

Gay Caballeros

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Hank is torn. In theory, he should adore k.d. lang for coming out proudly and defiantly in rural Alberta. But Hank, a gay man who ranches on the province's east-central plains, has other priorities. "I won't buy her CDs anymore because she stopped buying beef," he says. "I think she'd enjoy the rodeo, though."

Growing up 30 kilometers down the highway from the 4,000-acre cattle ranch where he lives today, a few miles from lang's hometown, Hank was a frequent rodeo competitor. That's what prairie kids did. Bulls and bucking broncos were left in the pasture, however, when he ran off to college and grad school; he figured he'd become a city slicker.

Then, in 1992, Hank attended his first gay rodeo in San Antonio, Texas. "That was where I felt, 'Oh my god – I'm not alone!' There's a whole community."

From its hardscrabble origins in Reno, Nevada in 1976 – local ranchers refused to rent livestock to organizers in 1975 – the gay rodeo circuit has swelled into a flourishing Can-Am tour with as many as two dozen stops in peak years. In mid January, the Road Runner Regional Rodeo in Phoenix kicked off the 2001 calendar, which will feature 18 rodeos, including unlikely destinations like Salt Lake City and Little Rock as well as the seventh annual Canadian Rockies International Rodeo in Calgary – the "international" dimension of the parent International Gay Rodeo Association.

A veteran of all six Cowtown rodeos, Hank (no last name, please) is already jacked about this summer's late-June hoe-down. With its three-day schedule of dances, prime-rib-and-baked-potato dinners, concerts by country stars like Chris Cummings, a total attendance approaching 2,000, and a full slate of traditional rodeo events, from chute dogging to barrel racing, plus camp events like the wild drag race devised to encourage beginner participation, the gay rodeo is a celebration of western heritage with an inclusive, machismo-free twist.

"There's such a sense of freedom," says Hank, 44, who refused to go to his boyfriend's aunt's wedding last summer ("maybe if it was her first wedding") because it was the same weekend as the Calgary rodeo. "I'd experienced that feeling before at the Gay Olympics in Vancouver," he continues, "but these are my people, people from a rural background who happen to be gay. If you're young, gay, and rural you don't have to run off to the city and become a hairdresser."

To engage part-time, wanna-be cowboys, gay rodeos generally feature a wide range of events guaranteed not to cripple participants. (For instance, goat dressing, which involves, naturally, dressing a goat in a pair of jockey-style underwear.) But overall, with bucking half-ton bulls to be conquered, events are challenging enough for professionals. "It's not a sissy rodeo," says Robert (not his real name), a gay rodeo regular who was raised on a farm north of Calgary. "You've got to be tough. You're working with real live animals. There's danger in it – I've seen quite a few people get injured and packed out."

Accordingly, the greater the danger, the greater the stakes. A handful of old-school cowboys who make the gay rodeo rounds, travelling from the Southern Spurs Rodeo in Atlanta to the Sierra Stampede in Sacramento, earn a living from their winnings. Of course, they have to supplement earnings by competing in mainstream rodeos – which is one of the reasons why The Roost, Edmonton's largest gay nightclub, is packed when the Canadian Finals Rodeo swings through town every November. Much of the extra business can be attributed to the thousands of tourists in the city to watch the CFR, says Roost manager Carl Austin. But if there are closeted gay men playing in the NHL, then pro rodeo world, one of the twenty-first century's last bastions of machoism, is certainly no exception.

For Robert, 37, the gay rodeo circuit has offered Stetson-capped

salvation. Still dealing with his recent homosexual awakening, he's found community and acceptance on the tour – and won some prize money, too. He was last year's all-around Canadian champ in Calgary and he almost broke into the Top 10 against some tough American competition in Phoenix in January.

Not bad for a guy who, as a teen, watched from the sidelines while friends and family members competed. "It was very intimidating," he says about the traditional rodeo atmosphere he was surrounded by while growing up. "I didn't feel comfortable there. I had all the opportunities in the world – my closest friends and neighbours rode rodeo, so it wasn't that I didn't have the right connections. I just didn't feel comfortable."

Two years ago, when he came out to his family, a lot of things changed for Robert. He began attempting to reconcile his rural background and demeanor with a sexual orientation considered (at least stereotypically, and in North American pop culture) to be very urban. Support from his family helped; after Robert explained to his mother that he was gay, his mom told his father, who surprised Robert by saying "nothing's changed. You're still the same person you were before. We accept you the same as we always did." But there was still that disconcerting rural-urban hurdle to clear. And taking in his first gay rodeo after stumbling upon the scene through a friend has been a tremendous confidence booster for Robert.

"I'm more at ease with myself now," he says, reflecting on his fledgling stint on the tour, which began last year at the annual Las Vegas extravaganza. "I don't feel as intimidated by other people. I'm more sure of myself."

Organizers of the Calgary rodeo, held on a private ranch on the outskirts of the city, are sure of themselves, too. Even in Alberta – the province that launched Stockwell Day and was admonished by the Supreme Court of Canada for not protecting the rights of fired gay teacher Delwin Vriend – the rodeo has faced surprisingly minimal controversy since its debut.

Current rodeo director Kevin Murray remembers a photo of a man wearing a wedding dress appearing in newspapers across the continent in Year One, an unfortunate representation because most competitors were clad in jeans and plaid shirts. There were also some protestors that summer – animal rights activists.

Hank, in fact, considers the Alberta countryside a tolerant

environment. As long as you're a contributing member of society and rein in the outlandish behavior, he says it's relatively easy to be a gay rancher. "I'm not going to walk down the road holding my boyfriend's hand and kissing him," he says, "but my neighbours don't walk down the road kissing their wives, either. People are accepting of you as long as you carry your own weight. Don't put rural people down. Most have satellite TVs and they get *Will & Grace*."

South of the border, there have been a couple of homophobic incidents. Some yahoo fired off a few rounds outside the Corona Ranch in Phoenix a couple years back, according to Murray, and organizers of a rodeo in Washington state's bible belt once received a telephone threat. "It was a wonderful setting," laments Murray. "There were beautiful hills. But there might have been snipers in the hills." (Last year's Calgary rodeo also sparked some controversy: members of a Denver-based gay clog dancing troupe say they were harassed and denied entry into Canada by customs officers at the Sweetgrass border crossing after a vehicle search turned up wigs and female clothing that female impersonators planned to wear while performing at the rodeo.)

Yet those anecdotes are exceptions. Heck, at the inaugural Salt Lake City rodeo in Mormon-soaked Utah last year, the mayor served as the grand marshal and media coverage was positive. "If Salt Lake City can host a gay rodeo and be wildly successful, there's nowhere we can't go," says Doug Graff, the IGRA's California-based spokesperson, 1999's "Mr. Gay Rodeo" for fund-raising purposes, and a talented bull rider who'll be back in the saddle whenever his torn rotator cuff heals. "That's our mission," he continues, "to support country-western heritage and lifestyle in the gay community."

"I can't tell you how many times I've gotten choked up about doing what we're doing and loving it so much," Graff adds, describing a transcendent moment in Albuquerque where a rider from Utah rode a bull that had never been tamed before with jaw-dropping grace and beauty.

With Bud Lite on board as a sponsor, gay rodeo is growing, another example of the mainstream world accepting the legitimacy of gay culture and the gay dollar. "We've worked with some major redneck stock contractors," says Graff, "but thank God for the almighty green dollar." Even in Alberta, in conservative, oil capital Calgary, it's a good sell. "Calgary is all about making money," offers

Hank. "They really don't give a shit about anything else."

Case in point, the Calgary Stampede. It's one of the largest rodeos in the world, an organization one might expect to be overly cautious about its image. Yet Stampede officials have agreed to rent one of their indoor arenas to the Alberta Rockies Gay Rodeo Association should they land the IGRA finals rodeo later this decade. "Our sales department is always looking for new uses for our facilities – we do not discriminate at all," says Jodi Johnson, the Stampede's media and publicity manager, calling the gay rodeo just another potential business partner.

"As far as we're concerned, business is business," Pat Bell of the Calgary Convention & Visitors Bureau responds when asked about the rodeo's impact on Cowtown. "The cash register has no opinion."

Neither do the bulls.

