

# Off to the Rodeo

## Off-duty Troopers participate in rodeo at Palmer State Fair

Garrett Willis has spent most of his lifetime wearing hats, first growing up riding horses and roping steers and then as an Alaska State Trooper. They both fit comfortably on his head. He wears his Stetson as a trooper working out of the post at Cooper Landing. This weekend, Willis donned a Wrangler hat to win his third straight all-around cowboy title at the rodeo his family puts on at the Alaska State Fair in Palmer on Aug. 29-30. To do this, he won two events, took a silver and bronze in two other contests. His sister, Callie Willis, bumped him into second place in the team roping competition and won the all-around title for the ladies.

When asked who the better roper was, Garrett laughed.

“Obviously my sister,” he said. “She beat me.”

When asked the same question, their father, Charlie Willis, smiled proudly.

“That’s not a fair question,” the older Willis said. “Actually, they’re both good, they both have a different way of handling steers. They have a different way to swinging, but when it comes to consistency, they’re almost matched. This is the second time in a row Callie has beat her brother at this fair to win first place.”

Roping has been in the Willis family for the past 26 years. The older Willis quit his job on the North Slope in 1984 to start a family and bought a tack outfitters business, now called CW Tack & Western Wear, in Wasilla. After spending the greater part of 26 years heavily involved in rodeos, the family took over running the rodeo at the fair about four years ago. Garrett takes off time from work to help with preparations that begin a week and a half before the rodeo. He was also part of the rodeo entertainment when he and the rodeo clown, George, hammed it up for the audience during a break in events.

“It’s a sport you can do it as a family continuously,” Charlie said.

Both Garrett and Callie started roping when they were 6-years old, Charlie Willis said. The pair teamed up to win the ribbon roping event. Callie roped a steer from horseback, then Garrett grabbed the ribbon from the steer’s tail and sprinted the length of the arena. The pair also took third in team roping. Garrett also took first in the double mugging competition where one person ropes the steer and the partner ties three of the steer’s legs together. He took second in team roping with partner Chris Flickeningner.

Garrett Willis wasn’t the only trooper involved in this year’s fair rodeo. Dave Bower, an investigator with the ABI in Palmer, Palmer patrol Trooper Duane Leventry and Capt. Hans Brinke participated in the rodeo in some fashion. Leventry competed in double mugging on the first day, but got called into work on Sunday and was unable to turn his luck around after he and his partner failed to record a time on

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Garrett Willis, an Alaska State Trooper in Cooper Landing, and his sister, Callie, on their way to winning the ribbon roping contest.





**Pictured left: Dave Bower, an investigator with the ABI unit in Palmer tries to persuade a steer to go a different route. On the right: Bower later stepped in to wrestle a steer that knocked down a fellow rodeo hand.**

Saturday. Bower and Brinke both worked behind the scenes handling the steers for the roping competitions. The two hope to compete in the roping events next year with a little more practice under the guidance of Charlie Willis.

That family atmosphere appeals to Brinke, giving him and his 6-year-old son something to learn together.

“It’s a sport and a way of life that keeps your family close,” he said. “I really like that.”

Brinke spent the summer learning the ropes at what he calls the Willis

Training Camp and intends to buy a roping horse with the hopes that he can advance his skills far enough to at least compete in the team roping events.

“I look forward to next year,” Brinke said. “I look forward to being able to rope off of a horse and rope a real steer instead of doing it off of a saddle rack and a fake cow.”

Bower, who grew up milking cows on a farm in Minnesota, has also taken some lessons from Willis. He kept busy Sunday by helping corral the steers into the chutes where Brinke would take over and guide them into back pens. Bower cleared off the ropes that were still attached to their horns. Then, after the round was over, they helped steer the small herd down to the other side where the cattle would be used for the next roping event. Bower’s experience as a trooper came in handy when he had to wrestle a steer after it knocked

down his working partner in the pen and kicked him around a bit.

“Once in a while you get a steer that is more rambunctious than the rest and we couldn’t get him calmed down,” Bower said. “It’s hard to control them when there are no ropes on them.”

Fortunately, Bower, with some help from another rodeo worker, was able to wrestle the 300-400 pound steer off and back to the chute with only a minimal amount of injury. Bower’s finger got squeezed between a panel and a pole and the other cowboy suffered some bruising.

“It was just kinda like wrestling a drunk,” Bower said. “Same thing, just no odor of alcohol.”

*Photos and story by Beth Lpsen, PLO*

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*- Capt. Hans Brinke*



**Hans Brinke, commander of the Alaska Bureau of Highway Patrol, helps guide steers into their proper pens after the first day of the Palmer State Fair Rodeo on Saturday, Aug. 29.**