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Red, White and Boyd

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Boyd Polhamus may only be in his 40s, but his career could be that of someone much older. Now in his 23rd year of announcing, Polhamus has been the play-by-play announcer for the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo 12 times and announces several major PRCA rodeos, including RodeoHouston and the National Western Stock Show & Rodeo in Denver.

In 2007 Polhamus finally earned PRCA Announcer of the Year honors after being nominated a record 12 times. We caught up with the legendary announcer during a rare break from his schedule while announcing the Rodeo of the Ozarks in Springdale, Ark.

ESPN Rodeo: Hi Boyd, how are you?

Polhamus: Better than I deserve, I can tell you that.

ESPN Rodeo: You've been announcing rodeos for over 20 years now. How did you get your start?

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Polhamus: By accident. I was pretending to be a rodeo announcer in my college rodeo practice pen, and when I got done pretending my coach said in a very nice way, "No, you're pretending to be a cowboy. You're really a rodeo announcer." At the time I was much more serious about my competition and the rodeo announcing was just kind of me messing with my buds. I said "No no no, I'm a roper and I'm a rider." But they were persistent, and I got introduced to a PRCA producer, announced my first rodeo, and the rest as they say is history.

ESPN Rodeo: You're on the road almost 300 days out of the year, and I'd imagine you've seen practically every state in the U.S. What are your favorite places to visit?

Polhamus: Yes ma'am. I left my home two weeks ago and I won't see my house again until August.

There's a few states on the East coast I haven't been to, but other than that I've announced a rodeo in almost every state up and down the Eastern seaboard, and every state in between. So I've gotten to see a lot. I guess what I like about announcing back East is that the crowds are much more novice.

I'll just compare it to Pecos, where I was last week, which is one of the world's first rodeos. You go to Gary, New York and a guy might rope a calf in 11 seconds, whereas in Pecos they're roping them in eight, but the crowds are twice as loud there as they are in Pecos, and when the little girl rides in to chase the calf to the buck pen, they're going to give her a round of applause for having been able to chase the calf in there. They're so novice that they see any accomplishment on horseback as a major one, and so they're a lot easier

to pull in to the sport.

I become more of a professor than an entertainer out East. There's many more rule explanations, because they have to understand why a guy can ride a horse for eight seconds and the buzzer goes off and he throws his hands up in the air and gets a no score. And they'll get mad, and they'll boo ya.

But in West Texas they'll say 'Hey buddy, where did you come from, we invented this sport.'" So in every place it's a little bit different. People that are from places where rodeo is not a staple are actually more active crowds than places like Texas or Oklahoma or Wyoming, and they're a lot harder to impress.

ESPN Rodeo: After 23 years of announcing, you've seen this sport evolve and change. What's the current state of rodeo right now?

Polhamus: Quite simply, I think we can be stronger than what we are. Have some good things happened? Oh yes ma'am. I like the tour idea, I like the finales with the big money, but at the same time until we invent a true tour — I liken it to the Rolling Stones. If you go to Chicago to see the Rolling Stones, and you walk in and it's Air Supply, it's not only going to make you disappointed you went to Chicago to see the Rolling Stones, you're going to lose a little love for the Rolling Stones. Well, it's one of those deals where, until we can get to a place and a point where we can guarantee the fans and the rodeo committee who they're going to get, we will forever handicap ourselves. And this isn't a recent problem; this is a problem that I think dates back. But then I look at a place like San Angelo and a place like Houston, where both do things different ways but both are packing the house, and you see both sides of it.

I think the entertainment part of our industry is very good. What we put out in front of the paying public for the most part is very good. I think where we're really, really struggling is in our ability to grow our fan base. Fewer and fewer people are growing up branding calves or jumping on a steer just to see if they can ride them. And I think we have to make a concerted effort to broaden our demographic. I think we need to have some outreach programs that allow people to get behind the scenes, get the feeling of what it's like to straddle a live animal. We need to have a little bit more of a cohesive effort from everybody in the industry to advance the sport. But I don't know if that answered your question (laughs).

ESPN Rodeo: I think you more than answered it. You call legendary announcer Bob Tallman one of your best friends. What have you learned from him over the years?

Polhamus: I actually talked to him for an hour this morning, and I usually talk to him for an hour every day. I always tell him I've learned as much what not to do from him as I have what to do.

The biggest thing I've learned from Bob Tallman is that I'm not him, and I can't be him. He is a one of a kind; he is a diamond in the rough. I might be a hard-pressed chunk of coal, but he's a diamond. And you do yourself a disservice by trying to be him. I think Bob would tell you if you're yourself, you're going to be more effective than if you are trying to be somebody else. Bob taught me a lot about the business end of the industry, you know, about contracts and that kind of stuff. But the greatest lesson I've learned from Bob is how to be a true friend. He is the definition of a true friend.

ESPN Rodeo: Do you think you've taught him anything?

Polhamus: Yeah, I taught him to be a little more anal. I taught him that you can't take a laissez-faire approach to the job and do it professionally. I think that Bob studies more, works day sheets more now than

he used to, I think that he's more on time for meetings, punctual. I mean, he's a free spirit, which makes his verbiage so great to listen to.

Bob has always been a workaholic, but at the same time I think he pays more attention to the finer details, or who did what last week, if they've had this horse before. Of course, he's so gifted that he could never do an ounce of research and make it sound like he's been livin' with the guy for a month. If I've taught him anything, it's probably to pay fuller attention to some of the smaller details. I think he'd tell you that, too.

ESPN Rodeo: Rodeo is one of a few sports that truly embody a larger lifestyle. What does rodeo mean to you, beyond what the spectator sees in the ring?

Polhamus: Boy you just made the hairs on my arm stand up. I'll tell you what it is. If the rest of the country — if the rest of the United States of America — took the same approach to their lives that a cowboy takes to his, there'd have been no Katrina. Oh the storm would have come — but people would have left on their own volition. People would have put personal responsibility for their success or failure.

What I love about the rodeo is that it is still to this day, the salt of the earth people involved. These are people who are prideful, who don't want help, who want to do it on their own. Rodeo personifies the American ideal of rugged individualism, self-reliance, you get what you put in, people get what they deserve — and I just absolutely love this sport and that John Wayne mentality.

John Wayne will tell you, you don't mess with a woman, you don't mess with a child, you don't mess with a horse, you don't mess with me — and if you do, you're going to wish you hadn't. And I just love — I just love that mentality. And I know it's probably antiquated, but at the same time I think it's largely missed from our society, where there's this notion that what's happened to me is somebody else's fault.

So if you're asking me what I love about this culture, regardless of whether we're the biggest sport in the industry or in the world of professional sports, that matters not to me. I would not sacrifice our integrity and our spine, the spine of a cowboy, for anything.

ESPN Rodeo: Last year you finally won PRCA Announcer of the Year after being nominated 12 times. That kind of makes you the Susan Lucci of the rodeo world. What did it mean to finally win?

Polhamus: Well, it probably meant more because I hadn't won it. If I had won it the second or third year I was nominated it would have seemed like the natural progression in my life's career. I was still a young man then. Had it happened when I was 30, I would have been like, "Alright, it's another great thing that's happened to me in a career full of so many great things, and so many more that I deserve to have happen."

So I basically got to the point where I started wondering what I was doing wrong. I guess people have looked at me, they know me, they've heard me, they know who I am and they know how I approach my job, and they've made up their minds that this is not an award I'm gonna get. But I would tell myself every year after it didn't happen, "You know Polhamus, there are more people who prefer that you not get this award because they don't like you, than do, and that's okay. 'Cause the ones that do are your dear, dear friends, they're the ones who know you the best, they're the ones who know you and love you despite all the warts." And believe me, I've got plenty of warts. But to win it at the time that I did, at a point in my life where I had made up my mind I was never gonna, is the most rewarding thing about it.

ESPN Rodeo: You're known for riding a horse while you announce, and I'm curious to know how that came

about and why it translates so well in the rodeo ring, especially when most professional sports have announcers up in a booth, far away from the action.

Polhamus: Alright, let me give it to you this way. It goes back to the showmanship that I was arguing about earlier when I said there was nothing wrong with our product. What we put out there in front of a live audience beats a lot of professional sports out there, and I think it's even better than football. If it wasn't for the fact that the NFL has a better system in place, our shows are actually better.

If you went to see Larry the Cable Guy or Jeff Foxworthy, how would you feel if you couldn't see them very well? Sinbad, George Carlin, George Strait — if you were to go see an entertainer, how would you feel if you couldn't see him? Well yes, you're watching what's happening in the ring, but it's my job to bring a little levity to the situation, it's my job to bring a little drama whenever Billy Etbauer's climbing on a horse that's never been ridden, and I'm just going to be a lot more effective communicator if you can see me, if you can look at the whites of my eyes, if you can see my hands move at the same time that you're listening to my voice.

It makes it much more enjoyable for the fan, but I'll tell you it's a lot more work for me. I have to condense everything to little sheets, and if I was sitting up behind a desk in a booth I could spread out all my notes, it would be much less labor intensive. But at the end of the day, if you ask a group of fans who've seen a horseback announcer versus a group of fans with a guy up behind a booth, I promise you nine to one they'd take that horseback announcer. It's not because one's better or worse, it's because you're much more able to communicate and connect with them.

ESPN Rodeo: Rodeo is obviously one of the most dangerous sports out there. What has been your scariest moment as an announcer?

Polhamus: The year 1994, the year Brent Thurman was killed at the National Finals. Easily, easily. I mean, I felt no impending danger, but my soul was crushed because I had lost a dear friend. Now I couldn't see him, his back was to me, but I could see the expression of Aaron Semas who was waiting on the back of the bucking chutes watching, and Aaron knew it was over and that look was all over his face. And I remember Adriano (Moraes, who won the event) coming up with tears in his eyes, telling me, "I ride that one for Brent, I ride that one for Brent!"

Ah, wow... that may have been the sickest I've ever felt.

ESPN Rodeo: You're now 42 years old, which seems like the prime of a rodeo announcer's career. How much longer do you see yourself doing this?

Polhamus: Well Hadley Barrett sure proved you could go a lot longer than I thought I oughta could (Barrett has been a PRCA announcer for over 40 years). I'm not sure that I could still be as good as Hadley is at the age that Hadley is, I think he's in his middle to upper 70s - and to this day he is still, without question, one of the top guys in our industry.

But do I want to be announcing rodeos at that age? I don't wanna do it just to say I'm still doing it. I want to do it and do it well, I want to be compelling to the audience, I want people to enjoy the work and feel motivated by it. Now if I can do it well, I'll do it for a long time. I won't do it for 300 days a year, I can tell you that.

ESPN Rodeo: Have you ever seen yourself doing anything other than a profession that involved the rodeo?

Polhamus: If you can make me the voice of the Green Bay Packers I'd do it tomorrow. As a matter of fact I want to call a game, I don't care if it's on radio for a 10,000-watt AM station. I wanna call a game, I wanna get it on tape, take it to an agent and say, go find me a job. I love football, I genuinely love it.

If you can make me the voice of the Green Bay Packers I'll give you a third of my salary. That's my football team and I've always loved them. I'm just a huge fan.

ESPN Rodeo: What do you love most about being a rodeo announcer?

Polhamus: Boy, that's tough. To just nail it down to one thing — I love the people. Most people work in an office; work for a company for 25 years, there might be some faces that change over the years. I go to a different town every week, I meet a vast majority of great people, visit different communities, see different cultures. You know, a banker does it because he needs the money. I've got to pay for my house and my health insurance, I've got to make a wage, but I'd do it for free just to be around these people.

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