

Weekend in the Life of a Wrangler NFR Fan - by Haley Sansom

For most, the beginning of December means it's time for final exams, last minute shopping and holiday parties. For the Entertainment Capital of the World, December means one thing: the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo. Each year, thousands of rodeo fans from around the world travel to Las Vegas to witness the top cowboys and cowgirls compete for the title of world champion.

As someone who has lived in Las Vegas for two years but had never been to the rodeo, I decided this year was my year to experience what everyone in the city has been talking about. I decided to fully commit to the experience and spend a whole weekend observing the WNFR as the fans do. I would quickly learn that Las Vegas does not disappoint when it comes to entertaining rodeo fans.

I didn't have tickets until the fourth performance on Sunday, Dec. 8, but that didn't stop me from watching the rodeo. For the first performance I attended the South Point's viewing party and the buckle presentation.

The highlight of the night was when team roper Riley Minor proposed to his girlfriend of six years on stage before accepting his first buckle of the 2013 WNFR, and the room was filled with "awwws" and applause.



Round 2 of the WNFR brought me to Gold Coast. After watching the rodeo at their viewing party, I hung out to watch the National Finals Tonight Show hosted by Don Gay, Joe Beaver and Dan Miller. The guests for this night included actor Josh Lucas, Shane Hanchey, Boyd Polhamus and bull fighter Dusty Tuckness.

After the show, The Farm took the stage upstairs at the Buck'n Ball, where there was plenty of two-stepping and line dancing.



On Saturday morning, I woke up bright and early to get some Christmas shopping done at Cowboy Christmas.

A picture can't do the 300,000-square-foot shopping extravaganza justice. The gift show offers everything from apparel and jewelry to home decor and rodeo equipment, not to mention enough cowboy boots for the entire city of Las Vegas.



My first stop was the Boot Barn booth to look for a belt. Actually, I shouldn't even call it a booth, because it was as big as a normal Boot Barn store.



I also explored some of the home decor booths. I stumbled across the Arizona Tube Art booth, which sells candle holders made from steel tubing.

I bought my first Christmas present of the season at a booth called Art from the Farm, which makes barbed wire art.



Cowboy FanFest, which is adjacent to Cowboy Christmas, had live entertainment all morning and afternoon. The Alexis Bloomer Live show was all about family this morning with brothers Tuf and Clif Cooper, their sister Shada Brazile and cousin Stetson Vest.



After the Alexis Bloomer Live Show, Flint Rasmussen took the stage for his “Outside the Barrel Show” with his guests Cesar de la Cruz, Derrick Begay, Trevor Knowles and Craig Campbell.



Most women love shopping, and while I love shopping, I love food even more. Lunchtime at Cowboy FanFest presented me with many options. I looked around and decided that a baked potato with all the fixings and a side of chili was just what I needed.





After I was full, I headed back out for more shopping. As I continued to wander, I found the booth for Montana Silversmiths, the company that makes the gold buckles for the WNFR.



Last but not least, I ventured to the booths with rodeo equipment and tack. While I know next to nothing about rodeo equipment, the booths were impressive, like this one selling every color Cactus rope you could want.

Later that night, I entertained myself at Sam's Town by watching the Mechanical Bull Riding Contest, where WNFR fans competed for cash prizes. They may not have been as good as the athletes competing in the WNFR, but there were a lot of impressive eight-second rides.

I woke up on Sunday excited that it was finally time for my first WNFR.

That afternoon, I put on my Wrangler gear and my boots and I was ready to go. My first stop was the iconic Las Vegas sign, located at the south end of the Strip.



Next stop, the Bellagio fountains, because no tourist day on the Strip would be complete without seeing at least one show.



Since I was close, I decided to grab an early dinner at PBR Rock Bar, located inside Planet Hollywood.

Pictured at the top of the menu, the “Bucking Bull Fries” appetizer instantly caught my eye. The french fries are covered in cheese, buffalo sauce and bacon, and like I said before, I love food, so these were right up my alley.



For my main entree, I ordered the “Chicken Mac N’ Cheese,” which was loaded with chicken, broccoli, bacon and tomatoes. My friend ordered a pulled pork sandwich with a side of barbecue baked beans.

While we waited for our food to arrive, I noticed the mechanical bull in the corner of the restaurant and decided it was time to check something else off of my bucket list.

I approached the bull with equal parts fear and excitement as I hopped on it for the first time. It might not have been the most graceful ride, but I can officially say I rode a mechanical bull, even though I did fall off.





We finished the meal quickly because I was running a little late to check in to the hotel. I arrived at The Mirage at 4:30 and had to check into our room and catch the 5:00 shuttle to the Thomas & Mack Center. Thankfully, the line was not too long on a Sunday afternoon, and they had plenty of WNFR decorations for me to admire while I waited.

After I checked in, it was a mad dash to drop off my bags in the room and get to the shuttle location. Luckily, I made it with about two minutes to spare.



When the shuttle dropped me off, I immediately entered the ProRodeo Zone, where I could interact with different vendors, such as RAM. The most popular booth was the one handing out free hot chocolate, since the temperature had dropped to 37 degrees.



Finally, the moment I had been waiting for all day was here. Having never stepped foot inside the Thomas & Mack during the rodeo, it was a dream come true to walk up those steps and through the doors.



Once inside, I hung out at the Cowboy Corral to enjoy free live entertainment from The Rowdy Band, who competed in a “Battle of the Bands” competition earlier in the month to perform here.



At 6:30 I headed to my seat to catch the National Anthem and opening act. There is no greater sight than that of 17,000+ rodeo fans removing their cowboy hats and praising our country.

I have watched the rodeo many times on television, and one of my favorite parts has always been the Grand Entry, when they introduce the contestants and the states they represent. Seeing this in person was probably my favorite part of the day.

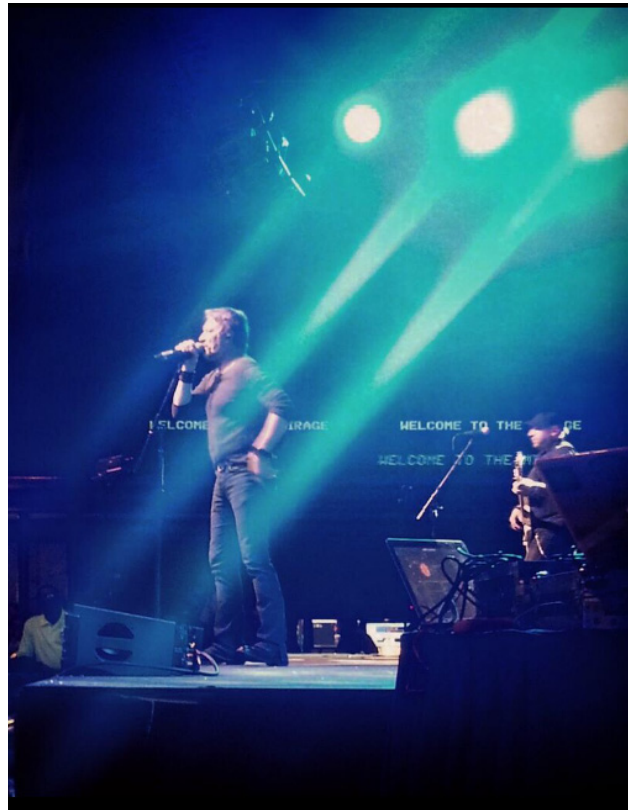


After that, it was time to ride! The fourth performance of the 2013 WNFR didn't disappoint.



The rodeo ended at 9:00 p.m., but the night was not over yet. The shuttle took us back to The Mirage, where Craig Morgan was performing for free at the Rodeo Vegas Party at 10:00 p.m.

The place was packed with cowboys and cowgirls waiting to hear Craig Morgan sing his hits "That's What I Love About Sundays" and "Redneck Yacht Club."



After the show at 11:30, it was time to officially check experience the WNFR off my list and get some sleep. Who knew that being a rodeo fan could be so exhausting.