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The Professional Bull Riders Tour: Growth and Development of a Niche Sport

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Abstract

The Professional Bull Riders Tour (PBR) presents an opportunity to study a niche sport in transition. After its days as simply a part of the rodeo, the tour has seen tremendous growth as a separate, independent activity. This paper highlights the beginnings of the PBR and its eventual development into one of the highest earning and most watched non-prime-time spectator sports. It also focuses on the development of the marketing behind the PBR and includes an analysis of sponsors and ancillary marketing activities.

The Professional Bull Riders Tour: Growth and Development of a Niche Sport

The Professional Bull Riders Tour (PBR) was formed in 1992, when 20 professional bull riders—previously members of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association—each invested \$1,000 to form their own incorporated bull riding association. Membership in the PBR now stands at over 1,200 bull riders from four countries (the United States, Canada, Australia, and Brazil) and three continents (North America, South America, and Australia). Before the advent of the PBR, bull riding was one component of the traditional rodeo (the other events were bareback riding, steer wrestling, roping, and barrel racing). Bull riding had long been considered the premier rodeo event. Specifically because of bull riding's fan appeal, the founders of the PBR bet their \$1,000 that the sport could stand on its own as an independent entity outside the rodeo format.

Each year more than 104 million viewers tune in to the PBR on NBC, Versus, FOX, and a host of other networks across the globe (Wheatley, 2006). More than 1.5 million fans annually attend the PBR's multitiered events, which include the marquee Built Ford Tough Series (presented by Wrangler), the U.S. Smokeless Tobacco Company Challenger Tour, the Enterprise Rent-A-Car Tour, and the Discovery Tour, which is designed specifically for entry-level competitors (Wheatley, 2006).

In 2006, the 13-year-old PBR conducted events in over 70 cities, offering successful riders a total purse of over \$6.2 million. To collect a check, a 150-lb rider must stay on a bull weighing as much as 2,000 lb for a time of 8 seconds. The PBR today is a \$46 million business, revenue having grown 150% over the past 5 years. From 2003 to 2005, the tour's adult fan base soared 48%, to 18 million, far outpacing the growth of NASCAR or any other major sport, according to Scarborough Research (Gregory, 2006).

PBR Demographics and Sponsors

When the PBR's leadership looks to the future, what they see in terms of growth and sponsorship is, clearly, NASCAR. "If you lay the NASCAR demos [demographics] over our demos, they're almost identical," said Randy Bernard, the tour's CEO. "We look at everything they do. What NASCAR has done, most obviously, is to turn a sport perceived as having only regional appeal into the country's second-biggest sport on television, now just behind the NFL" (Halpern, 2006). The Bud Light brand is one of the PBR's sponsors. A typical Bud Light drinker is male, white, 25 to 34

years old, married, with a high school or college diploma, and earns \$20,000–\$70,000 annually in one of a wide variety of occupations. This demographic profile echoes that of the PBR fan. Official sponsors of the PBR in addition to Bud Light have included the following:

B&W Trailer Hitches	Enterprise Rent-A-Car	Pennington Seed
Big Texas Trailer	Express Personnel Svcs	Priefert
BowTech Archery	Ford Trucks	Rocky Outdoor Gear
Branson Tractors	Frito-Lay	Stetson
Bud Light	Jack Daniels	City of Las Vegas
Cabela's	Johnsonville Brats	U.S. Army
Cripple Creek	Mandalay Bay	U.S. Smokeless Tobacco
Daisy	Mossy Oak	Wrangler Jeans
Dickies	Oberto Beef Jerky	Yamaha

Well-paying sponsors are a necessity for many if not most rodeo competitors, but at least one competitor's spouse has noted that "A cowboy's wife needs to be a cowboy's biggest sponsor" (Galayda, 2007).

Marketing the PBR

"A niche sport trying to go mainstream" is how Josh Peter described professional bull riding in his book *Fried Twinkies, Buckle Bunnies and Bull Riders: A Year Inside the Professional Bull Riders Tour* (2006). After splitting from the Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association, the Professional Bull Riders Tour set out to make bull riding the next must-watch sport. The PBR is not alone in trying to move from a niche to the larger sporting world. Organizations with similar aims include World Wrestling Entertainment, Total Nonstop Action Wrestling, the Professional Bowlers Association, and the Pro Bass Fishing Tour, to name only a few. All have in common a desire to use the niche markets they occupy to develop and grow their brands. The PBR uses its core demographic—rodeo fans, specifically those interested in bull riding—to pursue this. Its marketing challenge resembles, according to Josh Peter, a political candidate's task:

In effect, much of the PBR's sophisticated marketing resembles a political campaign; it needs to make sure to energize its base while at the same time trying to attract new voters without alienating either group. It's a careful balance. . . . In order to expand without losing its core fans, the PBR provides both the glitz of big market sports and a dedicated attention to heartland values. (Peter, 2006)

Numerous competitive outlets are available to the modern-day cowboy: There are saddle bronc riding, bareback riding, steer wrestling, tie-down roping, team roping, and barrel racing along with bull riding. But the PBR is a true phenomenon, of which Richard H. Patterson, chairman of the PBR, has said, "This is media in the new age. It's a large audience that's very passionate about this content that they can receive in a whole variety of fashions. They can go to events, they can see it on television, online and in print, and that's what we're looking for" (Bortstein, 2007).

An hour or two of viewing a PBR event on television's new Versus network, or perhaps in person, suggests how perfectly the PBR promotes its sponsors' products to bull riding fans. The rodeo ring is surrounded by sponsor advertising; so are the pens from which the bulls emerge—fronts and backs of the pen gates as well as tops of railings, angles picked up clearly by various overhead cameras. The riders themselves are walking billboards, and in this they resemble tennis professionals of the 1970s. Björn Borg was called the "bouncing billboard" by tennis announcer Bud Collins, remarking on the variety of advertising messages Borg displayed on his clothing.

(Eventually, the professional tennis tour would limit the number and size of endorsement patches players could wear on their clothing.) Today's golfers are not much different, with sponsors' names on their golf bags, shirts, and caps, and NASCAR racers cover their own and their cars' bodies with sponsorship messages. Bull riders wear protective vests covered with sponsor names and logos. Their protective chaps and even their cowboy hats are similarly trimmed. The PBR well understands who constitutes its core market and has proven its ability to land sponsors suited to the PBR demographic.

The PBR Magazine, *8 Seconds!*

Like many sports, bull riding has a dedicated magazine, published under license with the PBR each November, February, and June by FanCorp Publishing of Costa Mesa, California. Its title is *8 Seconds!* reflecting how long the bull rider must ride the bull in order to receive points. The magazine presents a great deal of pictorial content, along with feature articles, PBR event schedules, standings and biographies of the top bull riders, information on top bulls, cowboy apparel guides, and automotive showcases. The magazine has a 3-month shelf life; 20,000 copies are supplied to PBR World Finals events, with an additional 13,000 copies sent to newsstand displays in the United States and Canada. It is distributed at all events of the PBR Built Ford Tough Series in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, and Australia. Reader surveys and newsstand polls have indicated that, on average, about 3 people read each copy of *8 Seconds!* Thus there are some 99,000 total readers per issue. Moreover, issues of *8 Seconds!* remain in a reader's possession for an average of 3 years.

The magazine sells advertising to 28 official PBR sponsors, 14 of whom maintain full-page ads. Some represent national brands with broad consumer bases, for instance Ford Trucks, Wrangler, Bud Light, and the U.S. Army. Others suggest a fairly rural demographic: Mossy Oak, BowTech Archery, Cabela's, Cripple Creek, B&W Trailer Hitches, Branson Tractors, Stetson, and Priefert. Sponsors who are not official PBR sponsors can participate in the PBR bonus programs, including the Bud Light Short Go Top Qualifier Award, Cabela's World's Foremost Ride, Dickies American Worker of the Year award, Enterprise Rent-A-Car "Ride With The Best" sweepstakes, Ford Super Duty Challenge, Ford Truck Moment of Truth, Mossy Oak Shoot Out, Salem National Lease Invitational, and Built Ford Tough Battle for the Bull. Each of these programs provides advertisers with further opportunities to present brands to PBR fans.

FanCorp Publishing also delivers over 9,000 copies of the official program to the PBR Built Ford Tough World Finals, held annually in Las Vegas, Nevada. PBR fans use the program during the 5-day competition; an additional 1,000 programs are distributed through direct mail, television, and website sales during the October–November distribution period. Reader surveys indicate that, on average, 4 people read each copy of the program, for a total readership of 40,000.

PBR-Themed Games, Action Figures, and Fantasy League

Ancillary products like PBR-themed games and video games, action figures, and even a fantasy league are serving the PBR's effort to build its brand. Among games licensed by the PBR are a board game called "8 Second Madness"; a game that is a takeoff on traditional bluffing games, named "Bull Spit"; two dice games, "Bull Craps" and "Bullies"; as well as bull-riding-themed dominoes and PBR checkers that feature 24 bull-shaped markers and 12 bull riders taking the place of the traditional king.

Video Games

What a niche sport needs as much as anything is a representative whom viewers identify with and who boosts the sport by sheer force of personality. The PBR found such a representative in Ty Murray, first in rodeo history to win the world all-around championship and over \$1 million in prize money. Murray figures prominently in "Professional Bull Rider," the PBR-licensed video game introduced by Sierra Sports in 1999, for example joining fellow bull riding great Tuff Hedeman to produce tutorial narration for the video game. The game features 44 top cowboys from around the world (and 20 ranked bulls) and allows each player to "become" a bull rider. Action sequences are startlingly realistic, capturing even the snorts of the bull in the pen. "Professional Bull Rider" includes commentary from the PBR's television announcer Justin McKee, as well as advertising to target rodeo fans generally and PBR fans specifically. "Professional Bull Rider 2" was introduced in 2000, updating the original version.

Licensed Action Figures

The PBR has licensed a line of action figures that includes not only popular bull riders but the bulls they have ridden. The figures are produced by Sota Toys of Los Angeles. Among the first were Adriano Moraes and the bull called Hotel California; Justin McBride and Mudslinger; and PBR founder Michael Gaffney and Little Yellow Jacket, one of the most popular bulls in the United States today (Wheatley, 2004).

PBR Fantasy League

Fantasy football and baseball leagues and similar offerings have been extremely successful, and now fans of bull riding have joined the fun with PBR Fantasy.com. Participating "team owners" select favorite riders and even favorite bulls each week, competing in four different games that offer \$25,000 in cash prizes.

International Expansion

As the PBR continues to grow, international expansion of the brand will become an essential component of its marketing mix. Today the PBR hosts events in Mexico as well as the United States, an approach to international growth similar to that taken by World Wrestling Entertainment (Shuart & Maresco, 2006). PBR's television audiences outside the United States have swelled to over 320 million households, quite a change from its initial 1994 telecasts (on the old TNN) to some 80 million homes (Santos, 2000, p. 147). Today PBR fans in Brazil, China, Russia, Norway, Poland, Germany, and France can view PBR broadcasts; in the United States, fans who speak Spanish can watch televised PBR events on Telemundo, the Spanish-language network, as well as on FOX, NBC, and Versus.

The PBR's international strategy also extends to including bull riders from around the world in PBR competition. To date, international riders of note include 1998 PBR world champion Troy Dunn, of Mackay in New South Wales, Australia, and Bud Light-sponsored Brendon Clark, also from New South Wales (hometown: Morpeth). Among the best known of the international contestants is Adriano Moraes, one of six Brazilian riders on the tour and twice a PBR world champion. The first PBR event in Mexico took place in August 2006 in Chihuahua, where the top 45 riders and bulls competed. (The event had been formally announced in a press conference during the 2005 PBR World Finals in Las Vegas.) Its success required that certain logistical problems be surmounted, not least of which was transporting the bulls across the border, working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and its Mexican counterpart.

The Chihuahua event marked the start of the PBR's strategic expansion worldwide. The tour is planning future international events in the home countries of its riders from abroad. The past

several months have seen the appointments of several directors of new PBR offices in a number of countries. For example, José Longoria will direct a PBR office in Chihuahua and lead expansion into Mexico, while Troy Dunn has been named the PBR's director in Australia and Flavio Junquiera has been named the PBR's director in Brazil. In Canada, former bull rider Austin Beasley has recently been appointed to direct PBR operations there.

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