

Diné bull rider reflects on career, tribal roots

Written by By Cody Begaye Contributing Editor
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Preparing for PBR Buckin' on the Rez

The 75th Navajo Nation Fair is set to begin on Sept. 2 and run through Sept. 10 in Window Rock, Arizona. Locals and tourists will fill the town for a packed schedule of events catered to different interests throughout the week.

The fair begins with Professional Bull Riding, bringing its Challenger Series back to the Navajo Nation on Sept. 2-3 with Buckin' on the Rez. Riders of all skill levels will descend upon the Navajo Nation Fairgrounds to compete for the top prize.

One of those riders is Keyshawn Whitehorse, a Diné with roots near McCracken Springs, Utah. His bull riding career began in 2015 in the Touring Pro Division before moving up to PBR and winning Rookie of the Year in 2018. Since then, Whitehorse has competed in national venues as part of the Arizona Ridge Riders team and amassed dozens of rides since.

COMPETING ON NAVAJO LAND

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Whitehorse spoke to the *Sun* on Aug. 30 about preparing for this event. He said he has tended to lean toward competing in open bull riding events, such as WildThing Championship Bullriding, and it has been some time since he competed in a venue this close to home.

When asked about what sets Window Rock and the Navajo Nation apart from other venues, he said the crowds are a large factor.

“I’d have to say Window Rock brings a lot of good energy toward the rides,” Whitehorse said. “I’ve gone to some venues with double, triple or more people. But people in Window Rock pay more attention. All the energy and the fans there, they like to bring the noise.”

Whitehorse believes it is the local lifestyle that allows Window Rock crowds to be more engaged with the rides than other crowds he has witnessed.

“On the Navajo Nation, the biggest thing is the western lifestyle is important to the Navajo community,” he said. “Any type of rodeo event, the rough stock, more than likely there’s going to be a lot of people in the stands who have been around livestock and know how to ride. These people have a lot of knowledge and bring it with them to the events.”

He contrasted the Navajo and Indigenous people turnout to crowds in national venues he has attended in New York City and Los Angeles, where some of the spectators may have never seen livestock and only have passing knowledge about the western lifestyle through T.V. or movies.

“The fans are a lot more appreciative there because of that knowledge,” Whitehorse added, citing other Indigenous venues bringing a similar passion to Navajo crowds.

BEING BACK HOME

Beyond being more engaged than other crowds, Whitehorse said it means a lot to have a support system through Navajo and Indigenous fans, especially the younger generations.

“A lot of [bull riding] is done for the youth, riding here on the Navajo Nation or up in Pendleton, Oregon,” Whitehorse explained. “It was very meaningful to go to these places, and have some kids look up to you and see you as this guy who is like them riding out there. They have a dream to make it there too.”

Through his riding, Whitehorse said he aims to show the youth that they can aspire to their dreams of riding, roping, or any other sport they want to compete in.

“I don’t want them to look at me as a hero or an idol who can’t be attained,” he said. “I want them to think ‘I can be like that guy.’”

Regardless, Whitehorse’s career has led to a rise in attention and fame that he believes turn into good opportunities for him.

“I get to meet some nice people, some good people who could help me out in the future,” he said. “Then there are the older people, who I feel like, they appreciate a person who works hard. Whenever you meet someone in town who wants to meet you, it’s really nice to talk to them and meet them.”

While Whitehorse has attained a level of fame with locals in his hometown and across the Navajo Nation, he said it feels good that his family is proud of his accomplishments but still recognize him as the person they’ve known their whole lives. He also credits his family for providing him with motivation and drive.

“I think one of the [motivators] has to be my parents,” Whitehorse said. “My parents, my whole

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family, but it's also the biggest factor to leave nothing on the table. God gave me this ability, this talent, mentally and physically. I was able to put a lot of effort and work on my craft and skill. If I can leave everything on the table, by the time I get done I can say I gave everything I had.”

PBR Buckin' on the Rez is scheduled for Sept. 2 at 5 pm and Sept. 3 at 6 pm. For more information on the event and the PBR, visit <https://pbr.com/>.

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