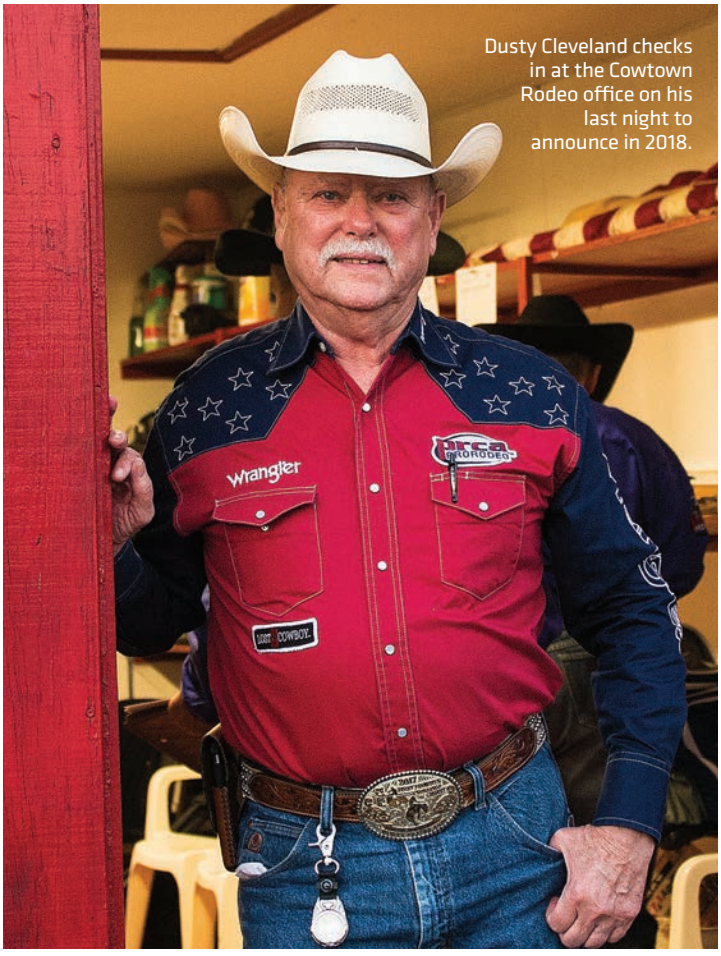
The Voice of Cowtown

New York's Emmy Award-winning PRCA announcer Dusty Cleveland reflects on a lifetime in rodeo.

By KATIE NAVARRA



Dusty Cleveland checks in at the Cowtown Rodeo office on his last night to announce in 2018.

KATIE NAVARRA

TOP AND RIGHT: RYAN STRUCK

East Coast rodeo fans get to see plenty of action in the arena at the Cowtown Rodeo in New Jersey.

Although he hasn't retired, Cleveland finished 45 years of announcing at the Cowtown Rodeo last year.

LEFT: Cleveland talks with riders preparing for the grand entry at a performance in the 1980s.

BELOW: The Cleveland family gathers at their arena in 1967.

COURTESY OF DUSTY CLEVELAND

For decades Dusty Cleveland has livened rodeo performances for East Coast fans with his quick-witted humor. His snappy narrations—a brush with a bull is "closer than a coat of paint," or a rider "just got knocked out colder than a mackerel"—have made him one of the region's most beloved announcers. For more than 50 years he's announced Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association rodeos, including the RAM First Frontier Circuit Finals.

But Cleveland is best known as the "Voice of Cowtown." For 45 years he served as the official announcer of the Cowtown Rodeo in Pilesgrove, New Jersey, nearly 300 miles south of his Ballston Spa, New York, home. Cowtown Rodeo started in 1929 and is the longest running weekly rodeo in the United States.

Younger rodeo contestants only know Cleveland for his work as an announcer, but his involvement started decades before he uttered his first words into the microphone.

GROWING VOICE

Cleveland's father, Harry, was a machinist, a farrier and an accomplished tie-down calf roper who was the Painted Pony Championship Rodeo champion in 1953.

Rodeos were a family affair. Born in 1942, Cleveland was roping steers in local and regional rodeos by age 9. His brother, Wayne, roped calves and steer wrestled, and his mother, Virginia, trail rode and was a timer at jackpots and rodeos. The family's 167-acre Circle C arena, also in Ballston Spa, has hosted jackpot roping and barrel racing events since Cleveland's childhood.

The family also bred rope horses and barrel racers. Their stallion Bouncy Bar (by Bouncy Mac and out of Tonto Rina by Tonto Bars Gill) sired several regional barrel racing stars, including Bouncys May Bar, who won a futurity at the Attica, New York, rodeo grounds, and Circle C Bouncy, who qualified twice for the RAM National Finals in Pocatello, Idaho.

As a teenager, Cleveland played the lead character in Western shows at New York's flourishing Frontier Town Theme Park in the nearby Adirondack Mountains during the summer. Three times each day he wowed the crowds with roping demonstrations, and bull and bronc riding exhibitions. He wasn't acting. He was simply showcasing his skills as an experienced calf roper and team roper who qualified for the PRCA Circuit Finals multiple times in both events. He also was ranked in the Top 5 in the PRCA First Frontier All-Around standings.

With a quick costume change between stock demonstrations, he acted out Custer's famous last stand in the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Rodeo fans line up on the highway to get into the Cowtown Rodeo, which was established in 1929.

KATIE NAVARRA

"I was the only one the Custer shirt fit, so that's how I got the role," he says with a laugh.

Cleveland's rodeo days were interrupted in 1960 when he volunteered for the U.S. Navy. He was stationed stateside as a corpsman at St. Alban's Naval Hospital in Queens, one of the five boroughs comprising New York City. He married his wife, Diane, before reporting for duty, and their first daughter, Sheri, was born the same year.

In 1963, he took a brief leave of absence to attend the Worldwide College of Auctioneering in Mason City, Iowa, which was founded by Colonel Joe Reisch in 1933. As a child, Cleveland attended numerous cattle sales with his grandfather and marveled over the auctioneer. When he told a buddy he was headed to auctioneer school, his friend couldn't understand why.

"He didn't know why I'd do a thing like that and said, 'No you're not,'" Cleveland reminisces. "We had this thing where we'd throw our hats in the air and bet $100 based on how it landed to determine the outcome."

Cleveland tossed his hat in the air, wagering it would land crown up. It hit the ground in that position, determining his fate—he was enrolling in auctioneer school. He completed the program in 1964, and within a week of graduation had his first auctioneer job. His second daughter, Lorri, was born the same year. Cleveland worked weekend auctions until finishing his military service in 1966. In 1967, his youngest daughter, Jody, was born.

Little did he know, but his auctioneer skills would soon come in handy at rodeos. In 1968, Painted Pony Rodeo in Lake Luzerne, New York needed a stand-in for their regular announcer, Hub Hubbell, a rodeo star and trick roper who worked with Roy Rogers, Dale Evans and Gene Autry. The rodeo's stock contractor, Don Baxter, and helper Jeannie Reynolds asked Cleveland to fill in because of his skills behind the microphone and in-depth knowledge of the sport.

"I had a bit of stage fright and was nervous because I'd never done it before," he says. "Don 'Wild Horse' Baxter owned the Painted Pony Rodeo then and was ecstatic with how I did."

After that night, Cleveland filled in anytime Hubbell was away. Baxter and Reynolds encouraged Cleveland to pursue more announcing opportunities, so when the Ballston Spa-based All American Rodeo Company opened in 1973, he signed on to announce its performances. In one week, he followed the rodeo company to events from Oil City, Pennsylvania, to Raymond, New Hampshire, where the PRCA Top 15 competitors in the world—including champion bronc rider Monty "Hawkeye" Henson and bull rider Bob Burger—competed. Famous trick rider and roper and National Finals Rodeo performer Francisco Zamora also was part of the event.

> "A young announcer was calling everybody a champion. I told him that if the rider didn't have the gold buckle, he wasn't a champion. It takes a lot of sacrifice to be a champion and announcers have got to get it right."
> *—Dusty Cleveland*

COWTOWN RODEO

Cowtown Rodeo is just seven miles from the New Jersey Turnpike, the major thoroughfare connecting Pennsylvania, New York and Delaware. Located in Pilesgrove, New Jersey, it's only 25 miles southwest of Philadelphia. Cars are stopped for more than a mile in both directions waiting to enter the rodeo grounds every Saturday night from May to September.

Cowtown is the oldest weekly professional rodeo in the United States. Howard "Stoney" Harris produced his first rodeo in 1929 in conjunction with the Salem County Fair. It became an annual event until World War II broke out. In 1955, Stoney and his son Baldy, the 1954 National Intercollegiate Rodeo All-Around Champion, established the weekly rodeo. In 1978, Baldy offered his son Grant, a multiple Northeast Circuit Saddle Bronc Champion, the chance to buy the rodeo.

Grant traded life as a rodeo competitor for that of a rodeo producer. He and his wife, Betsy, produced rodeos along the East Coast from Rutland, Vermont, to Raleigh, North Carolina, while hosting a weekly rodeo at home, which includes a 4,000-seat arena. The family also raised their own rough-stock. In 1984, Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame Stock Contractor Bennie Beutler bought the Harris' bull 018 and renamed him "Cowtown." In 1985 Cowtown was the PRCA Bucking Bull of the Year.

The Harris family no longer produces shows on the road and focuses on their rodeos at home. They raise 500 head of cattle for the rodeo and about 100 Angus beef cattle. Even though Grant gave up riding broncs four decades ago, the bucking horses are still his favorite. The rodeo maintains a herd of 150 bucking horses, many of them direct offspring of the mares who bucked in the late 1970s.

In September of 2018, Grant and Betsy turned Cowtown over to their daughter Katy, son-in-law R.J. and grandson Nate to carry the family tradition into the next generation, the fifth generation of the family to run Cowtown. Katy's sister, Courtney, lives with her husband, Jake Morehead, and their three children at Three Hills Rodeo Company in Bernard, Iowa.

Cowtown Rodeo celebrates its 90th anniversary in 2019, but the Harris family and their connection to ranching traces back to the 1600s, when their ancestors raised beef cattle. In 1776, the family drove a herd from their homestead almost 200 miles north to Pennsylvania, to feed General George Washington's troops at the Battle of Trenton.

Today the family owns 1,800 acres. Developers see the scenic farmland as prime real estate for amusement parks and shopping plazas. Offers to buy the land have been so high that the interest off the payment would be more money than the rodeo has ever made.

"Rodeoing has been a family business since 1929 when Grandpop Stoney got it rolling," Grant said. "When it came my turn to open the big gate, I had to make a big decision [to give up competing]. It wasn't easy, but it is hard to walk away from something your dad and granddad spent a lifetime building."

For the Harris family, no sum of money is enough to quit the family business.

The Cowtown Rodeo is the longest running weekly rodeo in the United States.

RYAN STRUCK

LEFT: Cowtown Rodeo's final performance in 2018 drew a full house of about 4,300.

BELOW: Pictured in 2016, Cleveland announced Cowtown Rodeo for 45 years.

"There were people hanging out of trees to watch the New Hampshire rodeo because there weren't any seats left," Cleveland remembers. "We covered 4,300 miles that week working rodeos."

In those days, Cleveland entered many of the rodeos he announced until PRCA prohibited it. He'd turn the microphone over long enough to team rope with his daughter Sheri, or they'd wait for the slack.

One Saturday night in 1973, while Cleveland waited to rope at Cowtown Rodeo, Andy Harris, the son of one of Cowtown Rodeo's owners, drew a rank bull named Kiss Me. The bull stood on his nose and whipped up hard, knocking out Harris. Mickey Osterman, MD, was announcing that night and rushed down to care for Harris. Rodeo organizers were frantically looking for someone to fill in when fellow contestants in the stands suggested Cleveland.

"Everyone in the crowd kept motioning to [Andy's brother] Grant that I could come up and take Mickey's spot, but I wasn't really paying a whole lot of attention. I was focused on Andy in the arena," he says.

Cleveland took over until Harris was okay. After that night, whenever Cowtown's regular announcer was away, Cleveland filled in. In 1974, the Harris family hired Cleveland as their official full-time announcer.

Often, he'd leave his house on a Monday and travel for two or three weeks at a time. During the week, he worked as an auctioneer. On Saturday, he'd arrive in New Jersey to announce for Cowtown before starting the routine again the next week.

"For years I bounced like a yo-yo through train stations and airports, working as an auctioneer and a rodeo announcer," he says. "A buddy of mine had his own plane and flew me on a few trips."

During his reign as the "Voice of Cowtown," he appeared on the local television news program *SNJ Today*. Each week, Cleveland was on camera before the rodeo grand entry at 7:30 p.m. and followed up with a recap after the rodeo.

"As soon as the official rodeo was over, Cleveland headed down the steps and over to the broadcast booth to do a recap of the night's rodeo," says Jeff Lee, a PRCA rodeo announcer from Silent Springs, Arkansas, who has announced with Cleveland. "He just never stopped."

Cleveland's appearances on *SNJ Today* earned him the Mid-Atlantic Emmy Award for Outstanding Sporting Game-Live/Unedited Program category for the 2005–2006 season.

"I didn't even know I was up for the award," he says. "I returned home after two or three weeks on the road and there was this box at my door. It was the Emmy. I eventually found the invitation in a stack of mail. I would have liked to have walked the red carpet."

MASTER OF THE CRAFT

Over the course of five decades in the business Cleveland has become a walking encyclopedia of rodeo trivia and performance records for generations of East Coast rodeo competitors, both human and animal.

"Cleveland does more homework for one performance than I do in a year," says Wade Grinager, a PRCA announcer from Hanover, Minnesota, who has often announced with Cleveland.

Cleveland has memorized the PRCA Media Guide so that when he calls a contestant a champion, he's certain the competitor has earned the title. Being sure of a rider's accomplishments is something the 76-year-old announcer says he has "a bug about."

"A year or two ago, a young announcer was calling everybody a champion. I told him that if the rider didn't have the gold buckle, he wasn't a champion," Cleveland says. "It takes a lot of sacrifice to be a champion and announcers have got to get it right."

Getting the facts right is as much about honoring a contestant's accomplishments as it is about establishing trust. The PRCA Media Guide and the Internet make it easy to confirm information, he says.

RYAN STRUCK

"His depth of knowledge of not only the contestants, but their moms and dads and their grandparents, is amazing," says Lee.

Milford, New Jersey, barrel racing trainer Lara DeLorenzo Sims attributes many fond childhood memories to races that Cleveland announced.

"I owned a great mare that Cleveland's parents bred and raised. He would always tell that story as I was making my barrel racing run," she says.

Cleveland was quick to acknowledge family connections and achievements for the contestants, but refrained from calling attention to his children, their spouses or his grandchildren despite their more than 50 collective circuit and year-end titles through the PRCA First Frontier Circuit and the American Professional Rodeo Association circuit. He never wanted to draw away from the show and put the attention on himself.

"The number of people that come up to him and give him a hug week after week is a testament to who he is and the impact he's had on rodeo," Lee says.

Cleveland's professionalism and passion have inspired a new generation of rodeo announcers. Pennsylvania cowboy Ty Miller grew up listening to Cleveland narrate his rides at the Cowtown Rodeo. In 2015, Miller traded in an arena view for a bird's-eye view, and credits Cleveland with the career change.

"I got started announcing by listening to him. He's been such a big inspiration to me," Miller says.

In 2017, Cleveland was diagnosed with multiple myeloma cancer, but he continued his weekly trips to Cowtown through that season and the next. At the rodeo's closing performance in September of 2018, he retired from the Cowtown Rodeo and was honored for his decades of service.

"Without fail, without being late, without being absent for 45 years, he was one of the greatest announcers rodeo has ever seen," says Grant Harris, who operated Cowtown Rodeo until September of 2018, when he and his wife, Betsy, passed it on to their daughter's family.

Cleveland may have hung up his hat as the official announcer at Cowtown, but he continues to announce elsewhere. In January of 2019, he announced the PRCA First Frontier Circuit Finals in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, for the 19th time, the only announcer to do so. He plans to announce at local PRCA rodeos as needed through the coming summer. His fans can always catch him in his director's chair next to the roping chutes on Tuesday nights at the family's jackpot events back home at the Circle C arena in Ballston Spa.

"Professional rodeo is the only sport to have originated on American soil in the cattle fields of this great nation. But no rodeo would be worth 5 cents if it weren't for the rodeo fans, and I always tried to make it an experience they would remember," Cleveland says. "Announcing has meant everything to me and I've enjoyed every bit of it, especially the folks—the contestants, the rodeo fans and my own fans."

KATIE NAVARRA is a freelance writer based in New York. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com