
Northwest Teacher Places Fifth in International Indian Finals Rodeo November 8, 2011

Northwest School Division teacher Karen Lavallee rode to a fifth place finish recently at the International Indian Finals Rodeo held in Farmington, New Mexico on October 20-22. The teacher from Jubilee Elementary was the top Canadian and her cumulative score from four rounds was good for the fifth place finish against the top 16 riders from Canada and the United States.

Seven Indian Rodeo Associations from British Columbia, Alberta, Northern Alberta, Saskatchewan, Montana, Arizona, and New Mexico, each send their top two riders to the IIFR. Three wild card spots are also available to event winners at designated rodeos held stateside.

Karen qualified for the international event at the North American Indian Rodeo Association's regional qualifier held at the end of September in High Prairie, Alberta. She won all three rounds competing against the ten top barrel racers from western Canada at that event to take first place.

This is Karen's second year aboard her 13 year old gelding Slick. "I've been a barrel racer my whole life," she said. "I was two when they first put me on the back of a horse, and I went in my first rodeo at six."

Barrel racing is a sport that requires a high level of ability, both physical and mental, from the horse combined with excellent horsemanship skills and physical fitness from the rider. Horse and rider are timed as they complete, as quickly as possible, a cloverleaf pattern around three barrels set up in a triangular pattern in an arena. Typical times to complete the circuit are 13 seconds in an indoor arena and 17 seconds in an outdoor setting. It's the kind of sport that comes down to separations of hundredths of a second between riders.

"I think I was, maybe, half a second out of fourth place after all four rides," said Lavallee.

Karen follows an intense training regime prior to and during the season. "I ride everyday," she said, "from April to October, one horse a day – I have two horses – and always outdoors. It's tough in the winter because the days are too short. The training rides aren't barrel racing – it's all conditioning for the most part. Then, as it gets closer to the rodeo season I go to events called jackpots to practice – where girls from Meadow get together to run against each other."

"I practice with my two sisters, Brittney and Charmayne. We help each other and compete and travel together," she said. "My younger sister Brittney, who's still in high school, also qualified for New Mexico as a junior. She placed third."

"Then from June through August there are rodeos almost every weekend. This year I went to Indian rodeos in Calgary –twice, Montana, Fort McMurray and others, and here in Meadow Lake as well, in my home town rodeo."

“My biggest accomplishment of the year was winning all three rounds in High Prairie to become Finals Champion and go on to New Mexico.”

Prior to the regional finals in High Prairie, Karen stood second in the overall standings with 1350 points, just behind her best friend Sonya Dodginghorse (1591 points). “It was Sonya who inspired me to be a teacher,” she said, “because of rodeo. She’s a teacher in the Tsuu T’ina nation near Calgary, and I saw that she was doing a job she loved and was also able to compete all summer in a sport she loved.”

When asked if she shared her love for the sport with her students, the grade two teacher got a huge grin on her face. “Last year I did a rodeo theme in my class, and then... we had a rodeo,” she said laughing.

“Say that again,” I asked, grinning at the thought of all those 7 year olds with numbers on their backs and jeans, boots, buckles and cowboy hats.

“We had a rodeo,” she repeated. “I brought my horses to school and my sister did a demo, and the kids barrel raced on the cement pad -on tricycles. People came in to teach them about the events, and then they did them. My brother came in and taught them how to rope, and then we had a roping contest – they were roping a dummy - a bale with a head.”

Whoa, I thought, imagining a bunch of grade two kids riding around on trikes, lariats in their hands, piggin’ strings in their clenched teeth and a lot of really, really nervous dogs and cats in the city of Meadow Lake.

“I had a bull rider come in,” she continued, “and he showed them his equipment and videos, and answered questions. We also went on a field trip because the rodeo was in town, so we went during the day and I showed them everything and explained the vocabulary. It was nice because later that night most of them came and watched. All the people who did the presentations were in the rodeo.”

“The kids loved it,” said principal Joanne Gislason.

“And I’ll be sure to do it again this year,” said Lavallee.

