

S. African cowboys

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ing in the barrel races, sang a few songs live from the back of a flat bed truck parked near the rodeo chutes.

For reasons they themselves can't fully explain, American country and western music is wildly popular with many rural Afrikaners.

"I just love it. I always have. When I was a boy I was always pretending to be a cowboy with my white hat," said Alden, apparently still pretending in an old white cowboy hat, tan and worn western boots and a gold and silver gunfight at the OK Corral souvenir belt buckle.

"I think country music is so popular because it is from the heart and because every song tells a story, even the ones in Afrikaans," he said.

Paul Walker, the rodeo clown, said that the music, just like in rural America, is what people hear growing up on farms.

For whatever reason, these born-and-bred South Africans, descendants of the first Dutch settlers to these shores, are determined to adopt both the music and the strange and alien customs of America's wild west.

"We love it," said bullrider Colin Alberts, 22. "We are cowboys."

At least they have most of the look with dusty and well worn cowboy hats, western shirts, leather chaps and western belt buckles nearly the size of individual pizzas. And, just like the cowboys they see at the U.S. national finals rodeo shown here on ESPN, they sit on the arena fence rail to watch the action.

"All hat and no horse," is the phrase that springs to mind.

What is missing, at least with most Afrikaner cowboys, is the manly footwear—the lowly cowboy boot. Most of the riders wore work boots or athletic shoes—a fashion choice that potentially could end with them drug around the arena with a foot caught in the stirrups of a bucking, saddle bronc.

"That's his problem," laughed Amedie Bull, the rodeo official in charge of animal welfare, when someone pointed out a rider's rugby shoes.

"I'm just here to make sure more riders than animals get hurt," he joked.

He is not one of the animal rights activists who, here as well as in America, contend rodeos are cruel to animals. Animal rights activists protested briefly at the rodeo until Dippenaar forced them to leave the grounds.

"I think it is more than a fair fight," said Bull, the animal welfare official, adding the animals have the size advantage but the cowboy is supposed to be smarter. One can't help but wonder when the chute opens and the bull begins its dance if there really is an intelligence advantage.

When 16-year-old Dirk Dippenaar, the organizer's nephew, was thrown roughly to the ground by a twisting, bucking angry bull, the hooves of the huge beast struck the ground over and over around Dippenaar's head. Only a quick and noisy charge by Walker, the rodeo clown, turned the bull away and allowed Dippenaar to scramble to safety with everything but pride intact.

"You have to learn to read the bull's feet," said Walker, who was making just his second appearance as a rodeo clown.

The biggest difference between this rodeo and a small town amateur show in the States is the level of skill of the riders and the quality of the mounts. The riders here have grit, but are short on experience. The barrel racing horses lack the specialized training and the rough stock lacks the violence and athleticism of their American cousins. They are provided by local farms, not rodeo live-stock companies.

"They just won't jump," complained Kylon Liversage, whose bull ran more than bucked across the arena. Liversage, a saddlemaker,

has a certain prestige among riders here because he has competed in a few California rodeos.

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