

Cunningham wins all-around cowgirl title, qualifies for nationals in 4 events



Louisburg High School's Lakin Cunningham recently won the state barrel racing title and will compete at the National High School Rodeo in four events.

Lakin Cunningham has had a rodeo season to remember – and it isn't even over yet.

Cunningham competed in the Kansas High School Rodeo Finals last month in Mulvane and left with a lot to show for it. She won the barrel racing state championship and was a reserve champion in goat tying.

That success led to even bigger things as she was named All-Around Cowgirl for the state of Kansas. Cunningham was also crowned the 2019-20 Rodeo Queen for the second consecutive year.

Cunningham, who just finished her sophomore year at Louisburg High School, didn't give much thought on winning the all-around title. As the season went on, however, it became much more of a reality.

"Going into finals I knew I had a pretty good chance at

winning the All-Around as I had about a 2,500 point lead on the girls behind me, but still anything can happen at the state finals when there is so many points up for grabs," Cunningham said. "I knew I just had to perform to the best of my ability and whatever happened was in God's hands. Going through the finals I didn't even know what the All-Around standings were, and to be honest I didn't want to know. So when I found out I did end up winning the title I was so happy.

"Going into this season this fall, all-around cowgirl was not even a goal of mine. In fact, it's something I didn't even expect when the season started last August as I thought to be an All Around contender that I needed to be a roper and have a couple more events. But, I had a great fall season in barrel racing and goat tying and led the All-Around standings from that first rodeo and kept my lead throughout the entire season. It was just something that happened and I was so happy that it did. The All-Around title has been won by seniors for the past several years in Kansas High School Rodeo, so I'm so honored to have achieved this award my sophomore year."

Cunningham

went up against some tough competition and found herself in a tight race for the barrel racing title with her horse, Precious. Unfortunately, during her runs at state she noticed something wasn't right with Precious.

When

all her rides were complete, Cunningham realized she was hurt. Despite all that, Cunningham was still able to take the barrel racing crown, which was her first event state title.

“We had been doing very well all season and I have learned, when something is up with my horse, that she doesn’t turn good,” Cunningham said. “Before the short round, we went back into the practice pen to try and figure out what the problem was. We figured out that my horse was hurting, but there was nothing we could do about it because the short go was that night, so I just told myself just be smooth and get through one last run. We ended up being third in the short round and it was enough to win us the state championship title by 2.5 points. I led that event from the very first rodeo last August and feel so blessed my horse put me in the money so many times and brought me my first event state championship title.”



Lakin Cunningham finished second in the state in the goat-tying competition.

Cunningham also stepped it up in the

goat-tying competition as she put together some of her best times of the season as the right moment. She was sitting third in the state going into the finals and the top five had been shuffled all year long.

She had a strong performance in the first two rounds with two 7-second times and then had a time of 7.3 seconds in the short-go to cinch the runner-up spot.

"I knew going into finals that I just had to make three smooth and solid goat runs and I would be okay for a spot on the nationals team," Cunningham said. "One mess up might cost me going to nationals since the points were so close between the top 5 girls. Little did I know I would go into finals and blow my expectations of myself way out of proportion. All I was hoping for was a spot on the nationals team and I ended up being the reserve champion goat tier and landing just a few of points behind the state champion."

Wyoming is the next stop for Cunningham as she will compete in the National High School Rodeo in Rock Springs. She will compete in four events, including barrel racing, goat tying and reined cow horse, which she took fourth at state.

Along with those, she will also represent Kansas in the royalty pageant. She will be the only competitor from Kansas to compete in four events.

The royalty pageant is something Cunningham

is looking forward to and has a better idea of what to expect this time around.



Lakin Cunningham was crowned the KHSRA Queen for the second consecutive year.

“Last year was a learning experience for me,” Cunningham said. “Going into the Nationals last year I had no idea what to expect. As a freshman, it was a little overwhelming for me as it’s the largest rodeo royalty pageant in the world with up to 50 girls (only 5 were freshman last year), but I learned the ropes and am so excited to go and do even better this year. Being a rodeo queen means so much to me. A lot of people think that a rodeo queen is someone who sits on a horse and looks pretty, but to me it’s

so much more than that.

“Being able to introduce new people to rodeo, as well as be someone for little kids to look up to is just one of the many things I love about it. I also love all the opportunities and skill it introduces you to. I’ve been able to meet so many people in the western industry that I never would have met if it weren’t for being a rodeo queen. I learn to be so much more responsible, how to talk to people and use better social skills. I also love the fact that I can show people that rodeo queens aren’t just girls who sit on a horse and look pretty. They are also tough rodeo athletes.”

The soon-to-be LHS junior is looking forward to the competition as nationals and Cunningham knows this is the moment she has been waiting for since the season started last August.

“This is my fifth time representing Kansas on its national team as I made it all three years of middle school and then my freshman year as well,” she said. “I’ve never qualified for nationals in more than two events though, so this year will be an experience.”

“When I go into nationals, I don’t think to myself, ‘Oh I have to go out and win a national title,’ I think to myself that I need to go out there and perform to my very best ability and whatever happens, happens. When I think this way it makes it easier for me to control my nerves. Sometimes you have to fail to learn how to overcome things. I learned a lot from my hardships my freshman year and my success at nationals my eighth-grade year. Those lessons made my sophomore year better than I ever could have imagined when I started the season. I left state finals with three

saddles, seven belt buckles and many other awards.”

All this success isn’t new to the Cunningham family. Lakin’s mother, Kara, also won the Kansas High School Rodeo All-Around Cowgirl title in the early 90s and won multiple state titles as well.

Her grandparents, Jim and Sandy Lowe, are also big parts of her rodeo success.

“I’m following in the family’s footsteps,” Lakin said. “My grandpa is the one that oversaw the breeding program both my horses came from and my grandma is the one that guided me on how to train my barrel horse and my mom on how to train my goat horse. It’s so cool that I’m a second generation KHSRA All-Around Cowgirl, State Champion and Queen.”

Nationals isn’t the only big event that Lakin will compete at this summer as she also qualified for the National Little Britches Finals Rodeo in August in Oklahoma. She will also compete in barrel racing and goat tying.

In December, Cunningham will also travel to Las Vegas to compete in the Vegas Tuffest Junior World Championship in goat tying.

“As you can see, we will travel a lot of miles this year chasing dreams at some big events and competing in the sport I love,” Lakin said.