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Bull-riding for better or worse

Brides battle it out on Saturday nights by riding a Kitchener bar's mechanical bull

1 2

August 23, 2008

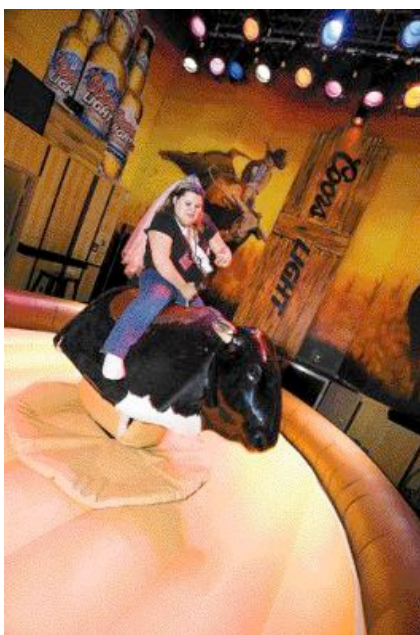
COLIN HUNTER
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A glittering tiara rests upon her carefully coiffed hair.

A silver sash draped across her chest identifies her as the belle of the ball.

Directly beneath her, a hulking, inanimate beast awaits its cue to become very animated indeed.

Mary Conway clutches the frayed, stubby rope that juts upward from the saddle of the mechanical bull.



JONATHAN BIELASKI, SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

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With her free hand, she waves to her friends -- her bridesmaids, actually -- who

have brought her to the Dallas Nightclub in downtown Kitchener for a final wild ride before she enters the comparative calm of matrimony.

Conway is just one of eight blushing and bucking brides-to-be who shall brave the bull before the night is through. It's three minutes past midnight and the Battle of the Brides -- a stagette rodeo held nearly every Saturday night at Dallas -- is set to begin. Within four minutes, it will all be over.

The contest always ends quickly, since it's rare for anyone, bride or not, to remain in the saddle much beyond the 20-second mark.

The hostess of the competition, Sam Cook -- a bubbly blond on-air personality at Country 95.5 FM in Hamilton -- recalls one rider who lasted a full four-and-a-half minutes, a ride that has become the stuff of legend. "I tried it and I only stayed on for eight seconds," Cook confides.

Cook takes some consolation in the knowledge that, after the first eight seconds of any ride, the bull operator cranks the intensity from "greenhorn" to "cowboy," an appreciable increase in bucking.

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With a big crowd now packed against the nightclub stage, and the twangy tune Save a Horse (Ride a Cowboy) blaring over the sound system, Cook turns on her microphone and introduces the first bride of the contest. "Let's hear it for Mary Conway!"

Woo-hoo! goes the crowd. yee-haw!

Conway, a 25-year-old Tim Hortons employee and full-time mom, is just seven days away from tying the knot.

And she's about 16 seconds away from an arse-over-teakettle crash onto the inflated padding that encircles the mechanical bull.

"You ready?" hollers Rachel Hamelin, the nightclub staffer who helms a nearby control panel, her right forefinger poised on the "emergency stop" button.

"Ready!" Conway yells back. Her voice is confident, bolstered by real courage and likely the liquid kind too.

A moment later the bull begins to buck -- slowly at first, as if it's just leaning over to graze and stretch.

Beneath the bull's torso, within the metal casing where its legs should be, hydraulic pistons and gears simulate the increasingly frantic motions of a belligerent bovine.

Conway squeezes her thighs tightly around the haunches of the beast, struggling to grip its black and white faux fur. The bull heaves forward, forcing Conway to brace herself on its plastic horns. Then it rears up, nearly tossing Conway off its rump, but she hangs on.

Conway's fellow competitors don't realize she's got an unfair advantage: "I used to work in a pig barn," she confided before mounting the bull, "and I used to ride the pigs."

After 15 seconds, she has already outlasted many of the burly men who paid \$5 a pop to ride the bull earlier in the evening. At 16 seconds, she's thrown to the bouncy padding below. As if to add an exclamation point, the bull spins for a moment longer, thumping Conway's lower back with its fibreglass snout.

Next up is bride-to-be Kim Kroeker, whose ride is somewhat less impressive: she hangs on for a measly three seconds.

"It's not my forte," she confesses. "I'm used to riding other things, not bulls."

Asked to elaborate, she replies: "Use your imagination."

The pre-nuptial parade continues as one female fiancée after another saddles up: Michele Goulet, Autumn Haslem, Amy Grace and more. Some wear fluffy pink Stetson hats, others have shot glasses dangling from string around their necks.

One by one, each woman removes her shoes, wraps her legs tightly around the bull, hangs on for a rough ride and quickly crashes, exhausted and laughing.

It doesn't take a giant leap of logic to spot the thinly veiled sexual undertones beneath it all.

A gaggle of soon-to-be-wed women mounting a powerful beast for a final crazy ride before embarking on a tamer domestic journey -- Dr. Freud could have written this stuff in his sleep.

But Cindy Vanderveen of Ayr says the mechanical bull is just one of many wild adventures to come.

"This is mild compared to what I like to do! I'm not a traditional girl."

After all eight competitors have been bested by the bull, a winner is declared: it's Conway, the first rider of the contest, who set the bar unbeatably high with her 16-second ride. She's rewarded with a spa gift certificate and a whooping ovation from her bridesmaids and other bargoers.

She places the tiara back on her hair, drapes the silver sash over her shoulder and claims her prize.

"I don't think anything could top this!" she squeals. "But the night is young."

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