



NATIONAL FINALS RODEO



JOHN LOCHER/LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Travis Graves, left, and Kaleb Driggers compete in the team roping event on the first night of the National Finals Rodeo on Thursday at the Thomas & Mack Center. The two are going their separate ways after the NFR, but will pick up new partners next year. Driggers will team with Patrick Smith, and Graves will partner with Smith's teammate, Trevor Brazile.

Team's breakup natural

Ropers say shaking things up keeps them competitive year after year

By PATRICK EVERSON
LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

When the National Finals Rodeo wraps up on Saturday night at the Thomas & Mack Center, Kaleb Driggers and Travis Graves will head their separate ways, which is not uncommon in team roping, even among the best duos.

But until then, both of them will keep trying to help each other grab a first world championship gold buckle.

"We're good buddies," said Driggers, from Albana, Ga. "It's kind of like any other business deal. You finish one job, and move onto the next job. I've never

lost sight of trying to win a world title this year."

Driggers entered the NFR second among team roping headers, and Graves was second among heelers, which is where both remained through Monday's fifth round. Driggers has earned \$127,981 and Graves \$132,603, including \$14,724 apiece for taking second in the fourth round and another \$7,813 each for taking fourth in the fifth round.

Driggers nearly got a world title in 2012, taking second while helping Jade Corkill of Fallon win the heeler world championship. Corkill moved on to rope with Clay Tryan this year, and those are the two that Driggers and Graves are trying to catch.

"The first couple of nights, we didn't

draw worth a darn," Driggers said. "Now we've made (some) clean runs, we cashed two nights in a row. We just need to keep doing what we've been doing. This is what we do for business, to make money. If we keep doing that, the world title will take care itself."

Graves of Morgan Mill, Texas, acknowledges the impending team switch enters his mind, but not so much that it's affected his focus.

"It makes it hard, I'm not gonna lie," Graves said. "But Kaleb and I have worked together all year long, and these 10 days at the NFR are the most important time. I'll do my job and do the best I can do, and let the rest take care of itself."

"I feel really good. I've just got to

worry about my job and do my part."

Driggers and Graves surely will be quite competitive again next year, because their new partners are also among the best in the world. Graves will join 10-time all-around world champion Trevor Brazile, and Brazile's longtime teammate, Patrick Smith, will pair up with Driggers.

"Sometimes you just need to change it up," Graves said. "Team roping is complicated. There aren't too many people that do team roping together for very long. Trevor and Patrick have roped together for seven years. That's a long time."

► SEE TEAM ROPING PAGE 4

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Today's events at the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo



A variety of entertainment can be found outside the arena. Sam's Town offers mechanical bull riding, at left. Also, many singers offer after-the-rodeo concerts, such as Justin McBride, above, at The Mirage.

WEDNESDAY, DEC. 11

Tip of the Day — Sam's Town offers mechanical bull riding competitions twice daily (5 p.m. & 8:30 p.m.) with \$2,000 in cash/free play and championship buckles awarded each day.

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 (Barrel Wrestlers) - Golden Nugget
- 1:15 p.m. - 2 p.m. — Rodeo Live Unplugged with Lucas Hoge (Cowboy FanFest)

NFR IN ARENA

- 6:45 p.m. — National anthem singer, Military Personnel
- 7 p.m. — Seventh Go-Round NFR Performance, Thomas & Mack



Members of the U.S. military will be singing the national anthem at the start of tonight's National Finals Rodeo.

NFR AFTER DARK

- 5 p.m. & 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

CONCERTS

- 7:30 p.m. — Shania Twain, Caesars Palace
- 9 p.m. — Damsel, LoCash Cowboys and Neal McCoy, MGM Grand
- 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. — Justin McBride, The Mirage

Highlight of the Day — Rodeo legend and country singer Justin McBride takes the stage at The Mirage's Rodeo Vegas 2013 party. Free admission, The Mirage Race & Sports Book.

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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Slack gets his second chance at NFR after 17-year absence

Most Pro Rodeo cowboys' careers have a shelf life, but tie-down roper Shane Slack is getting a second chance at glory 17 years down the line.

The 38-year-old from DeQueen, Ark., (he now lives in Idabel, Okla.) is one of the feel-good stories of this year's Wrangler National Finals Rodeo. Seventeen years ago, he rode into Las Vegas as the 1996 Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association Resistol overall and tie-down roping rookie of the year — ahead of none other than Trevor Brazile — and finished 12th.

The next nine years were a blur as Slack fell into the clutches of a diabolical substance abuse problem that derailed all his plans and goals in the sport and turned his life upside down. Even now, he finds it difficult to talk about that dark time.

"I went through some stuff and got mixed up in some things I shouldn't have," Slack said. "When I was a kid, I had a relationship with God, but I got away from that. What I was mixed up in had my senses hindered."

"It was really bad." Fast-forward to five years ago, and Slack realized that he wanted to take control of his life again. He began working to reclaim his grip and used a reinvigorated faith to guide him along the way.

"I've felt kind of led to do this deal," said Slack, a member of the Choctaw nation and former Indian National Finals Rodeo all-around champion. "I just gave it all back to God one day. I know my relationship (with God) is where it should be now, and for me, it doesn't get any better than that."

"I was wanting to change, but it was a hard and long process."

It was a long, tough road that was not without its share of setbacks, but Slack persevered. Four years ago, he began roping again, and two years ago, he bought a horse named Nitro from Jackie Moore in Missouri.

"He can run really hard, and that gives me lots of chances on a lot of different calves," said Slack, who learned to rope from his father, Steve.

"His speed is what I feel like has gotten me where I am."

Riding 10-year-old Nitro and buoyed by his faith, Slack has stayed away from the temptations that sidelined him and began to win again in the arena. Despite a tendency to stress about the rigors of going up and down the road week in and week out, Slack regained his roping form.

Neal Reid
IN THE ARENA



"It's been really hard to stick it out (all season) because of the mental part of it and the ups and downs," Slack said. "I wanted to quit. But I knew that if I did the next thing I felt led to do, I wouldn't feel comfortable starting if I didn't finish this first one. It's been a long, hard deal for me."

"Winning a little bit gave me the initiative to keep staying at it."

Slack won Rodeo Austin, among others, and finished 25th in the world standings last year, a performance that led him to believe he had a chance to return to Las Vegas. With big wins in Woodlake, Calif., Klamath Falls, Ore., and a fistful of checks, Slack qualified for this year's Wrangler NFR in the 11th spot with \$69,664 in earnings.

He placed in the second, third and fifth rounds to add another \$18,930 to his bank account and heads into tonight's seventh round second in the highly important aggregate standings. The experience of being back at the NFR this year has been a thrill for Slack, though competing in the world's richest rodeo brings with it added pressure.

"The stress level of this deal is really hard, but I've got to try and rise above that if I can," he said. "I've had some good times because I've had some good things happen here at the rodeo. It's like a dream come true."

Mike Johnson, a 23-time Wrangler NFR qualifier, traveled with Slack during the 1996 season and couldn't be happier to see his friend back in the saddle at the NFR.

"It's remarkable to go through a 17-year stretch, have some personal issues he's had to overcome and turn his life around," Johnson said. "I know that for anybody who even takes a month off it's hard to come back, and a year almost becomes a miracle to get back into it. To get back out on the road and make it to the National Finals after 17 years, that's beyond a miracle to me."

"He's roped great, his dad has been a really big part of his life, and I'm glad to see it."

Slack is a different man than the



NEAL REID/SPECIAL TO THE LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Tie-down roper Shane Slack says his horse, Nitro, has been one of the keys to his return to this year's Wrangler National Finals Rodeo after a 17-year absence.

21-year-old who sauntered into the Thomas & Mack Center nearly two decades ago, and he is grateful for his second chance.

"It makes you realize lots of things that are important and that a lot of things aren't as big of a deal to you," Slack said of overcoming his ordeal.

"It changes you, for sure, a whole lot in

a lot of good ways. I'm really thankful for the big picture of being here and thank God for it."

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.

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AUTOGRAPH SESSIONS

2013 Miss Rodeo America Chanae Shiner - 11:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

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

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KALEB DRIGGERS

TRAVIS GRAVES



Event: Team roping
World standing/earnings: Driggers (header), second, \$127,981; Graves (heeler), second, \$132,603
Residence: Driggers, Albany, Ga; Graves, Morgan Mill, Texas
National Finals Rodeo qualifications: Driggers, three (2011-13); Graves, five (2008, 2010-13)
Noteworthy: Both ropers are seeking their first world championship. Driggers teamed up with Jade Corkill of Fallon, in the 2012 season, and Corkill won the world heeler title, while Driggers was second among headers. Graves partnered with Clay Tryan in the 2012 season, and Graves finished eighth in the world header standings. Driggers and Graves will again change up partners for the 2014 season; 10-time all-around world champion Trevor Brazile and partner Patrick Smith are splitting after a seven-year run, and Graves will join Brazile, while Driggers will ride alongside Smith.



Header Kaleb Driggers, right, keeps things steady as heeler Travis Graves, left, goes in for the kill during competition Sunday at the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo at the Thomas & Mack Center.

► **TEAM ROPING:** Audience of NFR fans is loud at Thomas & Mack Center

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Regardless of how the week finishes out for these teammates, it won't taint Graves opinion of the NFR. This is his fifth trip to the season-ending event.

"I enjoy all of it," he said. "Sure, when you don't do good, you're disappointed. But with the money you can win, you can't beat that. And all the fans. These are huge rodeo fans, and it's loud. It's the best place in the world you could ever

rope."
 Driggers is on his third trip to the NFR. He and Graves have pocketed \$22,536 apiece through five rounds of roping, but Driggers knows there's a pile of cash yet to be won, and that's his

prime motivation at this rodeo.
 "This rodeo is about the money. It's gotta be the money," he said. "We can make more this week than we make all year. It's nice to come and rope for that kind of money."

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