

They're coming 'round the barrels

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Local barrel-racing enthusiasts host last of summer jackpots at the Gothenburg Roping Arena.

“Go Willy!” a voice booms from the announcer’s box as a horse and rider hurtle around a barrel.

As Jerry Schnacker and his steed Willy streak across the finish, announcer Larry Wendelin praises them for a job well done.

“It’s unconventional,” Wendelin said later as barrel racing enthusiasts loaded horses and packed up their trailers at the Gothenburg Roping Club arena last Wednesday night.

Most announcers stick to their job of keeping participants and audience members abreast of who competes next, racing times and other information but Wendelin can’t help encouraging riders.

“I just love this sport,” the former Gothenburg teacher said. “It’s a consummate team sport of horse and rider. I’m amazed at the skill of the riders and how they take young horses and get them started.

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"It's a process."

One reason horses and riders from as far away as Texas have competed in Gothenburg is the arena and how Schnacker keeps the ground in ideal condition for animals to "get a hold of" as they round barrels at top speed, according to Wendelin and others.

Schnacker keeps busy at the twice-monthly barrel-racing "jackpots" as they're called.

After each third or fifth rider, he drives his tractor pulling a blade carefully around each obstacle so hooves don't slip on hard or muddy ground. Grooming also fills in any holes.

Schnacker then saddles up to test his and his horse's skills against others.

As far as anyone can figure, the bimonthly jackpots have been going on at the roping arena for at least 10 years.

Although they are Nebraska 4-D Barrel Racing Association events, horse and riders who belong to other barrel-racing associations can compete for points.

Others, like 13-year-old Jake Mustard and 10-year-old Josie Hotz, sign up just to compete. In fact Wednesday night, Josie tied for first place in the third tier of racing and beat her mother—experienced barrel racer Barb Hotz.

In Nebraska 4-D, there are four divisions of competition based on time.

"It's fun and challenging," Josie said. "And I get to do it on my horse Tootie."

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Barb Hotz, who organized the Wednesday night event for several years, said she did it because there weren't many barrel races in the area.

She also loves the sport and the fact that it can be an enjoyable family event. Last Wednesday, Barb and Josie were joined by husband, father and veterinarian Jim Hotz—who watched—and their two young sons.

After whirling around the corners on her buckskin Sandy, Vicki Schnacker—who is married to Jerry—said Wednesday night barrel-racing means getting her horses seasoned and conditioned for bigger events with more prize money.

Once a rider goes through what is needed to train a horse to be a good racer and starts winning jackpots, Schnacker said he or she can appreciate what it takes to make a good barrel horse. Such a racer can cost anywhere from \$7,500 to \$35,000 based on its experience in the arena and the money it wins.

The Schnackers headed to McCook last weekend for a Barrel Bash and will travel to Topeka, KS, to compete Labor Day weekend.

Suzie Wahlgren hasn't competed in as many jackpots as she's wanted to this summer but she was there Wednesday night.

"We are very spoiled to have such good ground and upkeep," Wahlgren said. "Jerry also keeps it up during the week so we can come in and practice."

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"In my opinion, it's probably the best ground around."

It's also the only arena in Dawson County where jackpot barrel racing is offered, Jerry said.

That affects economic development.

Wendelin said those benefits could be even more with higher-paying jackpots.

He pointed to a jackpot in McCook where \$3,000 is added to the pot in addition to entry fees.

"They get probably 300 runners. Just imagine the economic impact to the city in terms of food, gas, motels and shopping," Wendelin said.

More than 80 competitors at a time have shown up at the jackpot event in Gothenburg which starts in June and continues through August.



Although Schnacker said he spends more time away from his automotive business than he should taking care of the arena, he enjoys seeing it used.

"People we know come up and fellowship with us there and at other events," Jerry said. "It makes it all worth it."

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He was quick to point out others are involved in hosting a jackpot event with everything from taking entries and recording times to setting the electric eye and figuring pay outs.

This past year, Marcy Bartlett and Lisa Findlay were joined by Beth Baxter of Kearney in organizing the event.

Occasionally, he said campers wander over from Lafayette Park to watch a jackpot and come back again the next year.

Just as the Wednesday night barrel racers will return to Gothenburg next June.

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