

TV Sunday

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Look who's making his network debut today as *the most extreme sport comes to NBC...*

By MICHAEL GILTZ

TODAY at 4 p.m., NBC broadcasts live coverage of bull riding in the \$200,000 Bud Light World Challenge. You'll see the top 45 international riders and the world's top 30 bulls (they have their own fans) go head-to-head in a sport where it's not if or when you get hurt — but how bad.

"One out of every 15 rides, there's going to be an injury," says Randy Bernard, the CEO of PBR, the Professional Bull Riders organization. "In NASCAR, if you wreck your car you can go home and build a new one and next week come back. These guys, you wreck your body and you're out for three to four months most likely."

Risking it all will be Ty Murray, the winner of a record seven all-around cowboy championships and boyfriend of singer Jewel. Though often called the greatest cowboy of all time, even Murray lost some years to injuries, eventually getting reconstructive surgery on both shoulders and knees. Murray faces 44 others, including this season's top bull rider Adriano Moraes of Brazil and a hot rookie, Luke Snyder.

But the real winners are certain to be the bulls — they're pampered like the prize investments they are, and even a rider who stays on for the full eight seconds has to watch his back until he's out of danger.

For NBC Sports executive producer Tom Roy, showcasing this event is a dream come true.

"I grew up in Tucson, Arizona," says Roy, "and we used to get two days off every year when the rodeo came to town. That's the culture out there."

"I've had the opportunity to produce the Super Bowl, the World Series the Olympics, the NBA Finals and the Kentucky Derby. But I always secretly had this passion to produce a bull riding event."

If it sounds like a one-time stunt (Fox aired a similar special in '97 and scored bigger ratings than the NHL All-Star game), if it sounds like the sort of thing ABC's "Wide World of Sports" would show briefly in the '70s right after cliff diving, then think again.

Bull riding and rodeo are poised to be the next NASCAR — a hugely popular sport with heartland appeal that's ready for prime time. The PBR bull riding tour (29 major events overseen by a cowboy-owned-and-operated organization) draws hun-

I want to kill a cowboy

dreds of thousands of fans after only eight years and is seen weekly on TNN, lassoing some of its best ratings after the fading wrestling shows.

The rodeo tour reaches a more traditional (i.e. older) crowd and is organized by the Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association. It includes hundreds of stops both major and minor, with competitions in bull riding, calf-roping, steer wrestling, bareback bronco riding and more. Rodeos draw millions of fans, and this year has garnered its biggest TV audience yet (thanks to increased weekly visibility on ESPN2. The National Finals Rodeo — held in Las Vegas, like many of the biggest events in the sport — airs on ESPN for two weeks starting December 11.

Whether it's a full rodeo or a PBR event, bull riding is always the fan favorite with its combination of physical danger and exceptional athleticism. It's easy to see why many believe it can capture the imagination of a wider audience that doesn't wear boots and wouldn't dream of riding a horse.

"You hold your breath from the time the gate opens until the cowboy escapes at the end of the ride," says NBC's Roy. "These bulls are literally 2000-pound, mean-spirited beasts who are



trying to remove the cowboy and make him pay for being there in the first place. So if we can translate that through the TV set to the folks at home, it will be great."

Murray hopes NBC will help new fans appreciate the physical demands and serious preparation that bull riding calls for. "It's the most scary, dangerous sport in the world," says Murray, calling from a studio where Jewel is in the midst of a photo shoot. "But the closer people get to it and the more they see, they'll understand these aren't

Load of ... Ty Murray (top with girlfriend Jewel) is often called the greatest cowboy of all time. He'll be facing 44 other bull riders — and some serious beef — on NBC's live broadcast of the Bud Light World Challenge.

fans with beer bellies. Now, virtually every major newspaper carries weekly stories on the latest races. NASCAR events are one of the few areas of ratings growth for televised sports and superstars like Jeff Gordon and the late Dale Earnhardt are household names.

Though the PRCA is affiliated with some 700 different rodeos in the US and Canada, the PBR doesn't expect to include many more events beyond the regular season's 29 and one-off specials like the NBC event.

"We would love to expand it further," says PBR's Bernard, "but it's such a dangerous sport because of injuries, we feel that we're really pushing the cowboy at 29 events. It's about as rigorous a schedule as you can have."

For Murray, the logical step is to bring those 29 bull riding events to bigger and bigger crowds at every opportunity.

"I want to see us in the 29 biggest markets," says Murray. "That's what I would like to see. We have to stay focused and continue to grow the sport." The PBR also benefits from not usually having to deal with the animal rights issues that dog rodeos, the circus, horse racing and other long-standing events and traditions.

As Murray says, "Bull riding is cruel to the cowboys, not to the bulls."

