

Mule Days Celebration

Thousands of people gather to the small town of Bishop, Calif. every spring for this mule extravaganza.

By Katie Olean

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For mule lovers everywhere, excitement ensues each year in the small town of Bishop, Calif. Since 1969, the week of Memorial Day has attracted mules, trainers, riders, packers and fans to the annual Bishop Mule Days Celebration. What once began as an informal kick-off to the packing season now garners more than 700 mules and 30,000 fans.

During the six-day event, riders and mules prove their skills in 14 different divisions: western, youth, English, cattle work, gaited, coon jumping, racing, musical tires, gymkhana, packing, shoeing, chariot racing, team roping and driving. Contenders at the top of their game receive bronze mule trophies, in addition to prestige. "We have the world's best competition here, and our awards are World Champion Awards," Mule Days Executive Director Julie Bigham says. "The competitors who win at this event definitely have bragging rights, as they are up against the best."

Most famous among the divisions are the packing events, particularly the Pack Scramble. For this event, 12 pack teams all work within one arena. Mules are released and scattered, and the teams must work to find their mules, pack them correctly and ride around a quarter-mile track without losing or dragging any ropes or equipment. "The Pack Scramble is by far our most popular event," Bigham says. "It is quite a show."

While the mule shows are a sight to see, they are not the only attraction to the celebration. Country music stars take the stage on Thursday night, and Friday morning is the Martin Luther Golf Tournament. On Saturday, participants line up for the longest running non-motorized parade in the United States. Country dances, barbecues and a western arts and crafts show all combine to complete the event.

Bringing an extra element of interest to the mix are veteran announcers Bob Tallman, of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association Hall of Fame and Bob Feist, founder of the Bob Feist Invitational for roping. Appearing for most competitions, both announcers present a balance of education and entertainment to the crowd.

The Bishop Mule Days Celebration is largely a volunteer effort. With only three paid staff members, the nonprofit event depends heavily on support from local sports teams, community, church and service groups and corporate sponsors. "The people of Bishop literally become a team to put on this event," Bigham says. "It's a very family oriented, fun event and it is all done for the benefit of the community."

For more information, visit www.muledays.org.