



Events plentiful both inside, outside the arena

LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL • TUESDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2013

NATIONAL FINALS RODEO

Tuf Cooper Tuesday is born

Reigning champ takes to social media like a duck to water

By PATRICK EVERSON

LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

After last year's National Finals Rodeo, when Tuf Cooper went home to Decatur, Texas, with a second straight gold buckle as the world's best tie-down roper, some fans got the idea that Cooper needed to up his social media presence.

Never mind that he already had one of the largest fanbases among rodeo cowboys. It was time to expand deeper into the Twitterverse.

So a tweet was sent out with a picture of the 23-year-old. Cooper retweeted it. And before long, those tweets evolved into a trend, which evolved into what is now called Tuf Cooper Tuesday.

"My fans on Twitter created it," Cooper said. "They send pictures of me to my Twitter feed, and I would retweet them. They had messages like 'Happy Tuf Cooper Tuesday.' Sometimes they'd tweet single pictures, sometimes collages, and they'd think it was pretty cool that I would retweet them."

"It's really cool that my fans want to get together like that. I thought it was the coolest thing in the world. I don't know who it was that started it. I just started retweeting, and after that, it just caught on. They're sending them left and right. It just shows how great rodeo fans are and how blessed I am to have them."

Such social media savvy goes a long way toward explaining Cooper's popularity. He has a whopping 26,030 Twitter followers, and he's approaching 70,000 "likes" on his Facebook fan page. Cooper said both those numbers are among the largest for cowboys. And Tuf Cooper Tuesday has even expanded to satellite radio, with Cooper doing a weekly segment at 3:40 p.m. Pacific on Sirius XM's Rural Radio.

"We are working on it every day," Cooper said of reaching out to his fan base, noting he is aided by manager Shawn Wiese. "Without fans, what I get to do is not possible. Without them, it would just be a sport in a pasture."

Instead, Cooper is a rising star in rodeo, making his sixth NFR appearance as he goes after his third world title. Entering this year's 10-day event, he led tie-down roping with 2013 earnings of \$135,164, more than \$37,000 ahead of second-place Tyson Durfey. Despite that lead, he's keeping a level head, understanding



Tuf Cooper of Decatur, Texas, competes in calf roping in the third go-around of the National Finals Rodeo at the Thomas & Mack Center in 2010. In 2011 and 2012 he won gold buckles in the sport. This year, he is going for his third straight world title.

► SEE COOPER PAGE 4
Tie-down roper in the zone

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Today's events at the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo



Gary Leffew's Legendary Buck 'n Ball at the Gold Coast is a nightly event.



Neal McCoy will sing the national anthem to start the action in the arena.

TUESDAY, DEC. 10

Tip of the Day — The Gold Coast plays host each night to Gary Leffew's Legendary Buck 'n Ball (8 p.m.) and to the National Finals Tonight Show (10:30 p.m.).

NFR 9-5

- 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. — Cowboy FanFest, Las Vegas Convention Center
- 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. — Cowboy Christmas, Las Vegas Convention Center
- 12 p.m. - 1 p.m. — Outside the Barrel with Flint Rasmussen
- 12 p.m. - 2 p.m. — Wrangler NFR Autograph Session (Bull Riders), Treasure Island (inside Gilley's)
- 3:15 p.m. - 4:15 p.m. — The Not So Newwed Game, Cowboy FanFest



Willie Nelson performs at the Golden Nugget.

NFR IN ARENA

- 6:45 p.m. National anthem singer — Neal McCoy
- 7 p.m. — Sixth Go-Round NFR Performance, Thomas & Mack Center

NFR AFTER DARK

- 5 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. — Mechanical Bull Riding Contest, Sam's Town
- 6:30 p.m. - 4 a.m. — Rodeo Vegas 2013,

- The Mirage
- 8 p.m. - 2 a.m. — Gary Leffew's Legendary Buck 'n Ball, Gold Coast
- 9 p.m. - 3 a.m. — Gold Buckle Zone, MGM Grand
- 10:30 p.m. - 11:30 p.m. — National Finals Tonight Show, Gold Coast
- 11 p.m. — Go-Round Buckle Presentations, South Point

ENTERTAINMENT

- 5 p.m. — ACA Awards, Mandalay Bay
- 9 p.m. — Damsel, LoCash Cowboys and Neal McCoy
- 9:30 p.m. — Cody Johnson, South Point
- 10 p.m. — Willie Nelson, Golden Nugget
- 10 p.m. — Rodney Carrington, MGM Grand

- 10 p.m. — Brit Strokes Band, The Mirage

Highlight of the Day — Trace Adkins and Danica Patrick host the 4th annual ACA Awards at Mandalay Bay.

For a complete listing of events, go to www.NFRexperience.com or follow us on Facebook or Twitter at /LasVegasNFR #WranglerNFR.

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Colletti competes through pain to gain share of victory

Struggling to get up off the Thomas & Mack Center arena floor after being bucked off in Round 4, bareback rider Casey Colletti was at his lowest point of the week.

Just one night removed from suffering a sprained medial collateral ligament when Frontier Rodeo's Full Baggage sent him flying after a successful ride, Colletti was in serious pain, both mentally and physically. His right knee throbbing and his mind wondering what the rest of his third career Wrangler National Finals Rodeo would be like, Colletti was helped out of the arena with his head hanging.

"I was at ground level," said the 27-year-old from Pueblo, Colo. "I was in the dirt yesterday and last night. I was just fighting my head bad.

"I didn't know what to do. I've been healthy the last couple of years, but it's just tough when you get hurt because there's nothing you can do. There's really not a good injury to have in the bareback riding, maybe your free-arm wrist."

After a day spent treating the knee and a bang-up tape job by the Wrangler NFR medical personnel, Colletti "cowboyed up" and showed his true mettle Monday night. He spurred Pickett Pro Rodeo's Top Flight for 87.5 points and tied four-time World Champion Bobby Mote for the round victory.

It was Colletti's first check since the opening round and was a boost that had him beaming from ear to ear after the dust settled.

"Today, I just knew I had a chance, because J.R. Vezain won the 10th Flight last year," said Colletti, who also won Round 5 at last year's Finals. "I'm through the ceiling right now with confidence."

That wasn't the case hours before, as Colletti knew the prospect of riding a bucking horse with a bum knee was less than ideal.

"It's not very easy," Colletti said of riding with a knee injury. "Tonight was a little bit easier because the horse was just super amazing and outstanding, leaping in the air and giving me a lot of time. When you get that pressure pushing on it and your knee tweaks a little bit, it hurts."

A sprained MCL eliminates an athlete's ability to maneuver his leg as a bareback rider must. And the pain can be shocking.

"It's not stable with a twist or a move," Colletti said. "If I can walk straight where my knee stays in line and doesn't move, it's outstanding. If I'm in bed and roll over and catch it on the sheets, oh man, there's a wet spot later."

Neal Reid
IN THE ARENA



Hours of treatment that included ice, heat, riding a stationary bicycle and laser treatment, coupled with a pound of medical tape, had Colletti raring to go on Tough Enough To Wear Pink Night.

"My hat's off to the Justin SportsMedicine Team and Dr. Tandy Freeman and those guys," he said. "Last night, we kind of had trouble getting my knee taped and tightened well, but tonight we knocked it out of the ballpark."

"I don't even want to take off the tape right now. I just want to leave it on for five more days."

Colletti was the third of 15 riders to nod his head on Monday night, so he had to wait through a dozen more rides to see whether his score would hold up. With many of the event's best horses in the Round 5 pen, Colletti was considerably nervous as he watched the other riders.

"It's kind of tough sitting up there on the bucking chutes being the third guy out," he said. "You're going, 'Do good, but not good enough.' We're all friends and buddies and all want to win, so it's crazy."

Mote was awarded a re-ride after Carr Pro Rodeo's Night Bells had a bad outing, and he made the most of it on Andrews Rodeo's PTSD Power Play. Mote and Colletti each took home checks for \$16,678 for splitting first and second, cash that serves as good medicine for Colletti.

"It makes all the pain go away," he said. Mote began this year's Wrangler NFR battling the flu and has ridden through several injuries during his illustrious career, so he can relate to what Colletti is dealing with.

"For the first three days, I was having trouble getting out of bed coming here," said Mote, who regained the No. 1 spot in the world standings with the first-place tie. "If you're going to choose this event, it's a given you're going to have to deal with being sore. Winning will make you walk around a lot better, too."

A freelance writer based in Colorado Springs, Colo., Neal Reid spent six years as editor of the ProRodeo Sports News. His writing has appeared in USA Today, Newsday, Western Horseman, American Cowboy and the Denver Post, among other publications. Follow him on Twitter: @NealReid21.



Bareback rider Casey Colletti does interviews in the Wrangler NFR press room after splitting first place with Bobby Mote on Monday night.

★ COWBOY FANFEST TODAY ★

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 10



ALEXIS BLOOMER LIVE
10:30 a.m. - 11:15 a.m.
Caleb Smidt
Taylor Jacobs
Justin Davis
Michele McLeod



"OUTSIDE THE BARREL" WITH FLINT RASMUSSEN
12:00 p.m. - 1:00 p.m.
Tyson Durfey
Tuf Cooper
Brittany Pozzi
Casey Colletti
Shea Fisher



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1:15 p.m. - 2:00 p.m.
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11:15 a.m. - 11:50 a.m.

CELEBRITY NOT SO NEWLYWED GAME 3:15 p.m. - 4:15 p.m.



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10:30 a.m. - 11:30 a.m.



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RANCH SORTING
3:00 p.m. - 3:45 p.m.



MINI BUCKING BULLS
4:00 p.m. - 4:45 p.m.

AUTOGRAPH SESSIONS

Guy McLean - 1:00 p.m. - 1:30 p.m.
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NFR



► COOPER: Roper in the zone

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

there's a lot of money on the line at the NFR, and he could easily be caught. "It's the same as before, the same plan as it's always been. Show up and do the best job I can every night, win as much money as I can every time I nod my head," Cooper said. "Just because you have that cushion doesn't mean you change anything."

The two-month break following the regular season worked out well, giving Cooper a chance to rest a bit, then get after finding ways to improve. "That's the only time we really get a break. That's our offseason, but we're also getting ready for our Super Bowl at the same time," he said. "It's kind of like a bow and arrow. You pull the arrow back before you let it fly, take a step back before you go forward."

Much of Cooper's effort came in the weight room, as he added 10 pounds of muscle over the past two months.

"And I'm trying to get more strength, more control," he said.

That work ethic allows him to be more at peace in what can be a nerve-racking atmosphere at the Thomas & Mack Center, with 17,000-plus fans on hand 10 nights in a row.

"I get zoned in on doing my job. I don't get nervous because I know I've prepared myself. I give God all my worries," he said.

But he's not so in the zone that he's oblivious to the arena's energy.

"The atmosphere is amazing," he said. "I enjoy the Grand Entry every night.

TUF COOPER

Event: Tie-down roping
2013 world standing/earnings: First, \$135,164 (regular season)

Residence: Decatur, Texas

National Finals Rodeo qualifications: Six (2008-13)

World titles: Two (2011-12)

Noteworthy: Cooper is going for his third straight world title, and he's been remarkably consistent since first qualifying for the NFR in 2008. That year, he finished fourth in the world standings. He finished second in the world in 2009 and 2010, and he took the 2011 crown with season earnings of \$192,042, and the 2012 title with a whopping total of \$232,885.



And throughout the whole week, all of Las Vegas is amazing. If you're a fan of rodeo, for the first two weeks of December, Las Vegas is the place to be."

And if you can't get to the arena, well, you can certainly connect with Cooper in the social media sphere. He and his manager set a goal of reaching 75,000 Facebook "likes" before the NFR started. He certainly appreciates the input from fans on both Facebook and Twitter, although sometimes people get a little carried away.



DAVID BECKER/LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Tuf Cooper jumps from his horse at the National Finals Rodeo last year.

"For the most part, it's all good, solid marriage proposals, that's for sure. Those are awesome." feedback," Cooper said. "But there's daily

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