

Cunningham shines at national rodeos



Louisburg High School freshman Lakin Cunningham, and her goat-tying horse Easy, fared well at a pair of national rodeos this summer and earned marks that were some of the best in the world on the junior high level.

Lakin Cunningham lives and breathes rodeo.

It is her passion and one that she works day and night improving her skills. Life in the rodeo world isn't an easy one as it features long trips, countless hours of practice and several weekends of competition a year.

All that hard work has paid off for Cunningham as she competed in two nationals rodeos in the last month and is now considered one of the best in the world in the realm of goat-tying.

The Louisburg High School freshman recorded a top 3 finish in goat tying in the National Junior High Rodeo Finals in Tennessee in June and later finished in the top 20 at the National Little Britches Rodeo Finals in Oklahoma earlier this month.

Cunningham was among 2,000 competitors at the National Junior High Rodeo Association Finals (NJHRA) that included participants from 42 states, five Canadian provinces and

Australia and she more than held her own.

In the goat tying competition, Cunningham had the fastest time in the finals as she won the jackpot with a 7.1 second run. In the first go-round, she won with a 7.7 second run. She later finished fifth in the short round and placed third overall in the world.

For her efforts, Cunningham won two belt buckles, a horse blanket, a shirt, a framed picture and money. The NJHRA is a division of the National High School Rodeo Association, which is the biggest youth rodeo association in the world.

Cunningham has qualified for the national rodeo the last three years and has been a Kansas Reserve Champion for two of those seasons.

"I was hoping to be either the world champion in goat tying or the Reserve World Champion," Cunningham said. "I won the first go-round of the rodeo and the jackpot, so I was set up for a world or reserve championship. Due to a slower run in the second go-round I ended up third at that finals by less than two-tenths of a second. I drew a goat that was a runner in that round and it kept me from my ultimate goal. I also made the junior high national finals in the Barrel Racing, but due to injuries with my horse I did not do well."



Lakin Cunningham finished third in goat-tying at the National Junior High Rodeo Finals in Tennessee.

She continued her success a couple weeks later when Cunningham traveled to the National Little Britches Rodeo Finals (NLBFR) in Guthrie, Okla., which is the oldest youth rodeo in the world.

Cunningham was one of 3,000 competitors from 33 states and Canada that range from age five to 18. To qualify, she had to place in the top 7 in four rodeos through the year and qualified for the third year in a row in multiple events.

This season, she earned a spot in goat tying, barrel racing and ribbon roping. In goat tying, Cunningham placed ninth in the world and also placed in the top 20 in ribbon roping.

"I did okay but I was again going for a world title," Cunningham said. "I placed fifth in the Goat Tying and Ribbon

Roping in the first go-round. In the second go-round I did not place and had a no time due to a goat getting up to place in the round. I did make it back to the short go and placed third in the goat tying in the short round. Had my goat not gotten up in round two, I would have been a Reserve World Champion.

“The second go-rounds at both nationals cost me the titles. This is an event where the stock that you draw can affect the outcome and in my case it definitely did. I also ended up 20th in the world in the ribbon roping with my partner Chancy Johnson, from White City. I was also in Barrel Racing at this finals to, but struggled with horse issues here as well. My barrel horse spent part of national finals week at a vet in Oklahoma so I’m hoping she is on the mend and will be ready for next year.”

Cunningham and her goat-tying horse, Easy, found a lot of success in the last month. After her former horse, Trigger, had to be retired, Cunningham trained Easy, who was bred, born and raised on her grandparents farm in Louisburg.

Easy was a retired race horse, but Cunningham started training him for goat-tying and the two seemed to be a perfect match. She started hauling Easy to Kansas junior high rodeos in April.

“We didn’t know how he’d do or if he’d even work,” Cunningham said. “Suprisingly, he did work and took my goat tying to the next level, shaving half to a full second off my times. I was a late 7-second to early 8-second goat tier on Trigger. Once Easy found his groove, we started clocking early 7s in May and June. My fastest times of 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3 have been using this unexperienced horse I trained. I can’t wait to see what Easy and I accomplish in high school. My goal is now to start clocking 6-second runs in high school. With Easy, I know it’s possible.”

After qualifying for both national events the last three

years, Cunningham has seen a lot of good competitors over that span, and each year it gives her extra motivation to top her previous performance.

“The competition is definitely difficult, since it is on a national or international level,” she said. “I seem to push myself more when I compete with more and better competition. I used to compete on the regional level and when I advanced to the state and then national levels I began to push myself more and set more goals. I think that is because I know I have to do better when there is more competition.”

Cunningham will see a lot more competition in the coming years as she graduates from the junior high level to the high school division. Still, Cunningham is proud of what she accomplished during her last three years.

“I think they are all special to me in their own way,” she said. “In sixth grade it was special because I didn’t think I’d even make the NJHFR but I did qualifying as Reserve Champion Goat Tier in the state of Kansas. That year was my first year attending the NLBFR and I won the National Princess title that year and also placed in a go-round in barrels, which was very special as it made me set higher goals for the next year.

“In seventh grade it was special because my goal was to qualify for the NJHFR in barrel racing, too, which I did. At the NLBFR I set a goal to make the short go in one of my events and I ended up making it in all three. This year, my goal was to make it to the short go at the NJHFR and I more than did that with my third place finish. My NLBFR goal was to be in the Top 7 in the world in goats and barrels. I didn’t quite make either of those goals due to my barrel horse being hurt and that goat getting up.

“It just makes me want it even more next year. My goals are now to make it to the 2018 National High School Rodeo Finals

and to again go for Top 7 in the world in my events at the NLBFR. One day, I hope to achieve my world champion goal.”

Lakin is the daughter of Kara Cunningham and granddaughter to Jim and Sandy Lowe in Louisburg.