

You're a *what*?

Rodeo clown

Wearing his colorful face paint and costume, Dale “Gizmo” McCracken may look like a typical clown. But as a professional rodeo clown, in addition to making audiences laugh, he’s responsible for keeping bull riders safe.

Rodeo clowns entertain crowds during and between rodeo events, such as bull riding and steer roping. While these events take place in the center of the arena, rodeo clowns walk along the outskirts and provide comic narrative. “We call it ‘walk and talk,’” Dale says. “It’s standup comedy mixed with the action of competition.”

Between events, rodeo clowns take center stage and perform brief sketches to keep the crowd entertained. Rodeo clowns perform different types of sketches, depending on their specialties. Some rodeo clowns work with animals, such as horses or monkeys, that are trained to perform tricks. Others perform slapstick comedy or acrobatics.

Dale has a diverse cast of characters he uses to amuse audiences. In one sketch, Dale drives a golf cart—modified to resemble an ambulance—into the arena, where he plays a bungling medic clumsily attempting to treat a patient. In other sketches, he parodies characters from popular television shows. And, as befitting his clown name, “Gizmo,” Dale is known for using mechanical gadgets in his acts. Many of Dale’s gadgets, such as his mock ray gun, emit smoke and sparks to excite the crowd.

From a young age, Dale’s natural comedic ability and showmanship entertained his classmates—if not his teachers. “I was the

kid that they kept sending home from school with notes saying not to send him back,” Dale jokes.

As an adult, Dale continues to amuse—but now he does it professionally. He watches the news to prepare jokes on current events, such as political races and celebrity mishaps. Dale also gets ideas for new sketches from classic comedies and everyday life. “Sometimes, I just go to a fair or to the mall,” he says. “You can pick up some funny stuff just watching the world walk by.”

But being a rodeo clown isn’t just about the fun. Some rodeo clowns also perform an important safety job, called bullfighting. A typical comedian might have to dodge boos from a restless crowd, but rodeo clowns must know how to handle a much more dangerous threat: angry bulls.

In bull-riding events, cowboys hold on to a bucking bull. When a cowboy gets thrown from a bull’s back, the cowboy might be too injured or disoriented to escape the angry bull. Rodeo clowns, along with other bullfighters, attract the bull’s attention so the cowboy can escape from the arena safely.

After attracting a bull’s attention, rodeo clowns might try to escape the bull by climbing out of the arena or by taking cover behind a barrel that’s in the arena. Frequently, however, the safest place for a rodeo clown is to stand as close to the bull’s side as possible. As a bull twists its body to face the clown, it’s unable to charge. The rodeo clown moves with the bull, remaining in its blind spots, until the bull gets corralled and taken back into the pens.

Drew Liming

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Getting close to an irate bull weighing almost 2,000 pounds requires caution—and nerves of steel. When sharing an arena with bulls, rodeo clowns need to know how to protect themselves. “You need to know how to fight bulls for your own safety,” Dale says.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics does not collect employment or wage data on rodeo clowns. Rodeo clowns are hired by rodeo organizers and are paid per performance. Depending on a clown’s experience and the size of the rodeo, the money they make varies considerably. New rodeo clowns might earn a couple hundred dollars for each show, and the most popular rodeo clowns at a large rodeo might make more than \$2,000 for a single performance.

Many older rodeo clowns learned their trade through on-the-job trial and error. Today, however, there are rodeo schools that teach bullfighting skills. These schools also help aspiring rodeo workers gain experience in different rodeo events and become comfortable working with livestock.

But becoming a professional rodeo clown isn’t easy. As self-employed workers, rodeo clowns need to generate their own business. Rodeo clowns build their reputations slowly, through networking and word of mouth. Beginners might start out by working at amateur rodeos, earning a small amount of money in exchange for making contacts and showcasing their acts.

Rodeo clowns work wherever there are rodeos across the United States. Because rodeos are temporary, rodeo clowns travel regularly. Dale estimates that he works in about 50 cities a year. In the summer—his busiest season of the year—he might work at a major rodeo every evening. This busy schedule means Dale spends a lot of time away from his family.

But the job’s danger and time away from home aren’t enough to keep Dale out of the arena. He loves entertaining the crowds at rodeos. “There’s nothing like walking out there and seeing those people have a good time,” Dale says. “It makes you feel good to see them laugh.”



Dale “Gizmo” McCracken entertains audiences with his humorous costumes. But his work to keep bull riders safe isn’t for laughs.

Photo courtesy of Dale McCracken.