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Ni Hao, Pard! Bull Riding Comes to China

Sport Proves Hard to Translate; Mongolian Cowboy

By Bob Davis Follow

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LAIYANG, China—Professional bull riding's Great Chinese Hope carefully lowered himself onto 1,000 pounds of ornery bucking bull. Focus, he said he tells himself. No distractions. After the bull settled a bit, the rider shouted that he was ready to go.

The chute opened, the bull grazed the side of the gate, bucked once and deposited the rider—splat!—on the ground. Elapsed time: about two seconds.

Embarrassed, the rider, whose name is Harihen, brushed himself off and said he wants "another one." Score one for persistence.

Bull riding is coming to China, but it is traveling a rutted road.

Although China doesn't have a cowboy culture or rodeos, cowboy devotees want to change that. They are led by James Wang, a wealthy Chinese former ostrich importer who fell in love with rodeos during the 10 years he lived in Texas.

He signed a deal with Professional Bull Riders Inc., the Colorado company that has turned bull riding into a big-time sport in the U.S., to plan a three-city tour in China this year. It was supposed to be the first PBR-promoted set of events in this country.

Mr. Wang bought 90 bulls for $2 million. The price also covered shipping them here by air from Australia. He paid a former Australian bull rider, Dean Pace, to accompany them. During the bulls' 57 days of quarantine in an Inner Mongolian shed, Mr. Pace said, he spent his nights in a sleeping bag in the shed and lost 40 pounds because he couldn't stand Chinese food.

"Chicken heads; chicken feet. C'mon mate," Mr. Pace said of the cuisine.

The Chinese Professional Bull Riding Association, as Mr. Wang's venture was named, hired an announcer who figured out Chinese equivalents for bull-riding expressions to whip up the crowd.

A "rank" bull, meaning one that is especially tough to ride, became a "*ye*" bull. "Ye" is Chinese for wild and crazy.

Most important to attracting crowds, though, was creating a homegrown cowboy—the bull-riding equivalent of Yao Ming, the Chinese superstar who turned the National Basketball Association into a Chinese obsession. Mr. Wang reached into Inner Mongolia, famed since the days of Genghis Khan for horsemen, and plucked out Mr. Harihen, who like many Mongolians uses just one name.

The 25-year-old, who has worked as a horse rider in shows, can ride a galloping horse while he is upside down holding on to the saddle from the side of the horse. He also tames wild camels.

Trouble is, Mr. Harihen had never seen a Western-style bull in the flesh, let alone ridden one. In China, bulls are water buffaloes, which generally like to loll around in the mud.

Mr. Harihen said he likes cowboy movies, and he has the lean look of a young Marlboro man. That was enough for Mr. Wang, who shipped him to Australia for coaching in the spring.

He was outfitted with a black cowboy hat and reborn as Tuff Dundee—Tuff for the U.S. bull-riding champion, Tuff Hedeman, and Dundee for Crocodile Dundee. With his Mongolian preference for one name, Mr. Harihen's business card says, simply, "Tuff."

In Australia, Mr. Harihen learned to ride by sitting on barrels that his coach shook under him. He rode smaller bulls in exhibitions but never held on for the full eight seconds necessary to score points.

"The most important thing is to be brave and not be afraid of the bull," Mr. Harihen said.

The CPBR set its inaugural event for late August in Qingdao, the home of Tsingtao beer.

A bull rider in the chute preparing to attempt to stay on a bucking bull for at least eight seconds. Promoters hope the rodeo event will catch on in China. ILLUSTRATION: BOB DAVIS/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

But Mr. Wang couldn't get government permission to use local stadiums. Mr. Wang figures that bull riding is the latest victim of the government's high-profile campaign against corruption, which has made local bureaucrats wary of approving new projects for fear of being accused of taking bribes.

Qingdao officials didn't comment.

Frustrated, Mr. Wang canceled the season, which was disappointing given that more than 10,000 "fans" have expressed interest in CPBR on the Chinese social-media website Weibo.

Mr. Wang claimed on a ticket-selling website that the animals couldn't get accustomed to China and were too sick to buck—an explanation he acknowledges is bull. He didn't want to blame the government, he said, whose approval he still needs to stage a 2015 tour.

"It's not true," he says of the website's explanation, "but it's the best excuse we could come up with."

The silver lining: Mr. Harihen had more time to learn to ride under the tutelage of Mr. Pace. Mr. Harihen now hopes to compete in the U.S. bull-riding tour later this year or train more in Australia.

Lacking a cattle ranch to house the bulls after the Inner Mongolia quarantine, CPBR put together outdoor cow pens and a bull-riding ring about 300 miles southeast of Beijing.

Mr. Harihen invited two hometown friends to join in training—his posse, so to speak. On a recent autumn weekend, they took turns mounting the bulls.

After Mr. Harihen's first disastrous ride during a visit by a Wall Street Journal reporter, the next two went better. On the third ride, he hung on for nearly eight seconds. Mr. Harihen dismounted cleanly; he wasn't tossed on his back. Elated, he trotted around the ring, high-fiving his friends, a camerawoman, a reporter, two translators and Mr. Pace.

"I focused on the bull's back," Mr. Harihen told Mr. Pace through an interpreter.

"Some bull riders aren't too smart," the coach replied. "Better not to think too much."

In their down time, the young bull riders discuss the career of Josh O'Byrne, an American who, like them, didn't start riding bulls until he was 25. Mr. O'Byrne is known for his injuries. He says that stompings got him metal mesh plates in his jaw, metal pins in his ankles and knees and an artificial hip.

"It's a matter of how hurt you get, not whether you get hurt," he said in a phone interview from Burkina Faso, where he works as a manager of a gold mine.

Mr. Harihen girds himself for such mishaps. He records encouraging thoughts in his diary, like "be bold and cautious." He and his friends sing Mongolian folk songs that have the cadence of a horse trotting on the grasslands.

Mr. Wang's commitment to Mr. Harihen, who is earning a salary of between 50,000 and 100,000 yuan (roughly between $8,100 and $16,200) a year, plus room, board and training—is open-ended. He intends to support Mr. Harihen at least until he starts earning prize money overseas, or if the CPBR gets out of the gate in 2015.

Until then, Mr. Harihen keeps training. The next day, he was tested again. The first bull he rode tried to bite Mr. Harihen. When the door swung open, the bull swirled and tossed him hard on the ground, then stomped on Mr. Harihen's wrist, ripped his jeans near his ankle and came close to kicking him. A cowboy hat left near the gate was mangled by the bull.

Mr. Harihen walked away dejected. He did a chin-up to make sure his wrist wasn't broken. He was ready for another ride, he said. "Once the chute opens," he said, "I don't feel a thing."

—Yang Jie contributed to this article.

Write to Bob Davis at bob.davis@wsj.com