

# All Systems are “GO” For 16<sup>th</sup> International Finals Youth Rodeo

By: Tammie Hiatt

Where else but Shawnee, OK can you have the chance to enter a high school rodeo that offers \$55,000 added money, eleven performances, three arenas, trophy saddles, buckles and most importantly...big paychecks! Also available for the graduating seniors is the opportunity to attend their first year of college on Cinch and Cruel Girl by winning one of the two \$2,500 scholarships. As the 2007 IFYR Champion Team Roping Header, Rodeo Walvern summed it up, “*the IFYR is the “Cheyenne” of high school rodeo.*” We couldn’t have said it better!

Welcoming an average of over 1,000 contestants each July, the task of processing this volume of cowboys and cowgirls can only be handled by the most experienced in the rodeo business. The personnel selected for the 16<sup>th</sup> edition of the International Finals Youth Rodeo includes the best that the parent association, the International Pro Rodeo Association has to offer. Danna Gann and Carissa Stewart have again been selected as the IFYR Rodeo Secretaries. These ladies are very experienced at processing the scores and times that will ultimately decide the ’08 champions.

Rodeo announcers Mark McGee and Jim Pugh will call the action as it unfolds in each of the three arenas. Clayton Macom and Ronnie Barnett will handle the rough stock judging duties, while Terry Tate, Ted Dunn, and Steve Ratchford will act as flag judges. Tom Osburn will take care of the line judge’s duties.

The task of timing each and every contestant’s performance falls in the capable hands of Heather Wilf-Gann, Beth Kidd, Charlotte Janes, Jody Wright, Sherry Sumner, and Mary Ann Barnett.

The bullfighters for IFYR16 will include Rob Gann, Ricky Thornberry, and Chad Dowdy. Veteran pick-up men Benny Jordan and Rod Adair will help the rough stock cowboys safely to the ground.

The action begins July 14 – 19 with performances daily at 9:00 a.m. and 7:30 p.m. The championship round will be 2:00 p.m. July 19. Entries opened April 1, 2008 and will close June 9, 2008. All contestants that are currently in 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade are eligible for entry. Entry fees are \$100 per event and entry blanks may be downloaded at [www.ifyr.com](http://www.ifyr.com). For more information call the Heart of Oklahoma Expo at 800-762-7695.

## The International Finals Youth Rodeo.... More Than a Rodeo

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The International Finals Youth Rodeo in Shawnee, OK offers more than just 11 performances of rodeo action, more than just three arenas running simultaneously, more than a \$200,000 payoff offered to the up and coming rodeo athletes in the country, it's a life changing experience. For the six individuals that serve as the IFYR Youth Directors, the third week in July will be something to remember.

The concept of having a group of high school age "directors" calling a majority of the shots at the "richest high school rodeo in the world" started 16 years ago. It was intended to get the kids involved in "their" rodeo and to have a say in how things were done. Over the years the program has expanded from the original four youth directors to six. There are two youth directors posted in each of the three arenas monitoring the intense competition. Should a question or dispute arise, the directors' step in and act as a liaison between the contestant and the judges and work to resolve the issue.

The director's duties don't stop once the arena action has ended for the day, with over 1,000 high school kids in one location, strict policies must be adhered to and it's often the IFYR Youth Directors that are called upon to make some tough decisions regarding a contestant's actions.

A youth director's day starts early in the morning preparing for the first rodeo performance that starts at 9 a.m., they have a brief meeting with the judges and rodeo secretaries before they ride in the grand entry. Then it's off to their respective arenas to monitor the competition. At the end of the performance they meet again with the judges and then it's off for a little "r and r" before any promotional appearances that may be scheduled take place. Soon it's time to gear up for the evening performance, grand entry, competition, recap with the judges and off to the rodeo dance. If you think this sounds like a full day, don't forget to factor in that it is usually over 100 plus degrees in Oklahoma in July or that drought-busting thunderstorm the weathermen have been speculating about decides to hit IFYR week.

But, as they say, the show must go on and this year's roster of youth directors is ready for the task at hand. They had a chance to get together at the International Finals Rodeo in Oklahoma City in January and hang out together for the week, see the sights and get to know one another. The unique bond that forms between the IFYR Youth Directors forms almost immediately and it is easy to predict how well this group will work together.

Levi Worley of Rocky Face, GA is serving his second term as a youth director. “I had a lot of fun last year. I wanted to serve again and to make some suggestions on how to make the rodeo better from things I experienced last year. I am a senior this year and plan to get a degree in Agriculture and continue rodeoing. Being a youth director was a great learning experience.”

Kelli Bilyeu, the youngest of the Missouri trio, is a tenth grader from Ava, MO. “I was excited to be selected as a youth director. I think this will be a good educational experience and I can take these life lessons with me to college. I hope to study Equine Science and become an equine therapist. I also plan to rodeo in college.”

Blair Davis is a junior from Lake City, FL. “Being a youth director is about public relations, and that is right up my alley. I like talking about what I like to do. I plan to pursue Ag. Communications in college and then work in rodeo public relations.”

Ashtin Green, the lone Okie of the group, is a junior from Byars, OK. “The IFYR is a really great rodeo and being a youth director is a great way to be a part of it. It’s a chance to be a voice for other kids and a great opportunity to learn. To me, it’s an honor to have been selected.”

Jessie Pratt, another member of the Missouri trio, is a senior from Stoutsville, MO. “I like to be involved and help. I like to help answer questions and solve problems. I want to see this rodeo grow and know that I was a part of it.”

Lauren McDonald, who is the final member of the Missouri triangle and also a senior, hangs her hat at Columbia, MO. “I think serving as a youth director will be a great personal experience. I want to be an equine veterinarian and I think the leadership skills I get from this will help me in college and in this profession.”

For more information on the “richest high school rodeo in the world” visit the website [www.ifyr.com](http://www.ifyr.com).

## **KOLT DONALDSON**

### *IFYR Graduate is PBR's Newest Star*

Tammie Hiatt

Kolt Donaldson of Idabel, OK is living his dream and having the time of his life. If you call the 19-year-old Ranger, TX Junior College freshman's cell phone and catch him in class you will hear, "This is Kolt Donaldson, Idabel, OK and I'm probably riding a Brahma bull to 90 points, but as soon as I get the hair picked out of my spurs and sign a few autographs for these fine young ladies, I'll call you right back." It's easy to see that bull riding is never far from Kolt's mind. "Kolt has planned to be a professional bull rider his entire life, that's all he has ever wanted to do," related Kelly Donaldson, Kolt's mother.

In 2007 Kolt made his final appearance at the International Finals Youth Rodeo, a rodeo he had literally grown up attending. His parents Chock & Kelly Donaldson owned and operated 44 Bar Rodeo Company which supplied stock to the IFYR for several years. "Kolt has been at the IFYR since he was in diapers," said Kelly. "I'm sad we won't be going this year to watch any of the boys compete."

Kolt finished the 15<sup>th</sup> edition of the "world's richest high school rodeo" as the number two man in the bull riding average. "The IFYR is a very professional rodeo. It gets you prepared to move on up. You learn how to take care of business there. I competed three years at that rodeo and my brother, Kody, served as a youth director," said Kolt. "This will be my first year to miss it in a long time."

Donaldson recently realized one of his life-long dreams when he was added to the PBR's Built Ford Tough Series roster. Kolt has been competing at the challenge events trying to earn his way to the PBR's big league and has learned just how rough the road to success can be. "A bull stepped on the back of my head at a challenger event in Durant last May. It crushed my nasal cavity and I had to have surgery to repair it. I was fine by the IFYR, but I had two black eyes at graduation," Kolt recalls. "That's the worst injury I have had."

The Challenger Tour Championship in Oklahoma City in February marked the turning point in Donaldson's bull riding career. Kolt won the first round of the qualifier round with a 90.25 point ride and came back in the second round to earn third with an 88 point ride to win the average in the qualifying event. "I had some really good bulls in the qualifying rounds. I went on to split third and fourth with L.J. Jenkins in the first round of the championship rounds. I won \$30,000 and that got me a seat on the Built Ford Tough Series."

The devout Christian cowboy is also a published poet. “I’m not sure what got me started writing poetry,” Kolt admits. “It was just something I started doing when I was younger. My poems are about Jesus and bull riding.”

To most, it would appear that Donaldson has achieved his lifelong goal of becoming a professional bull rider, but Kolt sees it differently, “No, I haven’t reached my goal yet; I want a gold buckle around my waist.”

Kolt is just one example of the 1,000+ entries that come through the arena in Shawnee, OK at the International Finals Youth Rodeo. These talented young cowboys and cowgirls offer up a virtual ocean of stories as well as immense rodeo talents. The IFYR is extremely proud of their graduates and the chance to have been a part of their lives and their rodeo goals.

The 2008 edition of the International Finals Youth Rodeo takes place July 14 – 19 with performances daily at 9 a.m. and 7:30 p.m... Open entries begin April 1 and are available online at [www.shawneeexpo.org](http://www.shawneeexpo.org).