

# This cowboy's boots were made for skiin'

By By Janet Reese , Special to the Rocky

Wednesday, January 23, 2008

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Most people wouldn't ride a mechanical bull, let alone a real one.

But Ray Thurston would.

This thrill seeker, doesn't just settle for bulls, though. He is in his element on the ski slopes, too.

After wrapping up a second-place finish during Friday's National Western Stock Show and Rodeo, the 27-year-old hit the Steamboat Springs slopes Tuesday in the 34th Annual Bud Light Cowboy Downhill. There, he snagged a first-place finish in the dual slalom competition, his second such finish in two years.

Thurston finished this year's race in 25.63 seconds. Last year, he won in 30.43 seconds.

A Tabernash native, he started skiing at Winter Park Resort at age 2 and racing at 6. So it no surprise that he excels in the cowboy ski event.

To compete, participants must be entered in the rodeo at the National Western Stock Show and be a member of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association or the Professional Bull Riders, Inc.

Thurston now lives in Granby and works with his father in their family run electrical contracting business. Year round, he travels one week a month on the pro rodeo circuit, mostly in Colorado and Wyoming. He placed third in last year's Colorado State Fair bull riding competition.

While growing up on his family's 20-acre ranch near Tabernash, Thurston started riding bulls at age 12.

"My father introduced me to bull riding, the only rodeo event I've ever tried," he said. "I enjoyed it so much, I stuck with it and competed in the Flying Heels Rodeo in Granby. I began riding calves and progressed to steers and bulls."

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Now bull riding is in his blood. "I'm good at bull riding, and it's a chance to win prize money, which can be as much as \$75,000 at the National Western."

Self-confidence, along with a strong positive attitude, are essential personal traits needed for bull riding.

"Bull riding is 90 percent attitude," he said. "You have to believe in yourself and that nothing is impossible. You have to love the adrenaline buzz from being on the back of a bull."

In the rodeo arena, riders must stay aboard the bull for eight seconds, a long time when you're riding an unpredictable bucking bull, said Thurston.

"Every bull has its own bucking style - nice or mean. You can draw either, preferably a nice one," he said. "The technique and movement for riding any bull is the same - with one hand, and in constant control and with good body position. The goal is to dismount in a controlled position, land on your feet and escape without getting run over. How you land depends a lot on luck."

What do rodeo bull riding and ski racing have in common?

"They both have an adrenaline rush," Thurston said. "You have to have athletic coordination and very good balance for both sports. There's fear associated with both, but on different levels. In racing, the fear is speed. In bull riding, it's landing under a 2,000-pound bull. I have a high tolerance for fear."

### **Skis, boards, chaps and horses**

\* **The main event:** The Cowboy Downhill begins with the dual slalom race on Headwall, a green-rated slope. Cowboys race down the hill in pairs and weave through eight gates with a 4-foot jump midway through the run. Once through the course, racers -clad in cowboy hats and chaps - must lasso a person, saddle a horse and sprint across the finish line.

\* **The grand finale:** Following the slalom event, a grand finale mass-start stampede on skis and snowboards pits cowboys against one another in a winner-take-all race. Shawn Hogg, a bull rider from Odessa, Texas, won Tuesday's stampede event.

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