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Lea County Fair and Rodeo
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Tarr will star at Lea County rodeo

LOVINGTON, N.M. – All Matt Tarr had to do to find inspiration for his craft was look up to some of the greatest men who have ever done it.

Tarr is a rodeo clown, and he will be one of the featured entertainers for this year's Lea County Fair and Rodeo, set for 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 3-Saturday, Aug. 6, at Jake McClure Arena; that also includes Lea County Xtreme Bulls, which is Tuesday, Aug. 2.

"I talked to (announcer) Andy Stewart about Lovington, and he said it's going to be one of the funnest rodeos I'll get to do," said Tarr, who lives in Hico, Texas, with his wife, Stacie, and their two children, son Bransen, 10, and daughter Memphis, 2. "They've got Pete Carr as the stock contractor, so, to me, that says it's going to be a first-class rodeo."

That it is, and it's been around 86 years. Jake McClure Arena has seen its share of clowns and acts in its days, so Tarr realizes he'll have to bring his best to the show when he arrives. That's perfectly fine for him, though; he does that every time he puts on the greasepaint.

"Justin Rumford gave me some advice in the beginning: 'Go all in; put everything you've got into it,'" Tarr said of the reigning 10-time PRCA Clown of the Year. "It was the best and worst advice at the same time. It made me work at it and made me really focused on what I needed to do in order to do this for a living."

Rumford was just one force that guided Tarr early in the man's career, but there have been others, and many of them have performed in Lovington over the years. Another attribute was having grown up around the game.

He is originally from Cody, Wyoming, which boasts of a nightly amateur rodeo throughout the summer and also has one of the biggest Fourth of July rodeos in the PRCA.

"I've roped all my life," he said. "The Cody Stampede was always a big rodeo for me. I watched Butch Lehmkuhler, and I loved his trampoline act. I got the opportunity to fight bulls, and I loved it, but I grew up in the era of (Dusty) Tuckness and those really good guys, and there was not a place for me."

That's when PRCA stock contractor Maury Tate reached out to Tarr. Tate, who produces the Cody Night Rodeo, asked the young cowboy if he wanted to try his hand at being a clown.

"He said, 'You ought to think about doing this instead of what else you are doing,'" Tarr said. "It just worked.

"For me, it's the family aspect of it. We had a young son when we were going into it. I had big aspirations of wanting to raise my kid around rodeo. I didn't realize how great the people were until I got into it. Having people like (fellow rodeo clowns) Robby Hodges or Rump or John Harrison or Keith Isley or any of those guys offer to help means something. It's cool to have my family around that caliber of a person."

Rodeo offers a bit of a gypsy lifestyle. People who make a living in the sport are gone from home for weeks, even months, at a time, so they make their homes anyway they can. That oftentimes opens the door to finding an extended family wherever the nomads make camp. It's then that the true meaning of "rodeo family" comes to life.

Tarr is a five-time nominee to be the barrelman at the National Finals Rodeo.

“That’s really weird for me,” he said. “I’m just a guy, but it’s so humbling to get calls telling you that you are top five for the NFR. I cry every October, because I never expected to have anything like that.”

He’s earned that, though. It takes a lot of hard work and real talent to be successful in rodeo. It’s hard to stay busy, much less be recognized as elite.

Some of it comes from ever-growing experiences, but to understand Tarr is to realize he’s a student of the game and a student of the crowd. He takes time to study the situations he might find himself in, and he builds upon that.

“I do tell some jokes, but there’s so much going on at a rodeo and there are so many people in one spot,” Tarr said. “I like to shoot from the hip and go with what’s going on. I want to make it tangible to the people in the crowd. If you can make it tangible, then they are a part of it. They’re going to feel like they’re a part of it instead of just watching it.

“I’m very aware of what’s going on around me. When the gates to the rodeo open, I try to pay attention to the people coming in. I’m scared to pick on a lot of people, so I’ll try to be mindful of that. A lot of it is not picking on people but pointing things out.”

Much of Tarr’s success comes from his work ethic and realizing he can lean on others for support when he needs. That may have been fellow entertainers or members of his own family, but it always has paid off.

“I’m in a position now where committees call me, but in the 10 years that go into this before that, it would take me a lifetime to repay everything those people have done for me,” he said. “I made a promise to my mom – she passed away unexpectedly – but she wanted me to try to make a living doing this; I told her I would.

“The day after my mom passed away, my wife said, ‘We have to keep a promise. You told me you never broke a promise to your mom, and I’m not letting it happen on my watch.’ ”

That’s what family means to Matt Tarr, and it’s a big reason why he’s so successful. It’s why he’ll get to work the Lea County Fair and Rodeo, one of the most prestigious events in the PRCA. Family is so important to him that they will all be with him when he arrives in Lea County.

“Having my wife and children with me is really just an extension of who I am and what I do in the arena,” Tarr said. “My kids are very much a part of all this, and I’d say they are a bigger piece than myself.

“I can’t do this without my wife. I drive, and I clown, but she does everything else. She is definitely a rock star.”