

Curtain CALL

Choreographing a memorable freestyle performance requires forethought, preparation and an uninhibited spirit.

Article by Betsy Lynch • Photos by Waltenberry

Long before *American Idol* hooked modern-day viewers, NBC-TV used to air a program called *The Gong Show*. Contestants would take the stage and perform for a panel of judges. Part of the show's hilarity was that the judges could "gong" the really bad acts after about 30 seconds, blessedly putting an end to the most painful performances. On the plus side, viewers had a chance to see some truly outstanding artists while legitimate contestants vied for publicity and prizes.

In freestyle reining, there's really no equivalent to *The Gong Show*. Once a rider starts his or her routine, the audience will either be swept away by the music and action, or time will slow to a crawl as they endure whatever transpires in the next 3-4 minutes.

"There are two sides to the coin," agreed trainer Doug Milholland, who has been participating in freestyle reining since its inception more than two decades ago. "When you see a bad freestyle, it seems like it can't get over quick enough. And then there are others that just take your breath away."

Not long after his first foray into the freestyle arena, Milholland helped to write the rules and standards for the class, with the goal of promoting high-quality reining in a captivating and spectator-friendly way.

Despite its critics, freestyle has indeed become the sport's most popular crowd attraction. The average person doesn't have to know much about the fine points of reining to appreciate beautiful horses doing dynamic maneuvers in time to great music. A well-rounded roster will likely feature comedy, drama and more than a few fairy tale characters.

At such venues as the All American Quarter Horse Congress, the Denver National Western Stock Show, the NRHA Futurity and several major world championship shows, freestyle contestants perform before packed houses. Not only that, many of the best freestyle rides get posted on YouTube and have been forwarded around the world via the Internet. Little wonder, top freestylers work hard to choreograph routines that not only entertain but also do justice to their horses' athletic abilities.



Rebecca Murray honored her late friend, fellow youth competitor Rebecca Goss, with a bridleless routine.



Josh Armstrong portrayed the Lone Ranger while his horse, Command N Chex, stood in for Silver during the Invitational Freestyle at the NRHA Futurity.

Who was that masked man?

Riders, of course, have many different motivations for competing in freestyle.

"I've always been a bit of a song-and-dance man at heart," admitted trainer Josh Armstrong, La Mesa, N.M., who also plays the mandolin. "I sing in the shower. I sing when I'm cleaning stalls."

"And," he added with a self-conscious chuckle, "I'm in it to win the money."

Over the past decade, Armstrong has put together a number of different routines. Some of the songs he's chosen include "King of the Road," "Runaround Sue," "Singin' in the Rain," "Folsom Prison Blues," "White Sports Coat," "Rhinestone Cowboy," "Chim, Chim Che-ree," and "Tie a Yellow Ribbon ('Round the Old Oak Tree)."

At the 2008 NRHA Futurity, Armstrong appeared as everyone's favorite masked horseman, the Lone Ranger. Aboard his perlino stallion, Command N Chex (Buemonic Chex x Dolls Annie Command x Dolls Union Jac), he slid and spun to the classic theme "The William Tell Overture."

Admirably, Armstrong and the other performers in Oklahoma City were showcasing their horses for the sheer entertainment of the crowd, as in 2008 the Invitational Freestyle was not a judged contest. Instead, participants received a nominal stipend for their efforts.

So why would they go to all that trouble?

"I think the freestyle has been a great promotional tool for our sport," Armstrong said simply.

It is a sentiment echoed by the other riders as well. They do it for fun, profit, recognition, and as a way to pay tribute to special people or horses, and also to

help promote worthy causes.

For example, Milholland dedicated his ride aboard Double My Whiskey (Paddys Irish Whiskey x Miss Double Tuck x Poco King Tuck), owned by W.T. Waggoner Ranch, to the memory of horsewoman Bucki James, a top non-professional cutter who died last fall of breast cancer. Milholland chose the song "Horses in Heaven" by Mary Ann Kennedy.

Fourteen-year-old Rebecca Murray, Burbank, Calif., rode Gatolotto (Senor Peppy Gato x Lenas Shamrock x Doc O'Lena) bridleless in tribute to her friend and fellow youth reiner Rebecca Goss, who died in a car accident in 2007. Murray used the opportunity to promote awareness of the Rebecca Goss "Boo-Yaah" Memorial Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded to help grieving families with medical, burial and counseling expenses, as well as provide college scholarships to veterinary medicine students. (For more information about the foundation, log on to www.BeccaBoo-Yaah.org, or contact John and Martha Goss, 909-985-7542.)

Musical chairs

Of course, freestyle is more than just smoke and mirrors. A great routine starts with having a highly trained reining horse. Like the compulsory elements required in a figure skating "short program," freestyle reining routines must contain several essential components, including at least one lead change from right to left and one from left to right; four consecutive spins to both the left and right; and a minimum of three sliding stops.

It's up to the rider to determine where to insert these maneuvers in the program, and how to blend other reining and artistic elements into a seamless whole.

"Some people get caught up in the idea of wearing costumes and riding to music," Milholland observed. "But a good freestyle really boils down to having a good reining horse that can do all the maneuvers, and then choreographing those maneuvers to the music."

No matter how much they may like a certain song, experienced freestylers agree that it's important to pick music that fits the horse.

"If you have a horse with a big, long, stride, you don't want a song with a really fast beat because your horse is going to look like he's struggling to keep up," said Heather Johnson, a trainer from Ringgold, Ga., who has been performing freestyles for about nine years. Before making a final selection, she starts with four or five choices and whittles it down by going out and riding to the rhythm of the music.

"Sure, you can make a slow horse run fast – and you can sometimes make a fast horse go slow – but it just looks better if the tempo fits your horse," she said.

Veterans also agree that the music should include good tempo changes so the horse can speed up, slow down and perform dynamic maneuvers in the appropriate spots without running out of steam.

"It's very important to make sure you have breaks for your horse," Johnson advised. "That's something they've built into the regular reining patterns. When these horses are running, stopping and turning around, they get very out of breath. I think sometimes [freestyle] riders forget that.

"If you build some breaks into your routine, you can ham it up to the crowd. A lot of times, I'll throw in some two-tracking or some tempi lead changes, or something slower that allows my horse to catch his breath."

Of course, personal taste in music varies so much



Doug Milholland, shown on Double My Whiskey, chose the song "Horses In Heaven" to honor the memory of a friend, Bucki James.

that there are no absolutes when it comes to a winning song. Familiar ballads and movie themes often provide strong storylines that riders can play upon. Rock 'n' roll classics may spur riders to pump up the crowd and literally get the house rocking. Spiritual songs can tug at heartstrings and move audiences to tears, while silly songs can provide for a bit of comic relief.

Almost anything goes. But the best song choices tend to be those that have broad audience appeal. In other words, you may want to think twice before picking that heavy metal anthem, gangster rap or Far Eastern chant. Above all, suggested Milholland, "pick a song that you really like and believe in, one you can put your all into." Of all the routines he's done over the years, his personal favorite was riding to "Amazing Grace," with which he won the freestyle in 1990, the same year he won the NRHA Futurity.

Some songs just seem to be a natural fit. For example, 14-year-old Jordan Donnelly, Aubrey, Texas, charmed the crowd two years ago when she rode Hollywood All Star to the tune, "Hey Now, You're an All Star," which some might recognize as the theme song to the movie *Shrek*.

In December, just six months after colic surgery, the 9-year-old gelding (Hollywood Dun It x Judy Elderberry x Elderberry Ace) was back in the arena dancing with Donnelly again to the tune, "Gonna Make You Sweat (Everybody Dance Now)." Jordan's mom suggested the music after watching the show *So You Think You Can Dance*. Dancing is something Donnelly admits she loves to do, despite feeling a bit self-conscious when she gets in front of a large crowd on horseback.

"My mom and dad are mainly the ones who come and watch me ride. They help me practice my routine and offer suggestions," she said. Still, this young lady thinks it's fun to be creative and enjoys playing to the crowd.

iPod generation

Of course, top riders make freestyle routines look effortless, but an above-average performance takes a lot of planning and preparation.

Armstrong said he likes to map out his freestyle routine on paper so he can study and memorize it. "I'm a visual learner," he explained. "I like to write it down, look at the pattern, and run through it in my mind."

When he saddles up, he concentrates on working out timing sequences and maneuvers, tailoring the routine to the music and the size of the pen. How long does it take to get from one spot to another? This is especially important when a rider plans to perform the routine at more than one venue since, for example, the show pen at the Congress is a lot smaller than the one in Oklahoma City.

Before taking the show on the road, Armstrong will pull his truck up to his home arena and blast the music for 30 minutes for a day or two while he rehearses and acclimates his horse to the sounds. However, he doesn't run through the entire routine more than a few times.

The thing is, horses are quick to make associations. These days, Milholland is grateful for iPods and earbuds. That way his freestyle horses don't start taking their cues from the song instead of from him.

"I've tried it just about every way that you can do it. I used to take a boom box out to the arena, but the problem with that is, after you've done it a few times, the horse really gets to listening to the music and starts anticipating the moves," he said. "So now I practice with earphones and a player so I can hear the music, but the horse can't."

Milholland uses his arena practice time at the event to rehearse various passages and to work out specific elements. How long will it take to execute a circle? Where will he ask his horse to stop? "I have it

FREESTYLE CHOREOGRAPHY



Jordan Donnelly made a sparkling comeback with Hollywood All Star after the gelding recovered from colic surgery, riding to “Gonna Make You Sweat (Everybody Dance Now).”

totally down in my mind after listening to the music for a couple of hours, then I just go in and do it,” he explained.

Prior to competing, Milholland tries to totally immerse himself in his song, listening to it over and over while picturing all the things he’s going to do. He’s careful to consider how best to showcase his horse’s strengths. “I try to pay attention to detail, to know my horse, what he’s capable of, and try to highlight those qualities,” he said.

For example, if a horse does really fabulous spins, he may incorporate seven or eight turns in a row rather than the required four. However, he cautions contestants not to overdo any element that would cause the horse to tire or get sloppy. Better to incorporate something unique or clever, such as one routine when trainer Pete Kyle, Whitesboro, Texas, spun his horse around and then spun his hat around on top his head.

“That was pretty innovative,” chuckled Milholland, recalling the sequence. “I think when you can throw in something like that, it plays really well.”

Incidentally, Kyle, who has multiple freestyle championships to his credit, is renown for his funny, sometimes irreverent routines, but he doesn’t sacrifice good form for good comedy.

Setting the stage

While the judges are primarily marking reining maneuvers, freestyle choreography should combine elements of artistry and entertainment. Some riders incorporate moves such as half-passes, sidepasses and tempi changes, which may not contribute much to the final tally (falling into the realm of “artistic impression”), but generally delight the crowd. Spectators tend to appreciate demonstrations along the lines of classical dressage and welcome the changes of pace

not normally a part of a standard reining pattern.

Costumes are optional, and not everyone is inspired to dress up. But costumes and props can certainly help set the stage, create a mood, and add to the drama of a routine.

Armstrong says his friends tease him about being a “costume minimalist,” but he typically gets into character. A black mask, gun holster and white shirt and hat transformed him into the Lone Ranger. Rain gear and an umbrella served nicely for “Singin’ in the Rain.” Black-and-white striped garb worked well for “Folsom Prison Blues.”

A get-up doesn’t need to be elaborate to be effective. For example, Kyle, riding to the tune “I’m Still a Guy,” won audience favor wearing a T-shirt, shorts, tennis shoes and a ball cap. He also carried a pop-gun over his shoulder and a fishing creel strapped to his saddle (which is where he stashed a six-pack of suds). We learn this when he opens the creel and tosses cans to the judges, then helps himself to one.

“The costume is part of the creativity,” Donnelly insisted. “It makes it fun.”

Donnelly wore a leotard and headband and dolled up Hollywood All Star in ’80s-style disco glitter for “Everybody Dance Now.”

However, if costuming or props are going to get elaborate, as in angel wings, flowing chiffon, a rodeo clown and even a set of horns “hoodied” to the horse’s head (all of which appeared in the 2008 Invitational Freestyle), certain logistics must be worked out in advance – such as making sure the horse can get through the gate and ensuring that he’s well-acquainted with the paraphernalia so it doesn’t spook him.

Heather Johnson’s horse, 6-year-old stallion Doublenotyourreeboks (Reeboks Kid x Double R Odds x Double R Doc), had to be gun-broke prior to his freestyle debut, as a shotgun blast at the end of her “Gunpowder & Lead” routine (blanks, of course) was the disturbing finale.

Curtain call

From the audience’s perspective, a good freestyle is as much theater as it is reining contest. Yet no matter how good the music, the costumes and the theatrics, no one who truly appreciates horses wants to see them being over-ridden or the reins pulled so hard that their mouths gape.

Of course, it’s also worth noting that sometimes even the best horses can miss their cues to “whoa,” and it’s likely because they can’t hear their riders’ voices through all the noise. And sometimes the rider, too, can get lost in the uproar. That’s where practice and preparation really pay off, knowing what comes next even when you can’t hear the music. And riding like that takes courage.

What’s also important to note is that, even with as little as has been invested in purse money and prizes to entice top talent, freestyle is often where audiences see the best of the best in reining. This is where adventurous contestants perform without bridles – sometimes using nothing more than their seat, legs, voice and confidence to brilliantly guide their horses through intricate routines. This is where riders strive to entertain and inspire us for the simple reward of being able to show off their horses’ talents in a free-spirited way.

So, forget the gong. It’s time for a curtain call. Freestylers, take a bow.

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