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SPORTS HOME

RODEO

Young cowboy will test talents in Las Vegas



1/2 – Mason Stuller has qualified for the Junior National Finals Rodeo this week in Las Vegas. The 14-year-old cowboy from Veneta, Ore. started out riding sheep, calves, steers and eventually bulls, as well as bareback and saddle bronc horses. In

2017, he was the Oregon Junior High Champion bull rider, and reserve saddle bronc and bareback rider. (Brian Davies/The Register-Guard)

BY KYLEE O'CONNOR

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VENETA — Mason Stuller might be only 14 years old, but he does something that most grown men wouldn't even dare try. He regularly mounts bulls and broncos that — for eight seconds — are doing all they can to buck him off.

Stuller, an eighth-grader at Fern Ridge Middle School and the Oregon Junior High Rodeo bull riding champion, recently qualified for the saddle bronc event at this week's Junior National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas.

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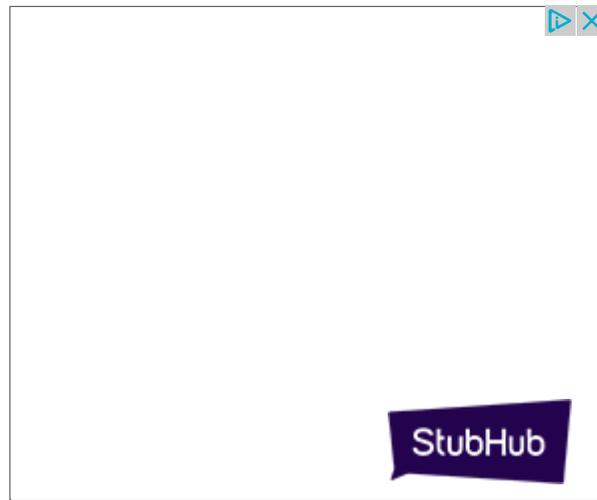
The key to Stuller's success?

"Stay calm," Stuller says. "Basically, just stay calm and do everything how I'm supposed to."

A few years ago, Stuller began training with Clint Wells, a local rodeo veteran and longtime friend of Stuller's dad, Brian. Wells has a machine in his garage that simulates the motions of a bull and Mason trains with him at least five days a week for a few hours at a time.

Stuller enjoys training with Wells, he says, adding that he has improved under his guidance.

Wells competed in rodeo for two decades and judges at more than 10 Northwest pro rodeos each summer. He says he can tell by the look in a rider's eyes and their body language whether "they're already beat before the gate opens." Other riders have what rodeo-goers call "try," a mentality of never giving up and giving everything they've got.



"He's got grit and try," Wells says about Mason. "Without that, you're in the wrong event ... He tries no matter what happens. All the time. Period ... I say he's got ice water in his veins, because (if the animal is) big, small, ranked, he doesn't worry about that. He worries about getting the job done."

Stuller had to first qualify for Las Vegas at a regional rodeo in Wyoming. There, he broke his wrist after falling off a bronco during competition. The injury is on his free arm, so it didn't hamper his training too much and it won't keep him from competing this week.

"I try not to think about it too much, but I do get nervous," Stuller says about the potential for injuries. But, like any sport, injuries are bound to happen.

"If you're going to be a rodeo cowboy and traveling full time, you're going to be riding with broken noses, ribs, arms, fingers," Wells says. "It's going to take that grit and that try to get to where he wants to be."

For Brian Stuller, a lead airport maintenance worker at the Eugene Airport, and Mason's mom Darci, the principal at Harrisburg Middle School, it can be nerve-wracking watching from behind the fence. But, Brian argues the odds of injury aren't as great as someone might assume, especially compared with other sports.

"A lot of people say, 'How could you let your kid do that?'" Brian Stuller says. "But if you look at the statistics, even football, soccer have a lot more injuries. He only has to do it for eight

seconds and the chance of him getting hurt in those eight seconds — how high are they compared to a whole football game?”

Mason has been doing rodeo since he was 4, but he also played some football and runs track. It’s the individuality of rodeo and the fun, yet competitive, environment that he’s really drawn to.

“Nobody is mad about anything, everybody is happy. It’s just fun, exciting to do,” Mason says of rodeos.

“It’s just him and the animal,” Brian Stuller says. “He really thrives in that environment. In a team environment, there were always kids who didn’t try as hard as he did, and he didn’t meld with that very well.”

The Junior National Finals Rodeo begins Thursday and Mason opens his saddle bronc competition Friday.

Wells compares the junior nationals to the Oregon football team making it to the national championship. Mason is one of three Oregonians who qualified for the event. It’s a big deal, but for Mason it’s just one step toward his dreams. Mason hopes to receive a college scholarship for rodeo and then go pro “as soon as possible,” he says.

“He admitted, ‘I want to be the world champion,’” Wells says. “And I think he can do it, without a doubt, if he just keeps the mindset and has the support from his family and friends.”

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Clint Wells

Eugene-Area rodeo veteran, on Mason Stuller