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## **Guymon Pioneer Days Rodeo** Where Champions Play the First Weekend in May

For information  
Contact Ted Harbin

(660) 254-1900  
[imteditor@gmail.com](mailto:imteditor@gmail.com)

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# Pioneer Days deserving of honor

GUYMON, Okla. – Oklahoma has a strong and powerful rodeo history.

From hosting the National Finals Rodeo to being the home of many world champions, the state is well known for its rodeo lore. Still, only this community in the heart of the Panhandle can boast of being home to Oklahoma's Hall of Fame Rodeo.

Fresh off its induction into the ProRodeo Hall of Fame last summer, the Guymon Pioneer Days Rodeo will show the world just why during four performances, set for 7:30 p.m. Friday, May 6; 2 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday, May 7; and 2 p.m. Sunday, May 8, at Henry C. Hitch Pioneer Arena.

"We have an 84-year history that we're very proud of," said Jim Quimby, chairman of the volunteer committee that produces the annual rodeo. "Every year we work very hard as a community to pull off the best rodeo in the state, in the country.

"Being inducted into the ProRodeo Hall of Fame is an incredible honor for us. We are very proud of our rodeo. We have a core group of people who work all year to put this on, but this is a community event. We wouldn't have the kind of rodeo we have without our community."

It's a rodeo that's well-respected by the contestants that play the game. Nearly 1,000 cowboys and cowgirls make their way to the Oklahoma Panhandle every spring for the event. Virtually every world champion in recent history has played the game inside Hitch Arena, and they always look forward to returning.

"The community really got behind this rodeo," said Robert Etbauer, a two-time world champion from Goodwell, Okla., now serving as the rodeo coach at Oklahoma Panhandle State University. "The community's the one that got the rodeo (to the hall of fame). Larry Jeffus and the rest of that committee ... my hat's off to them, because they did a heck of a job."

There have been a number of volunteers over the years that have held significant roles in the rodeo's success. From Melyn Johnson to Ken Stonecipher to Earl Helm to Quimby and the countless others who have been part of the event's success, it takes a small village for Pioneer Days Rodeo to continue to be a top-tier event for the contestants.

Etbauer and other cowboys had a big hand in helping put the Guymon rodeo on the map in the early 1990s. He and others with ties to Texas County worked hard to help increase the purse, thereby making it a big event in the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association.

Prior to the early '90s, Pioneer Days Rodeo had the smallest committee bankroll to make it eligible to be a PRCA event – local organizers raised \$500 per event, which was then combined with contestants' entry fees to make up the entire purse. Over the last two-plus decades, the local event boasts of one of the larger overall purses in the association.

"It's a rodeo that came from humble beginnings, just a \$500 circuit rodeo," said Bret Franks, a three-time Wrangler National Finals Rodeo qualifier who grew up in Guymon. "It hasn't always been a big celebration for the community.

“The big deal was getting sponsors behind it. I remember Robert going around and knocking on doors, introducing himself. We all kind of did it in little ways, but Robert was the driving force for us contestants, a lot of us Panhandle State alumni.”

It didn't hurt that Etbauer was wearing one of his two world championship gold buckles while visiting with sponsors, but that was just the start.

“It was our hometown rodeo, and we wanted to see the best for it,” said Etbauer, who, along with brother Billy, was inducted into the ProRodeo Hall of Fame in 2012 – they were joined a year later by youngest brother Dan as inductees into the National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City in Oklahoma City. “We loved this community and liked our hometown rodeo. We wanted to do whatever we could.”

There were a lot of big names who jumped on board. The Etbauers were joined by traveling partner Craig Latham, Franks and just about anyone who had ties to the Panhandle State rodeo team. Most were big names on the ProRodeo trail at the time.

“We appreciate all those that voted,” Robert Etbauer said. “Those that voted are the committees and your peers, the people you rode in front of and got to know them through the years. It's just fun to be thought of in that way.”

Now Pioneer Days Rodeo is part of the grandest hall in the sport.

“The town has grown so much in the last 10 years that it's unbelievable,” Franks said. “There have been a lot of people that have gotten behind that rodeo and improved it. They have always tried to do whatever would set us apart and improve it, whether it was bringing in all the different contractors to roping muleys (hornless steers used in team roping).

“They were doing things that were innovative and outside the box when we started. Now all the good rodeos are doing what we were doing then.”

Maybe that's just another big reason why Pioneer Days Rodeo will forever be enshrined in the ProRodeo Hall of Fame along with all the other greats in the game.