

Chilean Rodeo

The Chilean Rodeo is a paired team event whereby the members of the team have to take turns between driving and pinning positions. The objective of the sport is to show control in driving a steer to a given section on the half-moon arena (called "medialuna" in Spanish) wall where some part of the side of the bovine's anatomy is pushed by the chest of the pinning horse until the steer is pinned to a standstill on the padded cushion that defines the Pinning Zone.

The Chilean Rodeo is a judged event that establishes a score that is made up of points earned, minus points deducted for faults. The positive points are determined by one point that is given to all paired teams that drive the steer correctly around the Holding Pen. In a given run with one steer the paired team will have four drives that always start off with a right hand drive and then alternate with left hand drives. The first three drives can terminate in scored pins that vary between 2-4 points depending how far back on the steer's anatomy the pin took place. The fourth drive receives no positive points as it is simply a left hand drive to exit the steer from the arena but penalty points can be assigned if there is a loss of control of the steer. Since there is one possible point earned in the holding pen and three drives that theoretically could score a maximum of four points each, the highest possible score in a run is 13 points and this is very rarely seen.

The steer is received inside of an eye-shaped holding pen (known as "apiñadero") that on one end has a gate that permits a steer to come out of a feeding chute. Once the paired team of horses and riders (known as "collera") receive the steer coming out of the chute, they drive the bovine two and a half times around the perimeter of the holding corral and upon completing this the gate of the holding pen that is on the opposing end of the feeding chute is opened up so the drive can continue in the main field of the arena

In driving the cattle across the arena to the opposite side, the trajectory and speed is a choice of a combination of the bovine's fickle mind and the shrewdness and strategies of the competitors. Before the entry into the pinning zone, there is a marker known as the Posture Line ("Línea de Postura") that indicates the start of the Posture Zone. While in this area, the horse must maintain constant contact with at least one of points of his shoulders on the steer at all times. When reaching the Entrance Line with its corresponding flag the 15 m (48.75 ft.) Posture Zone ends and the 12 m (39 ft.) Pinning Zone begins. Herein, the pinning horse must maintain full contact with points of both shoulders and must have its entire chest touching the side of the steer. This requires an excellent "postura", or perpendicular posture, by the pinning horse, which progressively pushes the steer towards the pinning cushion.

Once the bovine is inside the pinning zone, it is fair game to pin the steer anywhere on the 12 m (39 ft.) outwardly inclined, cushioned pad. Contact must be made only once and with a follow through that comes from a strong forward and upward push of the chest that is powered by digging in with the hindquarters. The driving horse and rider have the important role of "feeding in" the steer at a speed and angle that will facilitate the pinning rider to time his pin right. However, the driving rider can in no way help the pinning horse to contain the cow once the intent to pin has been initiated.

Whether the pin earned points or not, it is the objective of the pinning rider to not let the bovine get past the Sentencing Line which is marked by a second flag and a painted "vertical line at the end of the pinning cushion. For this reason, many competitors try to make strong first pins when the cattle still have a lot of energy. If they are able to pin hard and roll the steer upward, lifting its legs off the ground, the steer will often fall to the ground when the contact ends. When the steer goes down, the chances of containing the individual within the definition of the pinning cushion is practically assured.

On the contrary, a properly or improperly pinned bovine that stays on his feet requires constant pressure against the cushion to contain his forward motion until the horse can wheel its hindquarters around to block the bovine's path. Obviously, the farther back in the steer's anatomy the pin takes place, the harder it is to contain the forward motion and the more desperate is the pivot on the forequarters in order for the pinning horse to block the steer's desire to head further down the pinning cushion. For this reason, the pins that are farther back in the steer's body are assigned more points. If a pin leaves the neck free, it's a two-point pin. If the pin leaves the shoulder blade free, it's a three-point pin. If a pin leaves the entire rib cage free, it's a maximum four-point pin. One-point neck pins that leave the head free are no longer awarded.

The outward-angled pinning cushion replaced the old solid willow wickerwork construction of years past. The cushion takes away the impact, while the slanted design permits the cattle to roll back and over to also diminish the force of the collision. This newer design also was a big improvement in preventing horses from hitting their muzzles or bits against the back of the pinning wall. This was a possible reason for injury or a cause of enough pain to the bars of the mouth to make horses shy away from making more hard pins.

At this point the pinning horse will make a 90-degree turn with its hindquarters so that it's facing the bovine. The driving horse will also move 90 degrees to its right and now take on a containing stance until the bovine gets on its feet and can be enticed by the horses to change directions. At that point, the steer is urged forward towards the pinning zone on the opposite side of the arena. While moving the steer in the opposite direction, the competitors will reverse the roles of driver and pinner. Upon completion of the second pin, the horses reposition themselves yet again and drive the steer back down to the first pinning zone, where they will have a go at the third pin. Upon completion, the horses shift positions for a third time, and the steer is calmly driven along the fence line back towards the apiñadero. Adjacent to the apiñadero, a small exit gate is opened so the steer can be driven out of the arena. Any loss of control of the bovine before it leaves the arena results in a penalty point.

If for ANY reason the steer gets a nose beyond the far end of the pinning cushion, (the Sentencing Line) it costs the competitors a penalty point and no pinning points are awarded. If the steer's entire body crosses the end of the Sentencing Line, there is a two-point penalty and the competitors must take the heifer into the apiñadero and come out the nearest gate in order to head in the direction of the next required pin. There is an intricate list of more explicit rules and regulations that are detailed in the rule book of the sport. However, this brief overview of the Chilean Rodeo rules is simply to give the reader a feel for this inimitable event that is the lifeline of so many Chilean Horses.

Most importantly, Chilean Rodeos will have various divisions where horses can try to classify for the finals, or the "Champion", as it's called in Chile. The accepted paired team categories are the following: the stallion division; the mare division; the gelding division, and the mixed division. Most rodeos will have four classifying series for these divisions, with the condition that the mixed division is only for breeders who put up a mixed paired team that is from the same breeding establishment. Each of these classification series will provide paired teams that classify for the final series.

Open series are also offered (usually there are two or three of them per rodeo), whereby all paired teams of any category that have not yet classified for the finals are qualified to compete. This includes paired teams from the mixed divisions that are not from a single breeding establishment. Each of the open series will also provide paired teams that qualify for the finals. Whether it be a classifying series, an open series, or the final series, the competition for each is structured in the same manner, with four possible steers worked by the contestants that qualify with sufficient points to go on to the next steer in the competition.

After all paired teams of a given series have worked their assigned first animal, a cutoff point is determined in the scores in order to stipulate which competitors can continue. Usually, this is determined by the best 24 paired teams with scores of +1 or more, plus any teams that tied for the last spot. After these classifying contenders have had a shot at the three pins with the second steer, the points of the first and second animals are totaled, and another cutoff point for qualifiers going on to the third steer is determined. Usually, these are the best 12 paired teams plus any ties for the last slot, based on their total scores. After the qualifiers run the third steer, the total of all three previous animals determine who will have access to the fourth and final steers. Usually, this is determined by the six highest scores, plus any ties for last place after all the scores have been tallied. The highest total score will determine the series champion. A tie requires a runoff with an additional steer. Once all the paired teams have been determined for the final series, all competitors start off with a clean slate as they once again face the first of a possible four animals.

Much like NCHA cutting horse competitions, these single-event competitions can seem a bit boring to the novice spectator. At all the rodeos they offer score sheets for all the classifying and open series championships and another for the "champion", or final series. These score sheets inform the public of the names of the horses and their respective riders and breeders, as well as the horses' sex and age. All scores are announced over the loudspeaker and it's advisable to jot these scores down and keep running totals for the competitors. This is a practical manner of becoming familiar with the competitors and their horses. Pretty soon, the viewer will begin to notice performance styles and human and equine personalities, as well as good and bad fortunes that influence the end results. The progressive elimination of participants and the climaxing competition between the remaining horses and riders usually makes for a very exciting run of the fourth steer. When you have seen all the series and then settle in to the "champion", you will find that many of the protagonists are familiar to you and the finals are all the more enjoyable.

At an even higher level still is the long-standing influence of a sport that has its origins in more than 400 years of working cattle in a manner that is unique to Chile. It is a sport that had some crude objectives defined as far back as 1820, and for more than 140 years has been practiced in the spectator-oriented confines of the medialuna. It is a sport that, for more than 108 years, has used registered purebred animals specifically bred for this single event! All these facts give more meaning to having the honor of witnessing any Chilean Rodeo. However, it has special significance when you witness new national records, such as the 48 total points that the winners of the 2006 Champion of Rancagua accumulated in establishing their victory.

No doubt the "Road to the Medialuna" has been long and strenuous. However, thanks to the faithful visionaries that were confident in the abilities that made up the Chilean Horse, thanks to the government and private organizations that unselfishly devoted themselves to preserving this national treasure, and thanks to the fans of the sport

that has both justified the existence and assured the future of the Chilean Horse, we can all feel satisfied that the medialuna is here to stay and within its crescent-moon shaped perimeter, feisty and courageous purebred Chilean Horses will always be the main attraction!!