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Toby Collins and Bryden Atkins [Photograph: Tanya King]



YOUNG AUSSIE COWBOYS

Tanya King

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Sitting on the edge of the chutes, watching the older cowboys stretch and flex as they prepare for the open division bullock or bronc rides, two young cowboys are quiet. Both rode today in the junior competition and both won places. The belt buckle shows that, for his age, the boy on the right is an elite performer. He is someone to be watched in the future when he joins the older men in the open division.

But the buckles that champion cowboys and cowgirls receive are the only outward signs of their success. Boasting is frowned upon; humility is expected from even the most decorated competitor. A winning cowboy may downplay his achievement by saying, "It's the luck of the draw. If you don't draw the horse or the bullock that'll buck, you don't get a prize," or, "Yeah, I was pretty happy with that, actually. I didn't go so well in Tumba' so it was good to get a ride today."

Rodeo is competitive. The ranks of performers are continually updated on the Association website. Everyone knows who has done well. Yet even those who merit 'bragging rights' do not crow. As one retired cowboy explained, "Oh we all got cocky! Everyone got cocky. But if anyone got too big for his boots he was pretty rapidly brought back down to earth ... reacquainted with the ground at a screaming rate of knots."

Here, then, we see an expression of Australian 'mateship,' that combination of individuality and group loyalty which is manifest in a strong aversion to celebrations of individual prowess. It is an 'organic' solidarity, well tuned to an environment where each individual may, at a future time, need to call on the support of others. It is wiser, therefore, to disparage oneself, to be modest, than to assert a brash, stand-alone, identity.

As the young cowboys sit quietly on the edge of the chutes, reflecting upon earlier performances of their own and of others, they embody both newly acquired technical skills and aspects of Australian 'mateship' that are expressed through the ethos of rodeo.