85 years of rodeo at the University: A Q&A with club sponsor Samuel Garcia

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The University of Arizona hosted the nation's first intercollegiate rodeo in 1939, organized by members of the University's Rodeo Club [1]. In the 85 years since, the competition has become a tradition for the club and the community.

The members of the club who compete in events make up the rodeo team. To compete, members must have riding experience and own a horse. The club also welcomes noncompeting members who help with events, fundraisers or the club's volunteer service at TRAK, or the Therapeutic Ranch for Animals and Kids, in Tucson.

Lo Que Pasa spoke with the club's faculty sponsor, Samuel Garcia, associate professor of practice in the Department of Animal and Biomedical sciences, as he and the club prepare for the University of Arizona Rodeo, happening March 2.

It's the 85th year for the University of Arizona Rodeo and for the Rodeo Club. Does that feel significant?

We've been around awhile. We were the first rodeo club in the United States. But I don't know if it necessarily feels significant. I know the students want to put on a well-run, fair and fun competition next month. They take that responsibility very seriously. But to put on a rodeo, there's more than just being the person doing the competing, the roping or the bull riding, right? We have several club members who are really good at organizing and planning, and see it as an opportunity to show leadership. It's something to be able to say, "I organized this event with 2,000 or 3,000 people in attendance." But I don't know if they feel the weight of history on them. There are so many people involved in putting on the event. First, we are extremely grateful to the Tucson Rodeo Committee for their advice and support and for giving us access to the rodeo grounds. They also let us do some fundraising during the Tucson Rodeo. We're also glad to have help from the club sports program at Campus Rec, who send athletic trainers to our competitions, and the veterinary college, which sends someone out in case animals need treatment.

Speaking of history, can you talk about rodeo's origins as a sport? It started out as a practical thing with cowboys showing off their skills to each other, right?

Correct. The word "rodeo" of course comes from Spanish, and it broadly means to "round up." And the sport started in Mexico, along with charreada [2] – which is a similar discipline – with the "vaqueros" who wanted to test themselves and show off their skills, and the "cowboy" evolved from that. Most of the events in modern rodeo go back to the kinds of activities that you do on a ranch – roping, riding, handling animals and all that. Probably not bull riding though. That's just a test of audacity.

Give us an overview of the sport. What events do college rodeo participants compete in?

Men compete in six events: bull riding, saddle bronc riding, bareback riding, team roping, tie-down roping and steer wrestling. Women compete in four events: barrel racing, team roping, goat tying and breakaway roping. Team roping is the one event where men and women can compete against each other, either as part of a same-sex team or a mixed pair. In college rodeo, everyone in each event scores a certain number of points based on the criteria for the event, and then those points are applied to the overall team score. Individuals who score enough points over the course of the season can qualify for the national competition. How you're scored depends on the event. If you're participating in a timed event, score is calculated based on speed, but you must cover the course without breaking any rules or you take a penalty. When it's bull or bronc riding, there are judges that evaluate the performance of the rider and the animal as well.

Tell us about the club. How many students participate?

We have about 25 students in the club, but only three are men. I should make a distinction between the rodeo club and the rodeo team. Not everyone in the club participates in the rodeo competitions. We are open to anyone who wants to participate, as long as they meet the requirements. Competing members must have their own horse and have experience riding. I personally don't rodeo myself. I grew up on a cattle ranch, so I do have some experience with animals and all that, but I don't rodeo myself because it is also a pretty expensive sport.

The University of Arizona had the first collegiate rodeo team. Give us an idea of how the sport has grown. How is it organized and where does the University fit into the scheme of things?

We compete in the Grand Canyon Region of the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association, against schools in Arizona and in New Mexico. Other schools in the region are Central Arizona College, Cochise College and Diné College in Arizona, and next door are Mesalands Community College, Navajo Technical University and New Mexico State University. Nationwide, about 600 schools compete in rodeo these days. This season will have nine competitions, 10 counting the regional in Payson in April. Four took place during the fall semester and our event is the first of the spring. Then there are...
nationals for people who qualify in a particular event. We're not the biggest team and that's made it a bit tough this season, going against schools with bigger rosters. Last year the men's team finished last out of six and the women finished fourth. But we had a couple of individuals do well. Kiara Begay won the barrel racing season competition and Bridger Sanborn came in fifth place in steer wrestling.

New Mexico State is the only other four-year institution in your region. Are there team rivalries in collegiate rodeo?

You do have some people that are very, very competitive. But often you see the Arizona kids and the New Mexico State kids and Cochise College and Central Arizona College kind of hanging out together and giving each other tips and stuff like that. So at the end of the day, someone has to win. But during the events, you know, we help each other. There's a kinship. Not a lot of people do this sport.

This year's University of Arizona Rodeo will take place Saturday, March 2 at the Tucson Rodeo Grounds, 4823 S. Sixth Ave. Events begin at 2 p.m. with overflow, or "slack," entries competing at 9 a.m. General admission runs $5 at the gate; University of Arizona students and children under 10 get in free. An open "4D" barrel racing contest at the rodeo grounds at 4 p.m. on March 1 will serve as a fundraising event for the club. For more information, visit the Rodeo Club's Facebook page.

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