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Guymon Pioneer Days Rodeo

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Pickup men are rodeo's true cowboys

GUYMON, Okla. – Each spring, tie-down roper Jerome Schneeberger makes his way to the Oklahoma Panhandle to compete at one of his favorite rodeos.

Schneeberger, an 11-time Wrangler National Finals Rodeo qualifier from Ponca City, Okla., is a two-time champion of the Guymon Pioneer Days Rodeo. He expects to make it three this year when the rodeo takes place April 29-May 5 at Henry C. Hitch Pioneer Arena. But he's got more to do than any other competitor in the field.

You see, Schneeberger will serve as one of three pickup men at the annual rodeo, now in its 81st year. In addition to handling many of the behind-the-scenes duties that help make the rodeo happen, he will join Matt Scott of Cody, Wyo., and Jeremy Hight of Carthage, Texas, to assist cowboys who ride bucking horses and bulls for a living.

"It feels good to me that someone calls me to pick up, especially a rodeo like Guymon," Schneeberger said. "Maybe I'll get a chance to work the NFR."

Pickup men are mostly recognized in bareback riding and saddle bronc riding, where they ride alongside the bucking beasts at the end of a ride to help the cowboys get off their mounts unscathed. It takes a special sort of cowboy to handle the tasks, one who understands livestock, is a great horseman and can rope better than many who actually compete.

"When you have someone good to pick up with, it's a lot of fun," he said. "I enjoy the lifestyle. I enjoy the work. I've always enjoyed being around it ever since I was a kid."

This will be the first time for all three cowboys to work the Guymon rodeo. Scott has been picking up in some form or fashion for the last decade, while Hight began the job just four years ago. Nonetheless, they've got a good handle on what it takes to do the job well.

"I started doing it so I had something to fall back on when I was done riding broncs," said Scott, 30. "I got to where I enjoyed it more than I did riding broncs, so I just went from there. In 2005, I quit riding broncs and went to picking up all the time."

Hight has never ridden broncs; not on purpose, anyway.

"I grew up around some amateur rodeos, but I never did really rodeo. I was more of a cowboy, working at ranches," he said. "I went to Texas A&M and stayed down there for five or six years working for big ranches. I came back here (to Carthage), because my grandfather has a little ranch. I've been working with that and picking up."

Now he'll get to work one of the most prestigious rodeos in the land, one that has been recognized by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association and Women's Professional Rodeo Association as rodeo of the year.

"Guymon is one of those places you hear about, a place you want to go," Hight said. "You want to pick up at good rodeos and work with good committees. That's what makes it fun, because you're going to see a 90-point bareback ride or a 90-point bull ride.

"Those are fun places to go, and I have the best seat in the house."

The pickup men might be the most important cowboys in the arena throughout a rodeo, but it's best that they're not recognized. Their primary tasks are to keep cowboys as safe as possible while also

helping with the overall production. They knew the necessity of getting the animals out of the arena in quick fashion after each ride and run.

That's why they're a valuable piece of the puzzle for well-produced rodeos. Pickup men are in the arena from start to finish, but if all goes well, they're hardly seen by fans.

"It's a big arena, and it's a long week, so I know it'll take some horses to get through it all," Schneeberger said. "I know it'll be a lot of work. I'm not opposed to that at all. I just hope the weather is nice."

No matter the conditions, the rodeo will go on. All three pickup men know they have an important job to perform.

"It's a big deal for me to work one of the bigger rodeos like Guymon, which has a lot of history behind it," Scott said. "It's a big honor for me."