



**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**¡El Hombre Esta Muerto!**

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Five animals are involved in a rodeo contest known as steer wrestling: two horses, two riders, and the steer. One horse and rider (the hazer) run along one side of the steer to prevent the animal from veering away from the steer wrestler's horse and its rider, who are on the other side of the steer. This idea is illustrated in Figure 1.

The job of the wrestler is to keep his mount alongside the sprinting steer, choose the best time to "ease off" the horse onto the neck and back of the steer, and then grab it by the horns, ears, or mouth. The exact part of the animal that is grabbed is often subject to luck. After the cowboy has succeeded in fixing his hold on the steer, he must then twist the steer's neck to an extreme angle in relation to the other parts of the animal. This radically altered geometrical arrangement in the steer's infrastructure---plus the weight of the wrestler---will likely result in a successful *dog*: The steer is wrestled to the ground.

The winner of a contest is the cowboy who wrestles the steer to the ground in the shortest time, usually three to four seconds. Thus, a lot happens in a brief period.

Steer wrestling, also called bulldogging, is not the safest way to spend one's leisure time. To understand why---in case the position of the wrestler in Figure 1 escaped your attention---let's spend a few moments examining this sport. First, here is the dictionary definition of a steer:

**Young castrated ox:** a male of the cattle family that has been castrated before reaching sexual maturity and is raised for beef, especially a young bull.

No one---human or cattle---relishes castration. Even so, if one must be castrated, one hopes it will take place in the *latter* stages on one's life cycle---well after reaching sexual maturity and the associated fun-filled experiences.



**Figure 1.** The animals involved in steer wrestling (my brother is the wrestler).

Second, no one---human or cattle---wants a job description of "beef"...as in medium rare on the dinner menu. Granted, humans take to the idea of being a "hunk of beef," or looking like a "beefcake." But these terms refer to looks and have nothing to do with dinner.

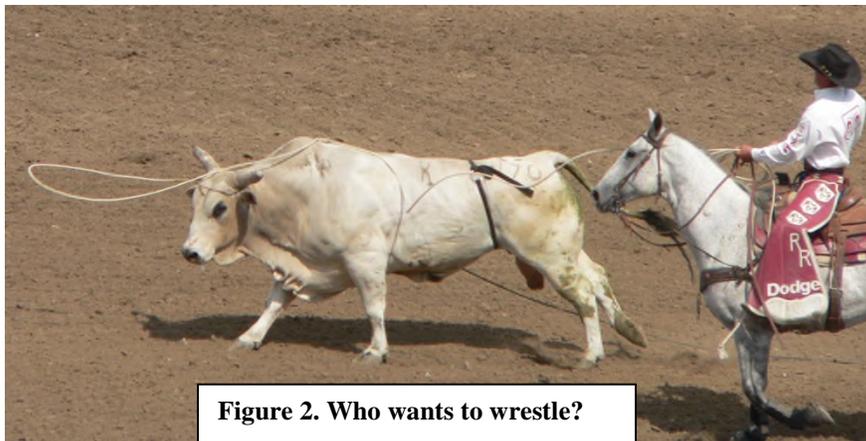
Anyway, the agitated look on the steer's face is understandable. First, he's a bovine eunuch. Second, he's destined for the feed lot. Third, he has been confined in a small space, and once released, he's being assaulted. Small wonder he believes he is threatened, which translates to a potentially dangerous animal.

Additionally, there is the matter of the steer's horns. Notice in Figure 1 how the cowboy (the wrestler, also called the bulldogger) is being careful to land on an area of the steer well behind the steer's horns. Notice the wrestler's intense looks. Notice he is not smiling, given his situation, an appropriate countenance. His eyes are closed! Maybe the photographer snapped the shot just as he blinked. Let's hope so.

If the bulldogger makes a mistake, he might suffer broken bones, cuts, injured muscles, and perhaps the most damaging affliction of all: injured pride. Few things are more demeaning to a bulldogger than failing to take the steer down or taking a long time to get the animal "dogged." A poor performance is subject to jokes from the spectators.

From the standpoint of practicality and the natural desire to go through life with limbs intact, bulldogging is not a good idea. In the contests I have witnessed, I can recall no time when I saw anyone descend from a running horse onto the neck of a fully-grown bull, grab him by the horns, and "wrestle" him to the ground. Even if a cowboy were playing with a small deck of cards, what person would want to attempt to wrestle with a grown bull? The animal used in steer wrestling typically weighs around 700 pounds, but a bull can go up to a ton.

One such animal is shown in Figure 2.<sup>1</sup> Compare the size of this bull to the steer in Figure 1. The bull is even greater in weight to the horse. Perhaps a sumo wrestler could handle such a bull. But a sumo wrestler is not versed in riding a horse. Nor is a horse particularly eager for a sumo wrestler to mount the horse.



So the term *steer wrestling* is more accurate than the term *bulldogging* because steers, not bulls, are used in the event. Anyway, even though a steer is not as big as a bull, the rodeo contestants are half crazy to perform the event.

I am not alone in my assessment of steer wrestling because bulldoggers are the bunt of many jokes around the rodeo arena. An old quip bulldoggers tell on themselves is that in relation to intelligence, the IQ order of the steer wrestling participants is as follows: the hazer, followed by the horses, followed by the steer, followed by the steer wrestler. In fact, the only rodeo

<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:California\\_rodeo\\_Salinas\\_lasso\\_bull\\_p1050544.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:California_rodeo_Salinas_lasso_bull_p1050544.jpg)

contestants considered crazier than bulldoggers are bull riders. They too exchange a lot of self-deprecating jokes.

Some years ago my brother Tom was a part-time rodeo performer. Rodeoing was a hobby to his main profession. In his younger days, he was a track and field coach in Albuquerque, New Mexico. During the weekends in the summer, Tom would drive from his home in Albuquerque to various rodeos held in New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, and Colorado to participate in steer wrestling events.

Added to Tom's fondness for steer wrestling was the fact that in his youth, he was a passionate pole-vaulter. The pole-vaulting event in track and field is one in which the contestants are also viewed as not quite pumping on all pistons.

Tom has a tendency to choose off-the-wall avocations. As another example, he suffers from claustrophobia and panics when he finds himself in tight spaces. For example, he cannot sit comfortably in the middle seat in the regular fare section of a commercial airplane because of his fear of closed spaces and his six foot, two inch frame. What better way to enjoy life than to choose the hobby of scuba diving and swimming in abandoned, water-filled quarries containing small caves and tunnels? Tom selected quarry scuba diving as another of his hobbies.

To be fair, Tom is an intelligent, multitalented man, but he is a bit eccentric about how he spends his free time.

With this background in mind, permit me to tell you a story about a night at a rodeo in Farmington, New Mexico, and the events that followed Tom's steer wrestling experiences at that rodeo. Before the story is recounted, a few words are in order about cowboys and rodeos in general, and steer wrestling specifically.

### **Time on the Ranch**

As you likely know by reading other writings, my dad spent most of his working life as a cowboy and I have related earlier how we sons lived on a cattle and sheep ranch with dad and our step-mom in New Mexico during some of our early years. (See *The Light Side of Little Texas* at Amazon.com.) Dad was born in 1899 and, until the mid 1950s, made his living breeding quarter horses and punching cattle. Well, he did not actually punch them in context of the exact meaning of the word, *punch*. Punching cattle meant being a cow shepherd---taking care of cows---feeding them, giving them water, and protecting them from storms.<sup>2</sup>

I've also written that some of dad's sons followed in his steps and became ranchmen, horse trainers, and cowboys. As the youngest of his six sons, I watched these cowboy activities with a skeptical eye---deciding to pursue other avenues for making a living and spending my free time.

During my childhood days on the ranch, we sometimes occupied our free time conducting our own rodeo. Dad built a small arena where we would practice cowboy activities, such as calf roping, steer roping, steer wrestling, and bronc riding. Because I was the youngest and the smallest of dad's sons, my rodeo event was riding the milk pen calves---an event for my size as exciting as an adult man riding a fully grown bull.

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps some cowboys would not take kindly to my joking description of them as a *cow shepherd*. The term has one word---*shepherd*--- in common with *sheep shepherd*, and we are informed from the old western movies that cowboys and sheep herders (shepherds) did not get along. Not entirely true. Many ranches raised cattle *and* sheep. But our Western myth does not permit the use of the word *shepherd* in relation to cowboys---too passive; too Biblical; not sufficiently macho; not sufficiently Western.

These activities had practical value in our day-to-day life. For example, bronc riding was not just a past-time. Breaking a horse---teaching it to accept a rider---was essential to its use in many ranching chores. Smart, trained horses were quite important to our work of herding sheep and cattle to various pens and pastures around the ranch.

Another event was the cutting horse contest, not seen in many public rodeos today. This rodeo event requires considerable skill on the part of the horse and rider. The competition entails the horse/rider team separating a calf or cow from a herd of cattle—all without ropes or the assistance of any other cowboy. My brother Ed became a fine cutting horse rider and trainer.

The purpose of separating the animal from the herd is usually to perform some cow shepherd activities on the animal, such as de-horning (cutting the horns off the head of a young steer), or castrating the steer so that it would not become a bull. Bulls are hard to handle. Many of them are dangerous and the prevailing view is that a few bulls can service a large herd of cows. (I'm not aware of any survey taken on the cows' views on this issue).

### The Rodeo in Farmington

Let's return to the main part of this story: the rodeo in Farmington, New Mexico, and its aftermath for my brother and me. In the early 1970s, I was visiting Tom and his wife, Kaky, also a rodeo hand—a skilled barrel racer. On a Friday afternoon, he and I drove to Farmington in his pickup, where Tom had entered the steer wrestling event of a local rodeo. We did not take a horse with us. Tom borrowed a mount from one of his friends who was also a contestant at the rodeo.

As shown in Figure 3, Farmington is 182 miles north of Albuquerque. In those days, most of the roads between the two cities were sparsely traveled. This fact will become a significant part of the story as we sort through the events of that night.

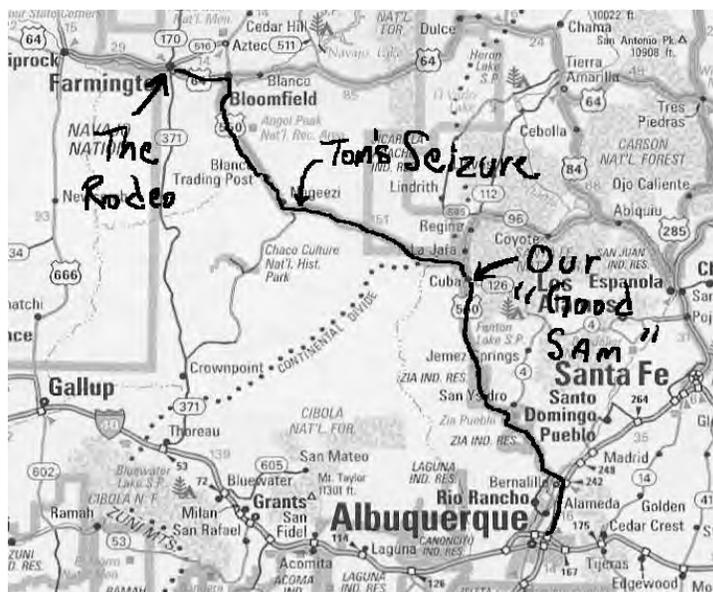


Figure 3. Farmington, Albuquerque, and Cuba.

Tom and I arrived at the rodeo arena about an hour or so before he was scheduled to perform. This window of time gave him an opportunity to warm up and become acquainted with

his mount. From my seat in the bleachers, I watched his preparations, hoping he would dog his steer quickly and cleanly.<sup>3</sup>

It did not happen. Tom's night did not go well at the Farmington arena. The problems started when he dismounted from his horse onto the steer. The idea is for the bulldogger to use his body to slow down the animal. To execute this task, the dogger's legs and feet must be in front of him, digging into the earth, acting as a brake for himself and the steer. To understand the intricacies of the task, take another look at Tom's body in Figure 1. The steer wrestler must get his legs off the horse quickly, then plant them forward to the animal to give him leverage against the momentum of the steer's forward motion.

Ideally, the cowboy dismounts successfully, makes contact with the steer, and leans his body back toward the tail of the animal. His arms and hands twist the creature's neck, and his forward-thrust legs and feet (grinding into the turf) act as the anchor point for the operation. If the cowboy's legs get behind his body, he cannot slow the momentum of the steer, and the weight of the man is no match for the weight of a 700 pound animal.

Yet, even with a poor dismount, if the man succeeds in getting the steer's neck twisted around enough, the steer can still be dogged. A slow take-down is not a pretty sight but the dog counts. On the other hand, a clean take-down is an impressive show.

On this run, Tom let his legs get behind him. He lost his balance and fell under the steer's body, just as the steer was going down to the ground. One of the knees of the falling steer came down on Tom's head, and with the weight of the animal's body, compressed Tom's head into the ground.

I was sitting in the grand stands watching these events unfold. It was not an attractive sight. I was not sure who was doing the wrestling, as the steer was on top of my brother; it was debatable who had won the event, the steer or Tom. But from a distance it appeared Tom and the steer were unharmed. Tom got up, put on his hat, dusted off his clothes, walked back to the chutes, then to where I was sitting in the stands.

In hindsight, Tom appeared dazed as he approached me, but he was smiling and making self-deprecating talk about his pitiable performance. Trying to make light of the episode, he asked, "Hey, do they give prizes to the steers when they bulldog the bulldogger?"

## **Heading Home**

Tom's debacle was the end of the rodeo for us. He did not dog his second steer. We headed back to Albuquerque later that evening. Ordinarily, Tom and I would linger in the rodeo town, usually to take in a bar or the local rodeo dance held after the rodeo was over. But Tom requested we depart for Albuquerque.

Before embarking south for home, we stopped at a liquor store to purchase a six pack of Coors. This beer was not yet sold on the east coast where I lived, and I needed my Coors fix when I was out West. Oddly, Tom did not want beer or anything to eat. He just wanted to get on the road toward home. With Tom at the steering wheel, off we went into the dark and nearly deserted highways of Northern New Mexico.

During this part of the trip, Tom did not say much, but I was not aware he was in trouble. We had been driving for a while. I estimate we were located at a position on the highway in Figure 2 labeled as "Tom's Seizure," when without any warning, Tom passed-out. He fell forward into the steering column, then slumped over to my side. I grabbed the steering wheel and

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<sup>3</sup> It was not to be on this night, but see my article in the "Sports and Games" section of my blog, titled, "Hall of Fame" to learn that Tom has had many more successes in steer wrestling and in life.

in spite of Tom pressing against me, managed to get the truck off the highway and to the right shoulder of the road. I am still not sure how I stopped the vehicle without crashing or turning over.

Nor am I certain about the events of the next few minutes after Tom's collapse---they passed by as if in a dream. My only vivid recollections were that I checked Tom's pulse and breath, pushed him to the passenger side, got into the driver's side, and tore-out for the nearest town, a community called Cuba, identified in Figure 2 on the map with my notation of "Our 'Good Sam'."

During this part of the ride, Tom's situation worsened. He came to, sat up and looked forward for a while. Again, without warning, he passed out and at the same time went into convulsions. As I braked down to stop, he became stiff, made some nonhuman noises. He then slumped down to the floor, totally relaxed, like a wet noodle.

I stopped the vehicle, ran around to the passenger door and opened it to find Tom unconscious. I could not detect any breath. I put my ear to his mouth and nose---no sounds---nothing. But I could feel a pulse, so I knew he was living but not breathing. I surmised further that he was not going to do much more of the former without benefit of the latter. So, I started CPR on my brother.

Something was seriously amiss, but after a few exhalations into Tom's mouth, he started coming around. Later, we joked that his recovery was probably due to my beer breath. Anyway, I thought he was stabilized enough to continue our journey to Cuba.

During this time and the time of Tom's initial collapse, not one vehicle passed by us in either direction. We were on our own. As mentioned, it was late at night, and we were in a sparsely populated part of New Mexico. Off we went again, I in a semi-panic state and my brother in a peaceful repose. He had fallen into a deep sleep.

I felt myself a prisoner in a distant and strange world. The landscape was devoid of trees. The terrain, illuminated by the moon, let me know no humans were nearby. There were no lights from towns or homes. Just empty, silent space. My brother might be dying, yet there was nothing I could do.

### **Finding Help in Cuba**

It took a while to reach Cuba, which at a late hour, was almost devoid of any waking person. Fortunately, one filling station was open, and I wheeled frantically into its gas pump area, where two men came out to service Tom's pick up. I wasted no time telling them we needed a doctor, that my brother was seriously injured. Both men picked-up on my concern and walked around the pick up to check-out Tom.

Tom was slumped down in the seat, totally zonked. After a glance at my brother, one of the men said to the other, "El hombre esta muerto."<sup>4</sup>

I knew enough Spanish to understand they were saying Tom was dead. I responded with, "He's not dead! He's unconscious from an injury!"

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<sup>4</sup> By the way, for you Spanish language buffs, have you wondered why the verb *estar* is used to describe someone who is dead, as in, "Esta muerto"? Why not the verb *ser*, as in "Es muerto"? After all, *estar* is often meant to convey a temporary condition and *ser* is often used for a condition that is permanent. I know of no more permanent physical condition than being dead.

Accepting my diagnosis, they helped me move Tom from the pick-up and laid him down on the service station floor. We placed blankets around him, elevated his feet and checked his breath and pulse. So far so good. But I was concerned Tom's condition might be worsening.

The service station attendants informed me a doctor resided in their town, but he would not consent to be awakened for any reason. So much for the Hippocratic Oath. In desperation, I called the Presbyterian Hospital in Albuquerque, 65 miles from Cuba. The hospital operator informed me she would dispatch an ambulance immediately to Cuba. One of the gas station attendants was listening to this conversation and suggested we place Tom in the back of his station wagon and head for Albuquerque. In this way, we could meet the ambulance about half-way between Cuba and Albuquerque and reduce the time before Tom would be in medical hands.

Brilliant idea! And what a good Samaritan this man was for volunteering his vehicle and himself as the driver. With the exception of the Coors beer, his suggestion was our only positive experience of the evening.

I agreed with his suggestion and conveyed the idea to the hospital switchboard operator. She also thought it a good approach, and we established the following arrangement:

- The ambulance would keep its flashing lights on during its ride north to Cuba.
- When we saw the flashing lights of the approaching ambulance, we would repeatedly turn our head lights on and off.
- The ambulance personnel would recognize us and blink their head lights.
- The two vehicles would stop, and we would transfer my semi-muerto brother to the ambulance.

During this time, Tom was coming around. He was still lying on floor, but his eyes were open. He even smiled at me, but not one of those "I'm with it" smiles. It was like one of those "What me worry" smiles from the character in *Mad* magazine.

### **The Death-Defying Ride to Albuquerque**

The ride toward the ambulance was one of the more terrifying parts of the evening. The driver's driving speed was not scary; it was the speed at which he took the curves. Our makeshift ambulance careened, skidded, and slipped off and around the highway as we rocketed our way south toward the ambulance.

I tried to remain cool with the driver. After all, the man had volunteered himself and his car for a lifesaving mission. But after several near-overtorns, I yelled at the driver, "Are you crazy? One person may die on this ride. Are you trying to make it three?!"

The good Samaritan was only trying to save my brother's life, and he did slow down around the curves, but not by much. After several minutes, Tom became more alert and uttered a few words. I was relieved that he was not quite "muerto."

The driver and I continued to look for the flashing lights of the ambulance and passed the time with some idle conversation. During this interlude, I asked how he came to be working at a service station in Cuba, New Mexico. He replied he was a former ambulance driver, coincidentally for the same ambulance service that was driving to meet us. He even had an oxygen bottle in his station wagon. Lacking any other medical intercession, I had placed the mask on Tom's face and turned on the oxygen supply. I have no idea if the oxygen helped, but it seemed like a good idea at the time.

The driver then gave me some interesting news, “They fired me a couple months ago.”  
“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Mind if I ask why?”

“They claimed I was a reckless driver. They told me the patients complained too much.”

The patients! Those in the back of the ambulance? Some probably half-dead? Some semi-conscious? But sufficiently frightened to muster the strength and will to be back-seat drivers? Stephen King had not yet written his tales of weird happenings. The *Twilight Zone* had not yet hit TV. Had either been in existence, I am certain they would have come to my mind. We were at the mercy of a loco ambulance driver outlaw, careening at death-defying speeds down a dark highway. Who could know what his motivations were?

At this point in the evening, the states of the two brothers in the station wagon were as follows: One brother was semi-conscious and happy. The other brother was conscious and terrified. The former not caring about anything; the latter beginning to think he might want to exchange places with the former.

Finally, we saw flashing lights appear on the horizon, about a mile to our south. In accordance with our previously-arranged protocol, the following events took place:

- The ambulance’s flashing lights became more visible.
- We responded by repeatedly turning our lights on and off.
- The two vehicles approached each other, and our driver slowed-down to make a stop.
- The ambulance passed by us and continued going north, its lights still flashing. It never slowed down or acknowledged our presence.
- I turned my head and watched the lights of the ambulance receding as it proceeded north to Cuba, perhaps Colorado, and who knows, maybe Canada...blip, blip, blip...slipping silently away over the distant, dark horizon.

Later, we discovered the person who spoke with me from the hospital forgot to relay our protocol to the ambulance crew. They were under the impression Tom was waiting for them in Cuba. And the crew did have the good sense to stop in Cuba, and the service station to look for their missing patient.

### **All is well, including Tom’s Head**

As it turned out, we made it to the hospital in one piece. The driver did a great job. He delivered us safely and quickly to the emergency room. Tom was diagnosed as having a concussion and was admitted to the intensive care unit for further care and observation. His examination revealed the normal amount of irregular brain activity that is associated with steer wrestlers, pole vaulters, and claustrophobics who scuba dive in abandoned stone quarry tunnels. Overall, he was okay. He had suffered a head injury but nothing as serious as I had feared.

After the Friday rodeo, Tom was scheduled to perform at a Saturday night western music dance in Albuquerque. Another of his hobbies was singing and playing country music. He had formed a band in which he was the lead singer. (It must be said that he’s a better steer wrestler than a C&W singer.)

The morning after the accident and the ride from Cuba to the hospital, he was advised by his doctor to rest for a few days. Kaky, who is a trained nurse, seconded the doctor’s advice. But Tom was not to be deterred. He left the hospital later in the day and performed at the dance for most of the Saturday night, well into the Sunday morning hours.

I had left Albuquerque on Saturday afternoon to return to my home in Virginia. I too was concerned about my brother. I called him on Sunday, the day after the dance and less than two days after his injury from the steer wrestling accident. I asked Tom how he felt and how he performed at the dance. His reply, “Oh fine, and it was the first time I have played at a dance that I could remember all the words to the songs.”

## Footnote for the Steer Wrestling Groupies

I have omitted some of the details of the cowboy getting off his horse onto the steer, and getting the steer to the ground. This footnote fills in these details about how the dogger dogs the dogee.

Common sense told me you might not care if the dogger uses his right hand or left hand on the steer's right or left horn, nose, tongue, or ear. But I have learned that regardless of the subject, be it steer wrestling, string collecting, sleep walking, needlepoint, can opening, coffee drinking, etc., some people want to know the intricacies of just about any subject on earth. Therefore, here is more information on the subject of the cowboy's dismount from the horse and his subsequent actions.

First, the cowboy does not fall from the horse onto the steer. In fact, the dismount is a rather deft and gentle action; it must be the opposite of a sudden fall. Otherwise, the sudden weight of the cowboy onto the steer could collapse the animal to the ground and require the sport's name be changed from steer wrestling to steer pummeling ---a practice that would surely lead to more steers visiting their local PETA office.

Second, the cowboy judges the best time to leave the carriage of his horse and transfer his weight from the horse to the steer and the ground. The horse-to-steer dismount requires the cowboy to make a very fast decision, because a successful and winning dog must be concluded in a few seconds.

The process unfolds as follows:

1. At the proper time, within 1 to 2 seconds from the time the action starts, the cowboy eases himself off his horse onto the steer by un-slinging his left foot from the left saddle stirrup. He places his left hand on the saddle horn and gently transfers his weight off the horse towards the steer and the ground.
2. Assuming the dogger makes this time-sensitive transfer successfully, he then proceeds to execute (in less than about 1.5 seconds) the following movements.
3. The cowboy grabs the steer by the horns, which is the basis for that famous saying, "Grab the bull by the horns." But you now know this old saying is incorrect in that, in practice, it is a steer that is grabbed by the horns, and not a bull.
4. The cowboy applies a downward force to the steer's left horn, by pushing down on it with his left hand. At the same time, he pulls up on the right horn with his right hand.
5. The result is that the steer's nose comes up, resulting in the steer turning to the left.
6. The cowboy then releases the left horn, while maintaining his hold on the right horn with the crook of this right arm.
7. Next, the cowboy encircles the steer's nose with the crook of the left arm.
8. The cowboy then twists the steer's head in a clockwise fashion. (For you beginners, practicing at your local steer wrestling range, don't forget it's clockwise, not counter-clockwise. Newcomers often make this mistake).
9. The aforementioned actions, and the clockwise twist, result in the steer veering even more to the left in an unbalanced position.
10. The cowboy is using the steer's momentum and its body position (not to mention the steer's reluctance to go through life with a broken neck) to bring the steer down on his left side to the ground.
11. The dogger has thus dogged the dogee.
12. In order for the cowboy to receive credit for the run, the steer must be lying flat on his side, with all four legs out from under him, visible to the flag man (the judge).