

NATIONAL FINALS RODEO

# It's all about experience

*O'Brien Cooper an old hat when it comes to team roping*



JOHN LOCHER/LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Clay O'Brien Cooper, left, and Jake Barnes compete in the team roping event during the seventh round of the National Finals Rodeo at the Thomas & Mack Center on Dec. 9, 2008.

By PATRICK EVERSON

LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Clay O'Brien Cooper is old enough to be the father of many of his team roping peers. Yet Father Time still hasn't caught up to the 52-year-old, who is competing in his 27th National Finals Rodeo, his 23rd at the Thomas & Mack Center.

O'Brien Cooper made his first NFR in 1981, and he's bagged seven world championships in the past 32 years. Last year, he made another run at the team roping title, working with Chad Masters. The two won the NFR average — the best aggregate time over the 10 rounds — helping Masters win the header world crown as O'Brien Cooper took second in the heeler world standings, just \$1,131 short of the title.

O'Brien Cooper, a Gardnerville resident, is back this year with a new

CLAY O'BRIEN COOPER

**Event:** Team roping  
**World standing/earnings:** 14th, \$65,643  
**Residence:** Gardnerville  
**National Finals Rodeo qualifications:** 27 (1981-95, 1997-98, 2000-04, 2006-08, 2012-13); seven world titles (1985-89, 1992, 1994)  
**Noteworthy:** O'Brien Cooper, a team roping heeler, is still making hay at the age of 52, competing strongly enough to put himself in world title contention. In 2012, O'Brien Cooper roped with Chad Masters and won the NFR average title, with a total time of 73.4 seconds for 10 rounds, and he finished second in the world standings with \$189,666 — just \$1,131 behind Jade Corkill. O'Brien Cooper is roping this year with 31-year-old Justin Van Davis.



partner, Justin Van Davis, a 31-year-old making his NFR debut. The two are hardly strangers, having known each

other for 15 years, but they've roped together only a few times several years ago, and Davis had never tried to rope

enough in a season to earn an NFR berth.

"When you start out the year, you have the expectation of hopefully having a good year," O'Brien Cooper said. "But somewhere along the line, each year is gonna present its obstacles. You just have to be committed to press through."

"Our year started off where we didn't do really good at rodeos that counted toward the NFR. But then we won at Houston, which was good even though that one doesn't count in the standings. Then we had a really good spring, and we established ourselves in the top 15 in the standings."

It was a rough summer, and the two were in and out of the top 15 in their respective standings, but did just enough late in the season to hang on. O'Brien Cooper finished 14th with

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*Going strong at 52*

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NFR

# Judges relish pressure-packed duty

Sports fans love to yell at referees and officials. It's a hobby for some, who blurt out profanity-laced diatribes like they're going out of style. The practice is much more subdued in ProRodeo, but the sport's officials aren't immune to the attacks.



Neal Reid  
IN THE ARENA

At the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo, the 14 judges and pro officials who don the black-and-white-striped-vests to decide scores in the roughstock events and oversee the timed events receive mostly good-natured ribbing when fans don't agree with their marks or calls.

Highly trained and specially selected by rodeo administrators, ProRodeo judges and officials are immensely important to the \$6.25 million event.

They decide whether they think saddle bronc riders miss their horses out of the chutes, determine whether roughstock cowboys make it to the eight-second whistle and determine whether they think the timed-event contestants have broken the barrier.

Judges can't miss the slightest detail or fail to see anything that happens in the arena because tens of thousands of dollars and gold buckles are on the line.

And they often draw the ire of some of the more than 17,000 fans filling the Thomas & Mack Center each night.

"We're going to get booed," said George Gibbs, who has been a judge at 27 of the 29 Wrangler NFRs held in Las Vegas, including this year's. "The crowd doesn't completely understand our scoring system 100 percent. Or, you're going to get booed in the timed events because they don't know exactly what we're looking for."

It's a high-pressure job that is as intense as they come.

"There is added pressure because the pace of the rodeo is so fast," said Gibbs, who is judging the team roping, tie-down roping and bull riding this



Wrangler NFR judge Mike Todd is one of 14 men tasked with deciding scores and making calls at the 55th staging of the world's richest rodeo.

year. "There's stuff that happens that's minute that is going to make a difference between whether a guy wins a world championship or he doesn't."

Judging the Wrangler NFR presents unique challenges.

"It's the best against the best, and there are so many similar animals and rides," said Steve Knowles, who is judging the Finals for the 15th time. "So, you have to decipher between those and pick a winner, and that's a lot more difficult here. You don't have that caliber of animals everywhere you go."

"You end up being bunched up more, but the best riders still end up coming out on top. It's just a little harder to go through the process."

The men in the stripes take their roles in the world's richest rodeo seriously and cherish their time in Las Vegas.

"This is the biggest thing in the rodeo business, and I'm just happy to have been a part of it for the years I have," Gibbs said. "It's a grand event."

Most of the time, judges go unnoticed

while doing their work, unless they get run over by an animal, make a tough or questionable call or input a score that puzzles spectators. They are students of the sport who know its history, legacy and traditions and who often come from a long line of rodeo people.

First and foremost, Wrangler NFR judges are huge rodeo fans who love living the Western way of life.

"You enjoy watching a great ride where an animal really bucks, or a great run in the team roping, tie-down roping or steer wrestling," Gibbs said.

Knowles, who is judging the bareback riding this year, is energized and excited by the growth of the Wrangler NFR in Las Vegas.

"When I walk around this community, I see how big this (event) has become," Knowles said. "Sometimes, I've just got to stop and think, 'Wow, I'm a part of this!' I'm very proud to be a part of something that brings this much revenue and people to the area."

Gibbs remembers when the decision

was made to move the Finals to the "Entertainment Capital of the World" in the early 1980s.

"I was in Oklahoma City when they announced the Finals were moving to Las Vegas, and there were quite a few people from Oklahoma at the table I was sitting at," Gibbs said. "They said, 'It'll never work. You'll be back here in two to three years.' And look where we've gone now."

The two veterans admitted that, even after all these years working the Wrangler NFR, they still get butterflies and an adrenaline rush from doing their job on the sport's grandest stage.

"It's very exciting," Knowles said. "It's the championship of the world, and it's a lot of added pressure on all of us. The nerves are still there."

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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► **EXPERIENCE:** *Going strong at 52*

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

\$65,643 among heelers, and Davis took the 15th and final spot among headers with \$60,936.

“With anyone, there’s a certain amount of time it takes to kind of get into the flow of knowing what the other guy is doing, how things will set up and how you react to that,” O’Brien Cooper said. “But that didn’t take long for us. I’ve roped with him before and with others with similar styles.

But Davis, even at 31, didn’t have the experience of most team ropers, let alone the veteran O’Brien Cooper.

“Justin’s kind of a rookie, in the sense that he’s never really tried to make the NFR,” O’Brien Cooper said. “I gave him the ins and outs of what we’ll face during the year, told him not to be worried by what others are doing, to trust in what you’re doing. That was my job, to have us both on the same page.”

Davis’ job was to do what youngsters can do.

“The thing the young guys bring is the enthusiasm and the excitement of the challenge of making it to the NFR for the first time,” O’Brien Cooper said. “Also, youth brings the athleticism, quickness and speed — the ability to do the job fast. This is a timed, speed-driven event. One partner needs to be fast, the other consistent. Usually the good teams have both those

components.”

And O’Brien Cooper would certainly know the winning formula at this stage of his career. Yet anymore, reaching the NFR isn’t necessarily the most important achievement.

“It used to be that the NFR was what it was all about,” he said. “But to me, the NFR is not the only focus and the only goal at this point of my life. I enjoy going to good rodeos throughout the year, I enjoy the camaraderie with my friends, and making friends with the younger generation.

“I’ve seen these kids grow up, I’ve known a lot of them since they were born, so I’ve got a friendship with kids I’ve known my whole life. So that part of it is really cool, as well.”

Also really cool is still being at the top of his game after so long — well after athletes in most any other sport would have to hang it up.

“I’m grateful and feel like God has blessed me,” O’Brien Cooper said. “There are not too many 52-year-old guys who get to compete in the sport they’ve loved their whole life, and still compete with the best. I’m blessed by the opportunity to have good partners and good horses and still be able to compete.

“I enjoy the thrill, the excitement and the enthusiasm of competition. Life is fun when you can do what you want to do. To be able to make a living at it is icing on the cake.”

NFR FUN FACTS & FIGURES



JOHN LOCHER/LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL  
Bray Armes takes down a steer in the steer wrestling event on the third night of the 2013 National Finals Rodeo at the Thomas & Mack Center on Saturday.

- Some fun facts about four-footed participants and two-footed spectators:
- Four-footed participants in the NFR will consume 60 tons of grain during the 10-day event. Horses and cattle will devour 180 tons of hay and 70 tons of grass.
  - It takes 1,200 tons of dirt — at a depth of 12 to 15 inches — to cover the arena floor for the NFR at the Thomas & Mack Center.
  - Rodeo fans attending the NFR will consume 75,000 beers and 11,000 hard-liquor drinks during the 10-day run. So don't forget the designated driver! But fans practice some temperance, too, drinking 15,000 bottles of water and 26,000 sodas.
  - Over the course of the NFR, fans will purchase 5,000 pizzas, 4,500 orders of nachos, 6,800 hot pretzels and 7,000 bags of popcorn.
  - Thirty-six Las Vegas Valley hotels are airing live coverage on satellite feeds.

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