says Christina Gomes. "I'll scold, I'll coach, I'll cheer. All the children become your children." This, Gomes says, is what makes Hawaii's team so extraordinary — so fast, and so good, even on someone else's horses. **AW**

SARAH ROSE is the author of *For All the Tea in China*, the story of the cowboy who stole tea from China.

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