Veterinary Care at Equine Events: Rodeos

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1. Introduction

Rodeos are held throughout the United States, and they are sanctioned by many different organizations catering to many different levels of competitors ranging from youth and senior to amateur and professional. The Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA), headquartered in Colorado Springs, CO, is the largest organization in the world representing the professional rodeo cowboy, as well as stock contractors, rodeo producers, rodeo committees, entertainers, and others associated with the pageantry of rodeo. It is estimated that there are a minimum of 10,000 rodeos held in the United States each year. This paper will focus on American rodeos, which offer a variety of events including tie down roping, team roping, steer roping, steer wrestling, bareback riding, saddle bronc riding, barrel racing, and bull riding.

The PRCA leads the way in creating animal welfare procedures, rules, and standards for American rodeo, and they network with many other rodeo associations to ensure the welfare of the livestock participating. All sanctioned rodeos have rules governing the care and handling of the livestock. Most rodeos require a veterinarian to be in attendance or on-call during competition.

The type of horses that a veterinarian may be required to treat at a rodeo varies. There will be performance horses that will be used in the timed events that include tie down roping, steer roping, steer wrestling, team roping, and barrel racing. Generally, these will be easy to handle because they are quite accustomed to travel and handling. The same can be said for the horses used by the pickup men and other support personnel in rodeo. A challenge many equine veterinarians face is working with the bucking horses used in the bareback riding and saddle bronc riding. Often it will be best to try and treat the bucking horses at the rodeo facility, which will allow for safer and more effective handling.

2. Materials and Methods

Although injuries are uncommon to horses and other livestock at rodeos, it is prudent to be prepared to handle an injury that may occur in the arena. The PRCA requires that a veterinarian be in attendance during an approved rodeo as well as sections of “slack.” The term “slack” refers to competition held before or after a scheduled performance in which rodeo athletes, who did not draw a position in the scheduled performance, compete. The veterinarian...
will work with a variety of people, including members of the rodeo committee hosting the rodeo, the stock contractor, who provides the animals for some events and as mounts; and the rodeo athlete, who usually owns his mount or contracts it to others in the rodeo.

Planning for incidents where a horse may be required to be transported from the rodeo arena is important. Before the rodeo starts, the veterinarian should meet with everyone who will be involved in the process of handling an injured livestock animal. A written procedure for injured livestock should be formulated and should include a step by step procedure with names of all personnel who will be a part of the procedure. The procedure should be practiced, and all equipment should be tested before beginning of competition to ensure that all equipment is operational. Before the beginning of the rodeo, it should be determined where the rodeo veterinarian will be stationed during the rodeo, the form of communication between the veterinarian and rodeo personnel, and who will make the call to bring the veterinarian into the arena. What supplies the veterinarian will have immediately available in a medical bag, where the veterinarian will park, who will pay for veterinary care administered to contestant horses and bucking horses, and when an animal will be transported to a clinic should also be addressed.

Suggested Equipment and Medications

**Equipment**

- Towels
- Twitch
- Halter and lead
- Stethoscope
- Thermometer
- Refractometer
- Syringes and needles
- IV catheters
- Stomach tube and pump
- Bucket, cup, and brush
- IV tubes
- Surgical packs and suture materials
- Bandage materials: cotton rolls × 6, Elasticon tape
- Vet wraps, heavy compress wraps
- Gauze, sterile surgipads, white
- Tape, duct tape
- Large tarp
- Splints: Kimzey type and PVC pipe (full and half leg)
- Bandage scissors
- Animal blindfold (blue towel) and ear plugs (cotton)
- Flashlight
- Clippers
- Surgical disinfectants

**Medications**

- IV fluids
- Oral electrolytes
- Local anesthetics
- Ophthalmic medications
- Wound medications
- Analgesics
- Injectable medications
- Antibiotics
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- Sedatives and short-acting anesthesia
- Corticosteroids
- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
- Diacetyl sodium sulfosuccinate (DSS)
- Mineral oil
- Access to water
- Euthanasia solution

Crash Box

- Xylazine*: supply plus predrawn syringes 8 ml
- Ketamine*: supply plus predrawn syringes 15 ml
- Lidocaine*: supply plus predrawn 3-mL syringe, 25-gauge needle
- Banamine
- Fourteen-gauge catheter
- Injection cap
- Super glue
- Needle holders already loaded with 2–0 pd
d- Heparinized saline: 12 ml
- Soludelta cortef®
- Euthanasia solution
- Syringes: 60 ml
- Syringes: 12, 20, and 3 ml
- Needles: 18, 14, and 20 gauge
- Number 4 scalpel handle with 20 blade pre-loaded, wrapped
- Tracheotomy tube

3. During the Rodeo

The official rodeo veterinarian should keep in mind that he or she is representing the rodeo management and stock contractor and therefore should offer services to those priorities.

Services may be offered to contestants before and after the rodeo; however, during the performance, except in the case of an emergency, the rodeo veterinarian should direct his/her services to those animals involved in the performance or animals that are immediately injured in that performance.

Discuss with the stock contractor methods of treatment and sedation or anesthesia before the rodeo and obtain his permission to administer those treatments if needed. With all pre-planning in place, review the steps outlined and make sure the contact person, rodeo committee, and stock contractor are in agreement.

Before the rodeo, the veterinarian should move quietly through livestock pens checking for lameness, bloody noses (as indicators of a cracked horn or skull fracture), or other problems. Injured animals should be discussed with the stock contractor for removal from the draw or “the animal’s position in the competition” and the identification number of the animal should be given to the person responsible for the stock draw. The rodeo judges are responsible for the stock draw and many other duties at the rodeo; the veterinarian should ask for an introduction to the rodeo judges when they first arrive at the rodeo grounds. During PRCA rodeos, a veterinarian is required to be on-site, so it is important that the veterinarian check in with the judges before each performance and sign the judges’ paperwork after the final performance of the rodeo.

It is important to work with the pickup men and handlers, discussing methods of restraint and handling of an injured animal, and impress on them their role in ensuring the welfare of the animal and in using their experience or expertise. Pickup men and handlers are usually quite knowledgeable.

The veterinarian should also visit with the rodeo announcer and secretary before each performance. These individuals are often the central communication line and can assist the veterinarian in contacting emergency personnel if his attentions are needed elsewhere. The announcer should make spectators aware that a veterinarian is on-site or on-call and introduce that individual if the veterinarian and rodeo committee feels this is appropriate. If the committee desires, the veterinarian should be available to assist the announcer in preparing a “scripted” statement in the event an animal is injured and some time is needed to transport it from the arena. Scripted statements could include a brief description of the steps being taken to care for the animal and that qualified personnel are attending the animal, such as the following example: “Ladies and gentlemen, our arena personnel have determined this animal will need assistance and the veterinarian is now examining it.” Just like rodeo athletes here today (tonight), we want to make sure this animal athlete doesn’t try to move prior to examination. So, our veterinarian, and other rodeo personnel will carefully restrain the animal and it will be removed by special equipment provided just for this circumstance. We appreciate your concern and patience while we care for the animal.”

The announcer should avoid making statements that downplay or over-dramatize the incident, such as “things like this happen.” Continued discussion of the care of the livestock should happen until the animal is removed from the arena. Additionally, the announcer should refrain from telling the audience they will let them know the outcome unless they are prepared to do so, even if the outcome is not favorable. The announcer should always be instructed to tell the truth regarding animal injuries.

4. Communication and Notification

The rodeo veterinarian, along with the stock contractor and committee, is responsible for developing a plan in handling an injured animal. Communication methods should be used that are understood by rodeo personnel and the veterinarian to avoid stimulating any undue concern by spectators. Different communication systems may be necessary for the performance as opposed to slack; however, it is important to keep in mind that the public has access to slack performances as well, so every precaution should be taken to handle these situations with the same care as a regular performance.
5. Guidelines for Handling the Acutely Injured Animal

Although injuries are uncommon in rodeo, the most often seen injuries are relatively minor and can be treated on the grounds. It is essential that the veterinarian be familiar with basic trauma and first aid techniques of large animals, as well as have a working knowledge of rodeo stock behavior to expedite treatment.

Injuries will vary. Calves and steers, although rarely, can sometimes experience broken horns with accompanying epistaxis, sprains, and leg fractures. Torn ligaments as well as back and neck injuries, although rare, have been documented. Skilled stock contractors and their personnel are often able to administer the proper treatment; however, the veterinarian should be available to examine all injuries and advise the owner as to treatment if requested.

Bucking horses and bulls will sometimes experience lacerations, displaced hips or shoulders, colic or bloat, and rarely, a fracture. Keep in mind that some bucking horses, as well as bulls, can be aggressive, so take special precautions handling these animals.

6. Acute Injuries

The pressure to clear the rodeo arena for the performance should not preclude the judicious evaluation and care of the injured animal. Most animals with a catastrophic injury can be loaded in the livestock ambulance by an experienced crew. Even in those severe cases where euthanasia seems certain, it may still be desirable for aesthetic reasons to load the animal in the livestock ambulance. Furthermore, it allows the veterinarian additional time to evaluate the injury and provide options to the owner. The animal can be transported to the selected area and euthanized if the owner and veterinarian agree this is necessary. If the injury is so severe that there is no chance of recovery and the animal cannot be loaded or if the animal fractures more than one leg, the veterinarian should strongly recommend to the owner that the animal be euthanized immediately. If, however, the horse has one limb fractured and is able to be loaded, it is always desirable to avoid euthanasia in the rodeo arena. Generally with bucking horses, if the animal has one fracture, the skilled pickup men can support the horse and escort them from the arena.

The animal may be very fractious, and considerable care must be exercised in handling to avoid injury to the veterinarian or the attendants. The expertise of the stock contractor and his crew in handling bucking stock should be used to avoid injury to the veterinarian. The first priority is to stay calm and evaluate the situation.

A large portable screen may be used to shield any procedure from the public. The veterinarian should have the final authority to euthanize a horse that is so severely injured that there is no chance of recovery. That authority should be recognized by the rodeo officials and contestants but should be exercised only in instances where there is no possibility of removing the horse from the arena. When the extent of the injuries cannot be determined at the time or there is a possibility that the animal may be saved, every possible precaution should be taken to protect the animal from further injury. The affected limb should be supported and the animal transported to the emergency treatment area for evaluation and treatment.

In some instances, after complete evaluation of the case and consultation with the individual responsible for the animal (trainer and/or owner), euthanasia may be deemed the best course. The decision on the final disposition of the case is much better made in the emergency treatment area or
hospital after there has been a complete examination. This may include radiographs and other laboratory tests, along with consultation with other veterinarians. This course may result in decisions that will be more acceptable to all parties concerned, including insurance companies. In instances of high public relations impact with live or high visibility television coverage, it may be desirable to have a trauma team appointed and on site to deal with the injured horse and eliminate that responsibility from the official veterinarian who already has many extra duties during this type of event. The management of the case from the onset of the injury may have a profound effect on the final outcome. As soon as the animal is up, every effort should be made to control it and protect the injured limb.

7. General Care of the Injured Animal

The animal that is injured in the rodeo arena could be severely stressed from excitement, exertion, and injury itself. Therefore, the use of drugs for sedation and analgesia need to be selected carefully and administered in moderate doses. Xylazine given intravenously will provide short term sedation and some analgesia and will help to control the fractious horse. An alternative to xylazine is detomidine. Butorphanol is a rapid acting analgesic and may be administered at the same time as xylazine or detomidine to horses. Because dosages for cattle and horses are quite different, it is suggested the veterinarian familiarize him or herself with the manufacturers recommended dosage before using the drug.

The doses may be repeated as needed. Xylazine and detomidine may be used intramuscularly if the animal is so fractious that the IV route is impractical. This may allow sufficient time for a brief examination and the application of some form of external fixation before the animal is transported. The immediate administration of several different sedatives and analgesics is to be avoided. The animal is moved to the emergency treatment area or hospital, intravenous fluid therapy should be considered if necessary, along with other analgesics and anti-inflammatory drugs.

The emphasis at this time should be on supportive therapy, providing quiet surroundings so the animal will calm down and completion of the examination can be accomplished. Next, a decision has to be made on the final disposition of the case. If the injury is deemed repairable, but surgical repair can wait for a few hours or until the following day, it may be preferable to allow the animal time to stabilize before subjecting it to general anesthesia.

If the animal is to be transported to a referral surgical clinic, again it is preferable to have it stabilized before the trip.

Horses or cattle that are recumbent and unable to rise because of an injury to the down leg will frequently be able to get up if they are rolled over. This is particularly true with fractures involving the upper foreleg and shoulder. An ambulance that has moveable partitions so the animal can be held firmly, along with support from a sling, may be helpful during transportation.

8. Equine Ambulance or Removal System

The ambulance or removal system for an injured animal is important, not only for the safety and welfare of the animal but for public perception. Animals should receive only enough treatment in the arena to stabilize them and should receive continued treatment once transported from the arena.

PRCA rules state that a conveyance must be available and must be large enough to remove a horse or a bull. The conveyance must be properly equipped to allow restraint of the livestock and to provide for safe transport from the arena. Depending on the type of injury and animal, different methods of conveyance can be used.

The removal ambulance or trailer should be low to the ground and have adequate ramps to easily load an injured animal (Figs. 4 and 5). It should be easily navigable for all types of arena and weather conditions. Although usually unnecessary, should the injury be of an extreme nature, a large portable lightweight screen could be useful in the arena to shield the animal from public view.
the rodeo committee and veterinarian should have a backup conveyance in the extremely rare case of multiple injuries during a rodeo performance.

If the animal is down, a large piece of rubber matting, belting, or a metal sled may be used to roll or slide the horse onto, and a power winch may be used to pull the animal into the ambulance. (Fig. 6) A stretcher can be made to remove a horse from the arena and can be carried by 10–15 men and put into the ambulance or trailer. It is quick and efficient and used at the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo.

The trailer should have a front and side door and be padded, with a movable partition that can allow more room while loading and restrict movement during transport. Emergency supplies should be stored in the trailer, such as halter, twitch, flashlights, emergency splints, and medications.

Some of the larger rodeos that are held in facilities that host a number of other livestock or equestrian events will have isolated treatment areas. However, most will not. A treatment stall should be prepared before the rodeo that is isolated from the competition area and contestant stalling. The treatment area should be concealed from public view and access, and efforts should be taken to prevent a crowd from forming. The stall should be kept clean and be large enough to accommodate the animal and handlers. Further treatment to stabilize the animal can be conducted in the treatment stall, and depending on the condition of the animal, may require additional movement to an outside hospital or referral surgical facility.

9. Euthanasia

Although the euthanasia of an animal is extremely unfortunate and rare, veterinarians should be prepared to carry out this act if necessary under the guidelines of the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP).

The prime consideration in selection of a drug for euthanasia purposes should concern the capacity of that drug or combination of drugs to produce painless death. The sole use of skeletal muscle relaxants do not pharmacologically meet that requirement, and their single use for euthanasia purposes is regarded by the AAEP as unprofessional and inhumane. This does not preclude the use of medically acceptable skeletal muscle relaxants as an adjunct to the use of barbiturates or other such drugs, or combination of drugs, to facilitate a humane and aesthetic procedure. Any other method or compound used must conform to the guidelines set forth by the AVMA panel on euthanasia.

Guidelines for Recommending Euthanasia

The following criteria should be considered in evaluating the immediate necessity for intentional euthanasia of an animal to avoid and terminate incurable and excessive suffering.

1. Is the condition chronic and incurable?
2. Has the immediate condition a hopeless prognosis for life?
3. Is the animal a hazard to itself or its handlers?
4. Will the animal require continuous medication for the relief of pain for the remainder of its life?

Euthanasia Justification

Justification of euthanasia of an animal for humane reasons should be based on medical grounds. These same criteria should be applied to all animals, regardless of age, sex, or potential value.¹

If the official veterinarian believes that he or she does not have sufficient knowledge to determine whether the animal should be euthanized, every effort should be made to sedate or control the animal until a qualified veterinarian can render an opinion.

Veterinarians should work with the rodeo organizers to have a plan for disposal of a euthanized animal in case that it is needed.

10. Conclusion

No words better describe a veterinarian’s role at a rodeo than “practice prevention, be prepared and take prompt action.” Those words briefly and clearly say it all. Prevention is the first order of business. Try to eliminate or prevent injury.
through pre-rodeo inspections. Preparation is having equipment and supplies available to handle the situation. Prompt action is vital, and decisions may need to be made quickly. Steps should be taken to protect the animal from further injury; to delay is often inhumane. The PRCA and other rodeo organizations believe its animal athletes deserve the best humane care and appreciate your contribution.

Reference and Footnotes

aElasticon Tape, Johnson & Johnson Consumer Companies, Skillman, NJ 08558.
bKimzey Splint, Kimzey, Woodland, CA 95695.
cXylazine, IVX Animal Health, St. Joseph, MO 64503.
dKetamine, Fort Dodge Animal Health, Fort Dodge, IA 50501.
eLidocaine, Sparhawk Labs, Lenexa, KS 66215.
gSolu-Delta Cortef, Pharmacia & Upjohn, Kalamazoo, MI 49001.
hDetomidine, Pfizer Animal Health, Exton, PA 19341.
iButorphanol, Fort Dodge Animal Health, Fort Dodge, IA 50501.

Appendix: Resources
Guide To Veterinary Service At PRCA Rodeos
This details the preparation needed for a veterinarian to serve as an on-site rodeo veterinarian. It is available through the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association at 101 Pro Rodeo Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80919; phone: 719–593-8840; e-mail: animalwelfare@prorodeo.com.

Animal Welfare Booklet
This publication offers explanation of rodeo equipment and events as well as veterinary expertise regarding the care and handling of rodeo livestock at PRCA sanctioned events. It is available through the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, 101 Pro Rodeo Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80919; phone: 719–593-8840; e-mail: animalwelfare@prorodeo.com.