

Recap: 4th Annual Early Californios Skills of the Rancho

The Elks Rodeo Grounds in Santa Maria, California was a perfect venue for the 4th Early Californios Skills of the Rancho.

The significant increase in people who have embraced the California vaquero tradition made it necessary to reconstruct the Skills so more of our members had the opportunity to participate. Computer registration opened at 8am Sunday April 10th and classes were full before noon with names going onto a waiting list. Schedule manipulations from Show Secretary Glynna Hoekstra and a few cancellations opened slots to allow everyone on the waiting list the chance to compete.

July's event continued to feature the best of today's bridle horsemen. Open competitors swung reatas in big loops, roped calves with apparent ease and demonstrated a practiced skill as they maneuvered horses and calves to set up intricate shots for themselves and teammates.

Eighteen classes allowed riders to demonstrate the slow and quiet horsemanship and stockmanship this tradition has become known for. The pros, horseback and afoot, helped green, novice, intermediate and youth competitors who rode in hackamore, two-rein and straight-up in the bridle. The Skills is a unique event where professionals share their time and knowledge with the novice, intermediate and youth competitors. The pros held rodear, settled nerves, set up shots, encouraged even the oldest of the beginners, coached the inexperienced and laughed off mistakes. The growth and love for this true California vaquero style is in part due to the acceptance and encouragement of these experts.

Returning judges Rick Walt and Miles Kingdon along with new judge Wacey Kornemann were a highly skilled team. These three men use the California vaquero style of stockmanship everyday on the ranches they work. Any one of them would have been a viable open pro team contestant. With three in the judges booth, Bruce Sandifer was able to be on horseback in the arena to help announcer Jeffrey Mundell run the competition seamlessly. With his left arm in a sling due to recent shoulder surgery, Bruce roped and set up shots for anyone who needed him. When an open team learned they would be one man short, Bruce filled in. In one case, Bruce and his bridle horse Mooney headed a calf, worked it in a calm manner through a difficult situation and provided a prime example of Californio skills.

A new class, Green Youth Ranch Horse, had four competitors: Jody Fields, Taliah Watkins, Emme Randall and Elizabeth Hammon. These young ladies rode into the arena alone, preformed their ranch horse patterns, roped a dummy and became show favorites.

There were eleven competitors in the Junior Ranch Horse and Roping events. These

youth are the fruition of what Bruce Sandifer had hoped to achieve when he formed the Californio Bridlehorse Association: to insure there would be another generation of people riding in the pure Californio vaquero style. As the number of competitors in the youth classes increase and the age of those competitors decrease, the CBA may find it necessary to bring in stairs for the awards ceremony to save wear on Bruce's knees and back!

First place winners in every event received a CBA belt buckle designed by Molly's Custom Silver. James Gullion won the Concho Contest and his bridle conchos along with conchos from fellow artists Dave Miller and Clayton White were given as prizes. Buckles, conchos, donated bridles, gear and art gathered by CBA volunteer Ingrid Wolff made an impressive cache of awards.

Ingrid also organized the items generously donated for the Joanne Rhoads Benefit Auction. Joanne and her husband Mike of Flat Hat Trading have supported the Skills since its inception and the CBA was glad to help raise \$8,961 for them.

Volunteer Elena Juarez put together a cadre of vendors, the Who's Who in vaquero equipment and art. Custom bits, boots, bridles and saddles were fitted and ordered when customers didn't find exactly what they wanted. Most of our vendors have been part of the Skills every year since 2013, manning booths and donating prizes. A shopper didn't have to be a horseman to find something to buy; there was something for everyone.

A Calcutta for the Open Doctoring Finals was held Saturday night. The top five three-man Open Reata Doctoring teams were auctioned off. The winning team of Mark Lundy, Scott VanLeuven and Dwight Hill split their half of the \$2,950 purse with Mike Bruce who was the top bidder for the team.

Bruce Haener and the CBA provided two spade bits for this year's Skills. One Haener bit was donated to the Joanne Rhoads Benefit Auction. The other was awarded to Jeffrey Mundell in honor of his three years as announcer for the Skills. Jeffrey's support since the first Skills, his knowledge and his humor has kept alive the celebration of the California vaquero and the fiesta attitude this event was designed to promote. The Early Californios Skills of the Rancho continues to be a fun family oriented celebration of a valuable, useful, ageless and growing tradition.