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NATIONAL FINALS RODEO

Durfey times it just right

Tie-down roper, country singer have Western romance to remember



By PATRICK EVERSON

LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

The story of Tyson Durfey and Shea Fisher has played out like the rodeo version of star football player and cheer captain. Except Durfey tackles and ties calves, and Fisher croons out country tunes, with an Australian twang to boot.

Yes, it's the great Western tale of cowboy meets country singer, cowboy falls for country singer (who likewise falls for him), there's a made-for-Hollywood proposal, and cowboy and country singer get married and ride off into the sunset. But not before first making a trip to Las Vegas for the National Finals Rodeo at the Thomas & Mack Center.

Which makes perfect sense, since rodeo is what brought Mr. and Mrs. Durfey together in the first place.

The two met at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo in 2010. But it took another year before the two actually got together.

"It wasn't until the Dodge Circuit Finals in 2011," Shea recalled. "I needed tickets for my parents, who were visiting from Australia."

Tyson said he'd deliver on the tickets if she'd have breakfast with him the next day, and she gladly accepted. Tyson qualified for his fifth straight NFR later that year, an event at which he got more serious about Shea.

"Tyson asked my parents if we could date," she said. He didn't qualify for the 2012 Finals, but the couple still came to Las Vegas, as did Shea's parents. "That's when he asked them if he could marry me."

Then it was Tyson's turn to figure out how to make the proposal memorable. With the help of a few buddies, he planned a New Year's trip to New York with Shea to ring out 2012 and ring in 2013. The idea was to make a Times Square memory, but Tyson had to change up on the fly on the afternoon of New Year's Eve. "I had planned on Times Square at midnight, with the ball dropping and everything," he said. "But we'd been there in the afternoon, and by 3 o'clock, there was literally a million people there to get in position. I quickly realized that wasn't what I wanted."

He was able to keep his dinner reservation at Sparks Steak House, attracted by the restaurant's renowned history. "It's supposedly where the old mob bosses hung out," he said.

While walking off dinner and taking in the sights, Tyson hired out a horse-and-carriage operator, with a goal of proposing at Central Park's Bow Bridge. But police had barricaded off the

TYSON DURFEY

Event: Tie-down roping
2013 world standing/earnings: Second, \$97,985

Residence: Weatherford, Texas

National Finals Rodeo qualifications: Six (2007-11, 2013)

Noteworthy: In his last NFR appearance, in 2011, Durfey won the seventh round and placed in three other rounds on his way to finishing fifth in the world standings with \$139,852. At the 2009 NFR, he cashed in seven of 10 rounds and finished third in the final standings with \$159,214. ... Durfey's wife, Shea, is an Australian country music standout.



COURTESY PHOTO

Tyson Durfey and Shea Fisher have had a Western romance that began when they met at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo in 2010, continued with a Central Park New Year's Eve proposal that brought their Oct. 6 wedding in Texas and now is on the road at the Thomas & Mack Center for the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo. After the NFR, they are headed to Tahiti and Bora Bora for their honeymoon.

► SEE DURFEY PAGE 2

Roper in running for world championship gold buckle

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► **DURFEY:** *Roper in running for world championship gold buckle*

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

bridge. So he had to settle for a nearby fountain — which worked out to perfection.

“I was pretty nervous, checking my phone every five to 10 minutes to make sure the timing was right,” he said. “Then five minutes before midnight, I started my speech, and I timed it just right. Right after she said yes, literally, fireworks went off. It was dumb luck. My timing is usually not that good.”

Said Shea: “I was still very surprised. I didn’t expect it that night, but once he got down on his knee, I knew what was coming next. It’s a weird emotion to explain. You’re at the fountain, it’s midnight, you can tell he’s nervous. You kind of know the question is coming. But it was like a little girl’s dream. I was overjoyed, excited, nervous. It really was the picture-perfect movie proposal. I didn’t expect anything less.”

What came next for both of them was resuming their career pursuits. Shea, an established country star in Australia, spent plenty of time in Nashville plying her trade, while Tyson hit the seemingly never-ending road that is the rodeo regular season. That season finished at the end of September, with a two-month break before the NFR. The two were married Oct. 6 in a country wedding at the Vista West Ranch in Texas.

The two didn’t do the formal honeymoon, rather just taking time to unwind and spend time together at home in Weatherford, Texas.

“Home is our honeymoon,” Shea said. “We’ve been on the road so much, and I couldn’t think of anything worse than being away from home at that point.

“And I didn’t want Tyson to take a week off because he’s on such a roll this season (second in the world standings). That wouldn’t have been supportive. He’d worked so hard, and that hard work has paid off.

“Our honeymoon was spending time together at home, me being a good wife and making dinner and all that.”

Now both are back on the road for the 10-day NFR, and Tyson has his sights set on a world championship gold buckle. His best finish in the season money standings was third in 2009, when he cashed in seven of 10 rounds at the NFR.



Roper Tyson Durfey, seen here plying his trade, took a detour to Las Vegas with his bride Shae on their way to their honeymoon in Bora Bora so he could compete during the National Finals Rodeo. Durfey has set his sights on a world championship gold buckle.

In 2011, he took fifth. He entered this year’s NFR with earnings of \$97,985, trailing Tuf Cooper by about \$37,000. But that’s money that can be made up quickly with a few good nights, and Tyson is eager to ride and rope after not qualifying last year.

“I’m looking forward to getting back into the Thomas & Mack and feeling the energy of the crowd,” he said. “Las Vegas is the one place where cowboys can truly be rock stars. The people and the energy, combined with an action-packed rodeo and 19,000 people per night — I’m excited.”

And on Dec. 16, the day after the NFR ends, the newlyweds will actually get that honeymoon, half a world away.

“By Sunday night, we’ll be in Tahiti, then to Bora Bora,” Tyson said, adding Christmas will be spent with Shea’s family. “It’s a beach Christmas in Australia.”

“We’re really looking forward to a getaway” Shea said. “And hopefully Tyson has a gold-buckle tan on his stomach.”

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Trio of Wright brothers battling for gold buckle

Wilbur and Orville aren't the only Wright brothers well-known for catching big air. One of the worst-kept secrets at this year's Wrangler National Finals Rodeo is that a fifth of the saddle bronc riding field is made up of a trio of Utah cowboys who share the same last name.

Cody, Jesse and Jake Wright aren't just taking up spots in the field, they're battling each other for the coveted gold



Jake, Cody and Jesse Wright, from left to right, are battling each other for the saddle bronc riding world title this season.

buckle that goes to the world champ.

Cody, the eldest of the seven Wright brothers, is a two-time world champion (2008 and 2010) and led the PRCA World Standings heading into Friday's Round 2. Jesse, the reigning world champion, was second, and Jake, Jesse's twin brother, was third after pocketing \$18,630 for winning Round 1.

The Wrights are no strangers to big-time publicity. A documentary crew followed Cody during his world championship season in 2008 and produced an award-winning film called "Born to Ride," and the New York Times is sending a reporter to cover the gold-buckle race this year.

The famed Etbauer brothers (Robert, Billy and Dan) finished in the top five in the world standings in 1991 when Robert won the world, Billy was second and Dan fifth, and the Wright brothers have a chance to better that lofty achievement.

"It's pretty awesome to be in the same category of the Etbauers," Jake said. "They were great bronc riders and great people, and we try real hard and all want to be No. 1."

Their competition is not exactly a heated sibling rivalry, but they each love to get one up on the others.

"Trying to beat them — I love it," said Jake, who is riding in his second consecutive Wrangler NFR. "It's way better than trying to beat somebody else, and they feel the same way."

The brothers enjoy watching each other ride and pull for one another every time out.

"It's a sweet and sour combination," said Jesse, a four-time Finals qualifier. "If you don't ride well, you're kind of upset that you should have done some things different, but all in all, it's all going to go well."

Cody set the bar high before the twins broke out on the scene, and they feed off each other when competing at the same rodeo.

"The energy is way high, and it's always higher when everybody's doing great," Jesse said.

"You're just that much more jacked, and it makes it more fun each night when you're all doing great."

His twin brother agrees.

"Oh yeah," Jake said when asked if his brothers' exploits get him charged up. "They show you the potential you've got when you see them jump out and are 90 or 91. You know you can do that."

Thanks to Jake's exploits in the opening round — which came via an 85.5-point ride on Carr Pro Rodeo's Wise

Guy — the Wrights are in the mix at the top of the world standings. They were all bucked off their horses in Round 2's "eliminator pen," but Cody retained the No. 1 spot in the standings.

Jesse is fourth, while Jake is sixth heading into today's third round.

The impressive nature of their ascension to the top is not lost on the brothers.

"I knew we were stacked in there pretty close, but to be 1, 2, 3 is awesome," Jake said.

"I'm just excited and hope I'll keep doing well and the week goes well. If we finished 1, 2, 3, that'd be even better."

Cody is thrilled to share the limelight with his siblings.

"It's exciting when you can all be on top, especially when it's your brothers," he said. "I try to help them when I can, and seeing them ride well definitely helps me ride better."

If one of the Wrights is able to triumph this year, it would mark four gold buckles in the past six years for the friendly Utah family. That would be just fine for Cody, who helped Jesse

and Jake along the way during their careers.

"I definitely want to win, but if I can't, it's awesome to see family win," said Cody, an 11-time Wrangler NFR saddle bronc rider. "I want to see them do well even when I have a good night. Hopefully, I'm just a little better."

"If I don't, there's nobody I'd rather see win than Jake and Jesse. As long as (the world title) goes home to Utah, I'll be happy."

Regardless of how things play out next Saturday, the family will be happy with what transpires.

"It doesn't matter, we always have a good night when one of us is winning," Jake said.

There have been many good nights for the Wright family in recent years, and there are no signs that will change anytime soon.

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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Craig Morgan

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
10 a.m. – 11:30 a.m. — Miss Rodeo America Pageant, Horsemanship Demonstration
12 p.m. – 1 p.m. — Outside the Barrel with Flint Rasmussen

1:15 p.m. – 2 p.m. — Rodeo Live Unplugged with Jason Sturgeon (Cowboy FanFest)

NFR IN ARENA
6:45 p.m. National anthem singer — Jackie Schmillen; Dayton Championship Rodeo
7 p.m. — Fourth Go-Round NFR Performance, the Thomas & Mack Center



Shania Twain

NFR AFTER DARK
5 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. — Mechanical Bull Riding Contest, Sam's Town
6:30 p.m. – 4 p.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
7:30 p.m. — Shania Twain, Caesars Palace
9 p.m. — Damsel and LoCash Cowboys, MGM Grand
9:30 p.m. — Billy Childers, South Point
10 p.m. — Dwight Yoakam, Golden Nugget



Dwight Yoakam

10 p.m. — Rodney Carrington, MGM Grand
10 p.m. — Craig Morgan, The Mirage
Highlight of the Day — Shania Twain continues her Still the One residency at Caesars Palace.
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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