

Heart of a Tiger: Boots, Ropes, and Big Dreams, The Heart of FHSU Rodeo

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - There is something special about people who rodeo. The students and their coach are always respectful and kind. They say, "yes, Ma'am" and "no, Ma'am" the old-fashioned way. But what really stands out is how they use the word "rodeo." For most of us, rodeo is just a noun - a show, an event. For Trevor Meier and Tyler McCauley, it's a verb. It's something they do every single day. It's not just what they watch. It's how they live.

Tyler grew up in Pender, a small town in northeast Nebraska. Last year, he made a trip to Hays, Kansas, to check things out. He wanted two things: a good rodeo team and a school that could prepare him for a career as an electrician. Together, Fort Hays State University and Fort Hays Tech | North Central offered both.

"I saw FHSU had a tech school partnership," Tyler said. "I came, visited, and loved the town and the program. I loved the teachers. I really wanted to come here to get my education, and I wanted to compete in college rodeo."

Because Fort Hays Tech | North Central does not have a rodeo team, Tyler competes as an individual member, wearing the Fort Hays Tech | North Central vest, while being a full member of the Fort Hays State University Rodeo Club.

Tyler's days start early. He feeds his horses around 7 a.m., then heads to class until 2:30 in the afternoon. After that, he practices roping for several hours. Then it's dinner, a shower, and bed, so he can wake up and do it all again.

"Not a lot" of downtime, he admits with a small laugh. "I'm pretty focused on the rodeo."

Tyler has been competing since he was just seven years old. Now he competes in calf roping and team roping. Someday, after he finishes his two-year electrician program, he hopes to head south to Texas or Oklahoma. There, he plans to keep rodeoing while working toward a business degree.

Even with his busy schedule, Tyler has found time to enjoy his new life in Hays. "They are good people," he said about his new teammates. "They are friendly, so I like that." He was especially excited about his first rodeo with the FHSU team on September 11th in Colby.

Coach Meier fully embraces the partnership between FHSU and Fort Hays Tech | North Central. Coach Meier didn't just join rodeo. He was born into it. He started roping and racing when he was only four or five years old. His mother was the rodeo coach at Garden City Community College at the time, so rodeo has always been part of his family. Coach Meier went on to

compete for Oklahoma Panhandle State University, and he still rides in professional rodeo events today.

This fall marks the start of Coach Meier's second year as head coach at Fort Hays State.

"The first year was fun," he said. "It worked out well to be the assistant coach my first year and see everything, but not have all the responsibilities yet, on my own. It made it an easier transition."

If Tyler's schedule sounds busy, Coach Meier's might top it. His day begins at 6 a.m., roping calves until 8 or 9. Then he heads to his office for meetings, paperwork, and checking on students. By late afternoon, he's back at the rodeo grounds for another four hours of practice, followed by feeding and caring for the animals.

Asked if he ever sleeps, Coach Meier just chuckled. "Not as much as I'd like, for sure. We stay busy."

He's not alone, though. His graduate assistant, Tee Koch, helps with morning and evening chores, health checks, and general animal care. Tee also competes in steer wrestling, calf roping, and team roping alongside his younger brother, Brodin, who is also a student at FHSU.

This year's team has 28 members, what Coach Meier calls "a comfy number." Taking care of many team members also means caring for many animals. The team leases cattle from ranches in Nebraska and Oklahoma, trucking them in for practice and competition.

Coach Meier spends much of his time watching high school and community college rodeo athletes across a huge stretch of land, from South Dakota down to Oklahoma, hoping to find the next great addition to the FHSU family.

This past summer, two team members made it to the College National Finals Rodeo: Abigail Olson in barrel racing and Madison Scott in breakaway roping.

For readers less familiar with these events, barrel racing is a timed event, almost always run by women, where a rider on horseback races a cloverleaf pattern around three barrels set up in the arena. It's all about speed combined with precision control of the horse; even a fraction of a second lost in a wide turn can cost the run. Barrel racing is one of the most popular events for fans because it's fast, athletic, and easy to follow. The lowest time wins.

Also, typically a women's event, breakaway roping is a variation of calf roping built for speed and safety. Here's the key difference from traditional roping: the rope is tied to the saddle horn with a string, and once the loop catches the calf and the horse stops short, the rope simply "breaks away" from the saddle instead of the roper dismounting to tie the calf's legs (like in tie-down roping). It's judged purely on speed — fastest clean catch wins — and it's gained a lot of popularity recently as its own standalone event rather than just a practice drill for calf roping.

Tiger Nation is proud of Abigail and Madison, and Coach Meier is hopeful for what that means for the future.

"We will have a really strong women's team this year," Coach Meier said.

The season ahead is packed. The team will compete in four fall rodeos and six in the spring, spread across Kansas and Oklahoma. The road leads all the way to the National Finals in Casper, Wyoming, next June, which would mark the team's third straight trip if they qualify.

But for Coach Meier, it's not really about the trophies. It's about watching young people become who they're meant to be.

"It's amazing to watch the students grow and all they learn," he said, "from the time they are freshmen all the way through college."

Rodeo is woven deeply into the lives of Coach Meier, Tyler, and the rest of the FHSU rodeo family. It's not just a sport or extracurricular activity; it's who they are. From early mornings, long days, and hard work to the life-long friendships they build along the way, rodeo is their way of life.