



## Thurston Stays Hot in the Desert

In his first three years at the WNFR, Big Valley, Alberta's Zeke Thurston, despite winning the 2016 world title, had made only one victory lap at the Thomas and Mack Arena here in Las Vegas. In round nine of the 2018 Finals, Thurston won his second go-round of the week, this one with a spectacular 90 point mastering of Andrews Rodeo's Brutus. The seldom-ridden gelding with one buckoff to his credit already at this Finals threw everything at the cowboy on his back but Thurston withstood all of it and was still there at the horn.

"They don't call this the eliminator pen for no reason," Thurston acknowledged. "That little horse bucks off a lot more guys than actually ride him but you just throw caution to the wind with a horse like that and go after him."

Thurston has placed in eight of nine rounds, the only blemish on his 2018 resume a buckoff in round 4. Sitting third in the aggregate and sixth overall, it will come down to round number ten exactly as it should be. Heading to tomorrow's final round, reigning champion, Ryder Wright clings to the lead with CoBurn Bradshaw leading the aggregate and sitting 9th overall. There are at least half a dozen men with a shot at the title moving to the final round and one of those guys is Zeke Thurston. The second Canadian in the field, Nanton, Alberta's, Clay Elliott, did not fare as well as his free hand came in contact with his mount, Cowboy Casino from D and H Cattle, at a heart-breaking 7.97 seconds.

In the bareback riding, the Canadian cowboy from Manitoba, Orin Larsen, placed for the third time in three nights. He was 86.5 on a Bridwell Pro Rodeo bucker called Ted to split 4/5 in the round and collect \$8884 to climb back into 3rd place in the world standings. The Friday night cheque gives the long, tall four-time WNFR qualifier \$75,727 with placings in five rounds in total, a remarkable performance by a man just three weeks removed from meniscus surgery on his left knee.

"To be honest, I'm totally ecstatic with the way the week has gone," Larsen smiled after the ride. "I wouldn't have believed this was possible when I was in the hospital and the doctor was telling me we'd have to re-think Las Vegas. I have to give so much of the credit to Sport Medicine. They've really done a number on me."

Reigning World Champion, Tim O'Connell won the round with a 90 score leaving the two-time titleist from Iowa very much in the driver's seat as he sits first in the world and in the aggregate with one round remaining.

Recently crowned Canadian Champion steer wrestler Scott Guenthner kept his solid WNFR going as he matched Larsen's performance with a 4/5 split of his own. After an opening round no-time, Guenthner has placed in six of eight rounds and sits 8th in the aggregate and 4th in the world. Teammate Curtis Cassidy checked in with a 4.7 second run and wound up 7th in the round just one spot out of the money. Cassidy sits second in the world but is well back in the critical aggregate standings. 2016 World Champion Tyler Waguespack inched closer to a second title. While his 5.1 time wasn't fast enough to get a cheque in the round, the Louisiana man they call "Wags" is first in both the aggregate and the overall standings heading to Saturday night.

Round 9 in the barrel racing event saw some rapid runs from start to finish, with World leader, Hailey Kinsel, proving once again why she's been in command through much of the 2018 season. The Cottulla, Texas cowgirl ran her fastest time to date - a 13.40 - from the bottom of the ground to move from eighth to seventh in the average and garner her third go-round win of the Finals. With nearly \$340,000 in earnings, Kinsel continues to enjoy a commanding and likely insurmountable World lead. Canadian, Carman Pozzobon, ran clean once again (14.17) to maintain her first place ranking in the aggregate.

Stephenville, Texas roper, Sterling Smith, was the ninth go-round winner on Friday night with a 7.4 second run, a nice turnaround for a cowboy who has struggled at this Finals with four no-times to date. Three-time Champion Tuf Cooper is still atop the standings but is a distant 8th in the aggregate standings which means that, like the saddle bronc riding, the tie-down race is far from decided. 2015 Champion, Caleb Smidt, is well-placed heading to Saturday as he holds the head in the lucrative aggregate standings and sits 6th overall. What makes this race so intriguing is the fact that the top five men in the world standings are all at the bottom end or out of the aggregate standings with one round remaining.

In the bull riding Eli Vastbinder of Union Grove, North Carolina turned in the highest marked ride of the week, a spectacular 91.5 on D and H Cattle's Sweet Pro's Bruiser. Canby, Oregon's Chase Dougherty kept his fine Finals going with a second place 87 score and moved to second place in the world standings as well but won't be able to catch Texan Sage Kimzey who, on Saturday night, will be crowned champion for the fifth time in his remarkable five-year career.

Derrick Begay and Cory Petska earned their third team roping go-round win of the week with a 3.8 second run - their fastest of the Finals so far. The Arizona ropers moved from seventh to fifth in the average as a result and sit fourth and third respectively in the World Standings. The top two rankings in those standings remained unchanged heading into tomorrow's final round with both teams - Clay Smith and partner Paul Eaves along with Kaleb Driggers and his heeler Junior Nogueira sharing the 2/3 spot in the round with identical 4.1 second runs. The two teams stay in first and second overall heading to the final round while in the all-important aggregate race, Aaron Tsinigine and Trey Yates are first but are well down in the World standings while Driggers and Nogueira are in second place with Smith and Eaves in 4th. Overall, it's a one-head run for a world title come Saturday night.

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### **About the Canadian Professional Rodeo Association**

The Canadian Professional Rodeo Association (CPRA) with headquarters in Airdrie, Alberta is the sanctioning body for professional rodeo in Canada. The CPRA approves over 50 events annually with a total payout exceeding \$5.1 million. The organization holds the Grass Roots Final September 26-27 at Stampede Park in Calgary, Alberta and their premiere event - the Canadian Finals Rodeo (CFR) - at the ENMAX Centrium, Westerner Park in Red Deer, Alberta, October 29 - November 3. Follow the CPRA on Twitter and Instagram @prorodeocanada, 'Like' Canadian Professional Rodeo Association on Facebook or online at RodeoCanada.com.

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