



# Local History As It Happens CLEAR CREEK COURANT

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## An American matador

*Bullfighters, once known as rodeo clowns, risk it all to help the riders*

By IAN NELIGH  
Courant Editor

In the constant haze of rodeo dust drifting over Kiefer Arena, Warren Burrier crouches like a linebacker, feet firmly planted in the dirt, ready for anything.

A rider nods, a gate swings open and anything comes in the form of 2,000 pounds of muscle and hatred. An impossibly massive black bull bucks into the stadium, effortlessly flings his rider into the night air and turns, looking for trouble.

At the moment the rider hits the ground in a cloud of dust and hard-won grit, Burrier launches himself forward and stands between bull and rider, in what is probably one of the most dangerous jobs in all of show business: bullfighting.

### A bullfighter

As the third night of the Oh My Gawd Rodeo kicked off June 25, the stadium had already witnessed a host of rodeo competitions. Bucking broncs, ropers and racers dug in deep and gave their chosen sport everything they had — and then some. But arguably the highest drama and best theater of rodeo is found in the bull-riding event.

For the riders trying to get their eight golden seconds, Burrier and his bullfighting partner are essential people to have close by. Termed “cowboy lifesavers” by rodeo announcers, the bullfighters are the natural evolution of the rodeo clown.

“Everybody in my line of work likes to be called a bullfighter. The whole ‘rodeo



**AT LEFT:** Warren Burrier flashes a smile after completing his transformation into a bullfighter before the Oh My Gawd Rodeo on June 25 in Dumont.

**BELOW:** Burrier talks to a bull rider waiting in a chute during the competition.

Photos by  
Matthew Jonas  
photo editor

clown,’ per se, is kind of slowly going out the window,” Burrier said. “The guys that bullfight and do what I do — they’d rather be called a bullfighter than a rodeo clown.”

After all, there’s nothing all that funny about getting chased down by a bull while trying to help a rider get safely out of the arena.

“Mainly what I do is protect the bull rider, and if he gets in any predicament ... I come in and try to get him out of the situation, make sure that they walk away,”

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## Welcome to the Clear Creek Courant

This week we’re mailing a copy of the Clear Creek Courant to everyone in the county, and this issue has many highlights.

In this week’s paper you’ll find stories on the rough-and-tumble world of bullfighting at the Oh My Gawd Rodeo, on Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper’s visit to Idaho Springs, and on longtime Georgetown resident Buff Rutherford’s childhood during the Great

Depression. You’ll also find sports coverage on this year’s Slacker races — as well as other local news items, photos, opinions and calendar events.

Right now, Clear Creek residents may buy a one-year subscription to the Courant for the discounted price of \$25. Just call Piper at 303-350-1030 before July 9.

This week’s mailing comes courtesy of Rocky MT Excavation & Demolition in Idaho Springs.



Ian Neligh,  
editor

— Ian Neligh



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Photos by MATTHEW JONAS | The Courant

**BULLFIGHTER WARREN BURRIER** pulls a bull rider off the ground in front of a charging bull during the Oh My Gawd Rodeo on June 25 at the Gene Kiefer Memorial Fairgrounds in Dumont.

## BULLFIGHTER

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Burrier said.

If that sounds dangerous, that's because it is, Burrier says.

Burrier, who lives in northern Colorado, has been a bullfighter for more than 10 years. He considers it a part-time job or even a hobby, and it takes him from rodeo to rodeo across Colorado with his cousin's rodeo stocking business, Miller Rodeo Co.

Burrier got his first chance to step into the arena as a bullfighter a decade ago at the Oh My Gawd Rodeo.

Burrier said he used to just help out loading bulls into the back pens. But one night the rodeo was down a bullfighter, and he was the logical replacement.

Being a good bullfighter is more than being quick on your feet, Burrier said. It's about knowing the temperament of the bulls, their positioning and a host of other quickly changing factors.

"If (the bull is) mean, if they're not mean — there's a lot of variables that run through my head in eight seconds," Burrier said. "Most of them, they'll position once we get started. ... They've got a set place where they're going to go, and then they'll turn back and buck. I gotta see where they're going to go. It's just like any athlete; they have an off night. You've got to be ready for the off night."

Burrier said he had his fair share of close encounters in the early years — and he has a stack of photos in his truck showing exactly how close.

"This bull here, his name was Wishful Thinking," Burrier said, pointing to one photo. "He caught me several times here in this arena, and he launched me up in the air one time above the chutes, and I guess I did a summersault up in the air. It was pretty crazy, from what I understand."



**BURRIER PUTS THE FINISHING TOUCHES** on his face paint before the Oh My Gawd Rodeo. The cab of his truck serves as his dressing room, and the side mirror serves a dual purpose.

### A family tradition

Burrier said he walked away from the encounter with Wishful Thinking, and all the other encounters over the years, with a lot of bruises. Burrier said the main thing to remember when in the arena is to stay calm.

"The other thing is, if you second-guess yourself, you're done," Burrier said. "You can't think about stuff. You just gotta go."

Burrier said he learned the ins and outs of bullfighting from his cousin, Dean Miller.

Miller quit bullfighting about five years ago because he couldn't afford the doctor's bills.

"I got the side of my face all mashed up. That was probably the worst one. That one costs quite a bit of money," Miller said. "Knees were bad, ankles were bad, just the normal stuff. Hooves, ground and body

parts don't mix very well."

Now Miller is a pickup man — one of two horseback riders who help cowboys off broncs and bulls after the ride is over, a job that may be a bit safer, but certainly not by much.

Miller said he originally got into bullfighting to keep an eye on his little brother, who had taken up the vocation before him.

"He was fighting by himself, and I didn't think that was too good of an idea, so when I first started, I was just out there to kind of make sure he didn't get into any bad jams," Miller said.

Miller said the levels of adrenaline he experienced were unreal.

"What was fun for me was when the cowboy comes off in a really bad spot and you fill the gap and pick the bull up and take him out of there," Miller said. "And the kid walks out of the arena, and then he

comes and thanks you later. That's what made it worthwhile for me."

Miller said a good bullfighter has to be fearless in the arena.

"You have a job out here to put yourself between the bull and the rider," Miller said.

"And if you want to be good, that's what you do, and if that means you run right in there and stop and get run over, that's the job — hopefully it's not like that too often."

### Legacy of the West

Burrier gets ready for the evening by donning gloves, hockey pads, bullfighting protective gear and an old straw hat.

Looking in the side mirror of his truck, he applies blue and yellow face paint, a tribute to the days when bullfighters were called rodeo clowns.

It's clear that a strong sense of tradition is the bond that keeps the rodeo alive and returning to rural communities year after year.

For Burrier, the rodeo is a tribute to the heritage of the West and a reflection of a way of life.

"I think it is very important. It is a place for people to gather and have some fun," Burrier said. "... It's slowly dying, unfortunately, but (for) a lot of us, that's our way of life."

But on this night the Oh My Gawd Rodeo stands are full. The cowboys and cowgirls are ready to participate in competitions that are distinctly American. Over his protective padding, Burrier puts on a pair of shorts covered in flashy bandannas meant to distract a charging bull.

"You're pretty much like the American matador," Burrier said.

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