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The American Man on Horseback

*The Bronco-Busting Contest at Denver
for the Championship of the World*

"THAD SOWDER can't ride; never could. He's worked for me, and I know. He is a gentleman, and I was glad to see him get the belt last year, but there are boys here this year he can't pack a saddle for — not on a buckler."

So said a judge, one of the five who were to decide, again, the world's championship of rough riding, contested for at Denver in the fall of every year. A group of other ranchers stood about, with foremen, cowboys, and strangers, listening, in the lobby of the Brown Palace Hotel, at Denver, and it did not seem to them strange that a judge should have and express a personal opinion on the event before it happened; on the contrary, they seemed, most of them, to agree.

"Well," said a cow puncher, "he done and he won, and I hear he's learned a lot about ridin' 'em since he's been with the show."

"Huh! That ain't ridin'," another puncher said, "hangin' on to leather on the side of a horse. There's a certain yaller dog come down from Idaho, a mean cuss, but a horseman—oh, but he can ride! I've seen him take off his saddle with the horse a-jumpin'—"

"Tom Minor, you mean," said the judge. "Let me tell you right here, that man's a rider. He is a boaster. I've heard that he told up in Idaho what he was going to do with the money he won down here. He may boast, but I bet we give him the belt."

"He says pretty plain how he can ride," said another rancher. "That isn't usual; but the curious part of it is, he can do it. Says he will tie Sowder up in his blankets and put him to bed."

The anger that flashed around the group looked ominous. All were silent for a moment. Then the rancher added:

"And I'll bet he will."

"Oh, Sowder — yes. But how about Harry Brennen and Lee Van Houten, and that boy Thompson, over there on the step?"

"That kid!" exclaimed the cow puncher.

"Who is he? Why, he's bleached with town. He ain't off the range."

"No; but you watch the kid ride to win."

"Won't last the first day," said the cow puncher. "Funning aside, Brennen's the man. He rides with both feet free, a-scratchin', and his hand in the air, givin' 'em the quirt every time they go up."

Most of the ranchers, from whom the judges were drawn, favored Van Honten, the only rancher to ride; the rest backed Harry Brennen or Minor. And they were riding their opinions hard when Sowder came in, a tall, slender young man, clear eyed, healthy skinned, and shy to the point of mental mystification. He was warmly greeted. Everybody liked the man. But Sowder

had something on his mind, and he drew aside Mr. John M. Kuykendall, the director in charge of the busting. Sowder put his question slow and direct. He had heard things.

“Will the Judge turn me?” he said.

“Go on and say your say,” said Mr. Kuykendall, his genial face as hard as stone.

Sowder was as hard. “You know what they are saying. You know what the Judge says himself. And I have had a round-up with him since last year.”

“Sowder,” said Kuykendall, “the Judge is a gentleman.”

They studied each other a moment, till Sowder’s face cleared.

“All you got to do is ride,” said Mr. Kuykendall.

“I’ll ride,” Sowder said.

The worst horses and the best riders of all the West — the big West — are brought together for the Mountain and Plain Festival, and they wrangle there for three or four days till the judges, a committee of five knowing ranchers, can pick the best horseman and the worst horse. The rider is proclaimed the champion of the world; and that he is without a doubt, though these Westerners will never be satisfied till their world-challenge is accepted, and the horsemen and the horses of Italy, Australia, and Russia have been pitted against their own. There is faith in the result. There is fretting only for the proof and the sight thereof; and this is so because, unconscious, but plain, the Western man has a sense of manhood that is secure — no fear, no weakness, no pretentiousness. Each man knows the other, and the other knows he is known, so takes himself the place that is his, by force, if need be; but he will get and take no more than his own. His fellows won’t let him. His world is only fair; rough to brutality, kind to sentimentality, it settles finally at justice. It is seeing this that warms the soul at Denver.

The festival is rich in excitement and the picturesque. The arena is on a plain beside one of those fiat-bottomed creeks that have either no water, or so much that the stream spreads over its course like a herd of cattle over a trail. Behind are the yellow prairies, in front the Rockies, blue and white, near at eighty miles distance. All this is filled with sunshine which beats through your clothes into your heart, sunning without heating it. Perhaps this explains why the Westerner is so full of fun; why cowboys will rope and ride from four o’clock in the morning till dark, do their chores, eat dinner, then, instead of rolling up to sleep, play for an hour, roping and riding one another, in wild imitation of the day’s work; why nearly every city or town or county from Missouri to the Pacific has its festival of flowers or fruit, Indians or maskers; why, when the season of range riding is over, the rancher and his cow punchers ride off to Cheyenne or Denver and ride. Some day the West will be the gayest part of this land. Gay and clean. It is character that counts every time.

When, the day before the busting, the ninety head of horses were collected in the corrals back of the arena, Mr. Kuykendall walked in among them with some cowboys and ranchers to “cut out” the “good ones.” Now the “good ones” are “bad ones,” and very few were known to the choosers; but they ran them, one or two at a time, pitching and kicking, into a small pen to “look ’em over.” The good, that is to say, the bad, were turned into a corral on the right, the “unknown” and the “saddle horses” (a comparative term) to the left. Mr. Kuykendall, whip in hand, stood in the pen, dodging some, climbing the fence for others, turning back those he dared face, deciding by the look of the animal or the reputation of its shipper, whether it was a “fighter” or “gentle.”

“Who knows that circle-dot mare?” he cried, pointing to a small goat-like bay that was trying to crawl under the fence.

“Ain’t that the little mare that threw the kid at Cheyenne?” asked a rancher.

“No; that was a white-stockinged, lazy D horse. This is one of the four that Perry Williams sent down.”

“That’s right,” said Kuykendall. “Open the gate and put her in the bad bunch. Perry said all his would deliver the goods.”

“If Perry Williams said she’d buck,” a cowboy drawled, “I wouldn’t want to buy her for my wife to ride Sundays.”

“Now the circle P. Oh, that’s ‘Deadeasy,’” said Kuykendall. “To the right.”

“What’s the story?” asked the cowboy on the fence.

The man at the gate opened, and fell back to wave the horse to the right, but the animal rose at him, and he ran. Pitched him back scrambling on the ground.

“You from Wall Street?” asked a rancher, and they all jumped down as the horse leaped into a wire fence. Sprung back by the fence, Deadeasy leaped into the boxes on one of the spectators’ stands, and ran through the rails as if they were matches.

“What’s the price of them seats?” some one inquired, as all the men scattered out into the arena to head off Deadeasy, who quit the boxes like a winged beast, and broke for the gate, which was swinging shut. He went through it, and out where he belonged — in the bad bunch. Back on the fence, the cow puncher repeated his question, “How about Deadeasy?”

“More horses,” called Kuykendall. A horse came in on his hindlegs, pawing at the director, who met him with a crack of the whip which turned him.

“I know this one. To the left. Samuels sent him. Said he’d buck. But he’s just a fighter.” Out the horse ran, the man at the gate dodging.

“What’s that you got at the gate?” a rancher asked, nodding contemptuously at a man who was afraid of a horse shipped by Samuels.

“Rum soaked,” said Kuykendall. “’Nother horse,” he called, and the man who admitted a big roan ran for the fence, and the director dodged, as his “rum soaked” helper at the outer gate had. But there was no similar comment. They recognized another horse from another kind of a man.

“That’s one John Coble sent down off his ranch. A circle 2, isn’t he? Yes; let him out to the right. Coble says—”

The horse turned to hit at the gate-keeper, but the man was up on the fence.

“The story,” said Kuykendall, “is that a tenderfoot got on the horse; the horse loped off nice and gentle a few. ‘Oh, he’s dead easy,’ said the tenderfoot. Then — ‘Nother horse,” Mr. Kuykendall called, and he added, “So they called him Deadeasy, that horse, and we’ll keep him for the finish.”

A big, clumsy looking black horse came in, and everybody cheered. The horse had all the marks of a plug, and he trotted in like a work horse. “Steamboat” they called him, in the tone of a man speaking the name of some delicious food.

“To the right,” said Mr. Kuykendall. “He is to be kept for Sowder on the last day.”

And it was explained that this horse was a gentle horse to saddle, let his man on, then bucked, twisting, “sun fishing,” and pounding the earth, or jumping round and round. He had won the prize for the best, i.e., the worst, horse on Frontier Day at Cheyenne.

“Ought to let Minor from Idaho have him,” said a cowboy. “We want sure to find out about him.”

“But the champion ought to have the best horse; he only rides once, and ought to have every chance to win. Besides, you want to know about him too, don’t you? You don’t think he will get it, do you?”

Then the riders were discussed all over again, while the horses were sorted or “worked” till Mr. Kuykendall feared he would tire them out with the “milling” and “ginning” that resulted from the efforts to ride into the bunch and cut out individual horses. They had the very worst out, and the men sat on the fence and discussed them, as they had the riders, with a brutal sentiment warmest for the hardest fighter, man or beast. To an outsider, the one striking point about these bad horses was that they were of all colors, sizes, and shapes. There is no type of the buck, and no breed predominates. Those collected at Denver were cayuses, mustangs, and crosses in all degrees with both standard and thoroughbred stock; and though they did not all buck, the seventy-odd that did, bucked each in his own way, so that, except for the hard pounding of the big horse and the snaky wriggle of the small horse, there was no picking them for excellence except by experience with the horse, or knowledge of the kind of man who recommended him for a “hard one.”

The horses disposed of, Mr. Kuykendall rode down town to see the riders at their headquarters, where the sixty-seven entered were gathered. It was a bare room, and the men “sat on their spurs” or saddles, or stooped and kneeled silent, with their heads pointed in, for all the world like a lot of street arabs “shooting craps.” They squatted thus all the while the director talked.

“Boys,” he said, “I want you to be clear about what we expect of you. You are to ride with the hackamore and a clean saddle. No bridles, no bits, no bucking straps or rolls. And the man that is seen to pull leather or choke his horn is out of it. Also, I want you not to cut your horses up to make them buck. If they won’t buck, we will give you another horse; but I don’t want you to force them with the quirt or spur. Do what you want when they are up in the air, but when they’re down—you understand. And remember, the hackamore, a clean saddle, no grabbing for leather, and no riding on your spurs.”

That was all. There was no comment for half a minute; then a voice from the depths of the bunch said:

“Gotasaw?”

“A saw!” the speaker exclaimed. No. Why?”

“Want to saw off my pommel so’s I can’t find it.”

The laugh that went up broke up the “powwow.” The next morning they had a street parade of Indians and two hundred or more horsemen, not all cowboys, and very few on cow horses. Generally speaking, the men were mounted and placed by the committee, according to the degree of respect for their ability to stick to the saddle. At the end of the line, on a little old mare with a bell, and a colt, rode “Rick Thompson,” the kid we were advised to watch. Everybody laughed as he went by, but the boy was serious to sadness. “I sure got to ride,” he said at the grounds that afternoon, and the other boys laughed. “I’ve been working in town lately, but I’ve ridden the range.” Another laugh. “I have, for two years.” Now they roared.

“Two years!” they jeered; “and a palefaced city kid at that.”

The bunch drew their numbers, then squatted again close up to the wire outside the arena, their backs to the crowd gathering in the stands, their eyes turned on the judges and ropers out in the center. “Thad” Sowder sat on his show horse apart, as he was told to do. Tom Minor leaned, also apart, against the fence, waving now and then to the stand, where his Idaho friends were seated. The other cowboys viewed them, as they did the horses, as the enemy; they had to “make good.”

“Can’t tell,” said Harry Brennen to some one near him. “The best man goes up in the air sometimes, and I hear they’ve got some horses here.”

Sowder wet his lips.

"I'll ride anything they got," said Minor, "and I'll drink out of a bottle while he is a-jumpin'."

The bunch became dead still. The band struck up a march. There was a sound of horses kicking in the pen, boards creaking, and out leaped a wild red horse on the end of a rope. He fought, and the ropers galloped up and caught him by the forefeet and threw him. The rider was called. He and some friends from the silent bunch ran out, put on the hackamore, kicked up the horse, and, holding him by the ears, saddled him. Another horse and another rider came out; then another couple. The first man was fighting to mount, and his horse threw himself. The second rider mounted first, but his horse did not buck, and the first rider, up at last, soon had his tired horse quiet and "done."

"All in," called the judges to the two disappointed riders. "Get off."

"Give 'em another horse," cried the crowd.

Other horses came, and other riders, all in rapid succession. Most of the animals fought from the pen to the "squeezer," and from the squeezer to the arena, where they fought the hardest. Some got away, and the ropers, the two "Clark boys," LeRoy Van Houten and Charlie Irwin, all horsemen famous in the West, had their hands full catching and holding them. It was a wild scene, with horses bucking across the arena among the loose horses, driving judges before them and stopping only at the fence. Two riders were thrown at the fence, the wire of which gave to the rush of the horse, and pitched him back scrambling on the ground. One man, Ed Thorpe, had his leg broken in this way. In the confusion, individual riders were lost except to the judges, until in a pause the name of R. R. Thompson was called, and the Kid ran out with his saddle on his back. The crowd fixed on him; the people and the judges saw how young he was.

"Who let that boy in here?" one of the committee asked. But the boy's horse stood for the saddle, and before any answer came Thompson was up, and he was riding. His horse went up in the air and reached ahead for space. The boy smiled. The horse landed with a squeal, "side bucked," "back bucked," then flashed ahead straightaway in long pitches.

"He's a rider," said a judge.

"A rider!" yelled the crowd.

"He sure can ride," said one of the cowboys; and they rose and cheered, while, hat off, Thompson rode through the air, jolted, but happy—so happy you could see his face shine.

"All in," said a roper, catching up his horse. "Say, you're all right, Kid. Get down. You're sure a rider."

The man who said that was a famous horseman. The Kid, already elated, looked up and drank in the praise. It made him drunk. He reeled in his saddle, flopped off, and staggered about. The band crashed into the cheers, and Kid Thompson, blind with the joy of it all, snatched off his hat and reeled off to the bunch.

"Did I make good?" he was muttering. "Did I make good?"

One of the older riders—one of the scoffers—called just then, got up, and, understanding Thompson's state of mind, handed his saddle to the Kid.

"Here," he said harshly, "help me saddle, will you, Thompson?"

That sobered the boy. It was another triumph to be so recognized, but the request was in the hard tone of the plains. Thompson caught himself and the saddle at the same time, and went to work as if he had forgotten himself and the crowd and the band—everything but the fighting horse his friend was to ride. And when the day was done, and the judges announced that out of the seventeen who had been tested, but two had survived—Thompson and one other—

Thompson took it pretty well. He did not seem to hear that he was one of the ten to ride for the privilege of meeting the champion.

The rejected men were not all thrown; they “pulled leather,” or “rode on a cinch,” or “did stunts” instead of “straight riding.” Not five men in all the four days were “thrown,” and two of these fell at the fence. The horsemanship was superb, but the riders were not the greatest spectacle; the display of manhood was greater. It was exhilarating to see these outspoken Western judges swallow their own words to pass Thompson, just as it was worthwhile to see them rejoice openly when their friend, the rancher, Le Roy Van Houten, on the second day, threw, saddled, and mounted a fighting black, and rode off with him fighting still; and also it was good to hear the cowboys cheer the rancher, giving that approval, “He’s a rider,” which the Westerners keep back until it is earned. Van Houten was put into the ten, and some of the judges and many of the cowboys said he would ride it off with Sowder. Then Stone, a “bad man” with a good smile, leaped upon a mad horse and, like a wolf, grinning and waving, rode rejoicing till the animal was “broke.” Luther Dennison, a gentle, bashful fellow in ordinary clothes and his shirt sleeves, unknown to judges and cowboys alike (he had been range riding only four years), rode attentively, without a flourish, but perfectly, a horse that twisted, pitched, then ran bucking and shaking clear across the arena. Dennison let him buck, giving him a dangling rein while he swung the quirt at each jump. In his fury the horse pitched forward so hard that he went over on his head, poised there a moment, then turned a complete somersault. When he came up out of the tangle, Dennison was in the saddle. He took a place at once. So did Jack McGuire, who said nothing and did nothing but ride a hard buckner to a finish. But the popular triumph of the second day was Harry Brennen, a sunny, blond young man, who was forever playing pranks. He is the reckless type of Western rider. When he was called he got a horse that rose straight into the air, squealed, landed with a grunt, rose again, going ahead, pounding with all his weight, and bucking from side to side. Brennen kicked away his stirrups, gave his horse his head, and with legs swinging, arms in air, this natural horseman crossed the arena, hit the fence, went down with his horse, came up with him, and rode back. It was a sight, and you heard then that Brennen was the man to meet Sowder, who, ever watchful, serious, silent, thought so, too.

Minor was called. “And give him a horse,” said the judges.

“Now we’ll see,” the cowboys whispered. They brought out a cat-like little beast, which three men held blindfolded for the saddling. “Turn him loose,” said Minor, settling into place, and the horse sprang to his feet, darted here, there; side-buck, crow hop, rear, and jolt, he went across the arena. Minor was drinking from a bottle of soda water. When it was empty, he tossed away the bottle and bowed. The horse bucked on, and the rider slipped behind the saddle. But it wasn’t the “stunts” that held everybody spellbound; it was the consummate grace of the man and his complete identity with the horse.

“He’s a rider,” said the cowboys grimly.

“He’s the man,” said the judge, bitterly, yet with involuntary admiration. “Sowder can never equal that; none of them can.”

Others rode, and ten were selected for the finals, but it was plain already that, partly because it was hateful to them, these judges believed they had in Minor the champion horseman of the world. The bottle of soda water, and the other tricks, pricked like spurs. “Let some friend tell him to quit his monkey business,” they said, and someone conveyed the warning. The feeling was intense.

For relief the riders and ropers started up some cowboy fun. The biggest and strongest got down on their hands and knees, and boys and lighter men tried to ride them. The imitation bucking broke the spell, and Minor was accepted as inevitable—as inevitable as Western justice.

On the third day the ten were cut to five. “Rick” Thompson fell out among the first. He had a good buckner, and he rode him with ease, but the boy could not help showing just a little. He twisted in his saddle, threw his right hand around back, down to the horse’s left flank; the animal swerved from the touch, and out went “the Kid”; he tried to get back without touching the leather, but he couldn’t—his hand clutched the horn, and the judges smiled. “Another time,” they said. And they turned to see their favorite, Van Houten, ride a running buckner. He might beat Minor. The man sat his horse beautifully, crashed with him into the fence, and turned, unmoved, to ride on. The crowd, though its sympathy was with the cowboys, stood up to cheer the rancher, and all voices were for one to save the day from Minor the boaster.

“But he’s riding on his spurs,” said a judge.

“No—yes,” said another.

“I don’t believe it,” said a third, as the rider dismounted.

He hunched his hack, bucked high, and landed hard.

“Give him another horse and watch him.”

Now, many good riders hold on with the spurs caught in the cinch, and usually it is called fair riding, but it was counted against men at Denver, where the contest soon came down to a fine point, and when Van Houten, all unconscious, got on his new horse, he stuck in the rowels and the judges, his friends, threw him out without debate. He said not a word; so far as I could learn, he never asked why. When some of the cowboys were sulking under their disappointment, the rancher, game to the end, said, “I’ll ride again next year.”

The five men who were in the final list were: Thomas F. Minor, of Shoshone, Idaho; B. F. Stone, of Rosier, Wyoming; Harry Brennen, of Sheridan, Wyoming; Jack McGuire, of Schley, Colorado; Luther Dennison, of Caddoa, Colorado. It was announced that these men should ride against the champion; but the rules provide that the judges shall first pick one man from the five, then calling for the champion, bid these two ride it out. They believed in their hearts, these judges, that Minor was the best rider, not only of the five, but of the world; and some of them said, as they all seemed to think, that Sowder couldn’t ride. It was a “bitter pill,” as one of them said, but it was plain they were prepared to swallow it.

“Say, Minor says he’ll ride any horse you got and take the saddle off while he’s bucking.” This message was like a challenge, and an offer to bet five hundred dollars went back. “Mark the spot where I am to leave the saddle,” was the reply; but there was no acceptance of the wager.

“Let Sowder ride,” the judges ordered, “and give him a horse that will kill him if he doesn’t.”

“It’s Minor,” they said to their friends. “He rides with Sowder, and that means that he wins.” But this was not generally known. The four other cowboys thought they were all to compete for the first place, and among themselves they decided that Brennen was the best man. They collected in a bunch, squatted, and three of them said so. Brennen objected, and pointed to Stone the Wolf. “I can ride any horse Brennen can,” said the Wolf, “but I can’t ride him the way Brennen can.”

“Bring out Steamboat,” called Mr. Kuykendall. “Sowder is to ride him.”

The four cowboys looked up as Sowder rode in on his show horse. The horse pranced to the music, but the rider was modest and flushed. There was no swagger about him; only earnest preoccupation.

"Maybe he can ride," they said. "If he can, let him win. He's the best man of the two, anyway."

Brennen got up, went over to Sowder, and when the champion dismounted and had his saddle off, ready for the buck, Brennen said to him:

"Sowder, I hear you drew Steamboat. I saw him back at Cheyenne, and he can sure buck. But I tell you this, he bucks high and he lands hard, but he goes mostly ahead. When he turns, he turns mostly to the left. Anyhow, I never saw him turn no other way."

"I'll remember," said Sowder, and as Brennen slouched off to the bunch, the champion looked after him with as much gratitude in his face as a man can express in a look.

Steamboat trotted in, took the saddle quietly, and when ready, Sowder turned for the word. The judges waved to mount, and the clean limbed fellow rose slowly, cautiously, into the saddle, his eyes on the horse's head. Steamboat hesitated a moment, then went right up into the air; he hunched his back, bucked high, and landed hard. Then he pitched, "mostly ahead." The rider sat easily, leaning a little to the left, and when the big black "turned, he turned to the left," Sowder going with him. It was as if every move of the horse were anticipated by the man. There had been nothing like this. The crowd arose to cheer as the horse straightened out for more pitching, and the judges yelled like cowboys when, the horse wheeling again, with high bucks to the left, found the rider before him.

The cowboys joined the yelling.

"He can ride; he can ride; he's a rider. Hi, yi!"

There was no mistaking the joy of this faith; it was universal.

"Minor's beaten!" they shouted; but Minor was to have every chance. They brought him horses, eight in a string, and he rode them; but only two bucked.

"He's a horseman, and can prevent his horses from bucking," they said in the arena.

"These are dead ones," Minor said each time as he rode past. "Got any horses that can buck?"

"Bring out that A. E. horse, Deadeasy," was the reply; and the Deadeasy horse was brought.

He bucked. Even Minor admitted that he was not an "easy horse," and as the snaky little beast crept along, wiggling and twisting, he showed daylight under his rider three times.

"But he rode him," the judges said, and the decision, thus predisposed, went over to another day.

"Steamboat for Minor, Deadeasy for Sowder," was the order then, and Minor rode first. "He cinched him in two, and held up his head," said the judge. "The man's a horseman. He's so clever they can't buck hard with him. I guess he's got it all right."

But he hadn't it yet. Sowder mounted A. E. with his characteristic care and watchfulness. Once up, he gave the horse his head, and the little bay flew, zig-zag, across the arena. The rider did not move. He kept just a point ahead of his horse. There was absolute silence, for with that animal turning the unexpected way every other second, no one could see the end. Besides, the situation was not spectacular—only very nervous and intense. Points or an accident would decide. The horse was headed for it, with his head down as if he did not see it. But his head went up suddenly, ten feet away, and from full speed he stopped short, throwing himself about, end to end. Sowder

went up in the air. "Oh!" cried the crowd, rising to see. Sowder came down off his balance, and he bent to save himself, his right hand reaching down.

"Pulled leather!" someone shouted. But he didn't. His free hand went down the side of the horse's neck and caught the hackamore rope. That righted him. The discussion ran high, both on the stands and in the arena, and the judges talked long. When they decided, at last, their secretary walked over to Sowder.

"Give me the belt," he said.

Sowder unbuckled it, staring at the man.

"Who won it?" he asked quietly.

"M. T. Sowder," said the secretary, and he buckled it on again.

"Sowder! Sowder! Sowder!" The cry went bucking into the air like a bronco, and the cowboys caught up the winner.

Then they gave Minor a boost, but Minor was sullen. He sought out Sowder. "Sowder," he said, "you're no rider; not with me. I challenge you to ride me again."

Sowder looked down, then up, flushed. "Minor," he said very slowly, very steadily, "if you'd a won, I'd a said you were the champion of the world. But you didn't. I did. And since you're talking this way, I'll say right now that there's two men better than you."

"You and who?" "Frank Stone and Harry Brennen."

"And you?"

"I'll meet you here again next year."