

Rodeos and kids: Good fun or just a lot of bull?

Watching an animal get hurt can traumatize children, Kristine Berey writes.

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As part the celebrations for its 375th anniversary, the city of Montreal is planning the NomadFest urban rodeo, billed as a country festival “ideal for families and kids.”

But many, including almost 600 veterinarians and the Montreal SPCA, want the event to be cancelled.

Mayor Denis Coderre says the rodeo will be managed by experts who run the annual rodeo Festival Western St-Tite, who will assure the animals’ well-being.

In February, animal advocate Stevan Harnad asked Coderre if he would allow his family pet to be treated like a rodeo animal. The mayor responded there is a difference between farm and domestic animals, but did not elaborate.

One difference is that testing a “rodeo skill” on any dog, even Lassie, might result in permanently disfiguring facial injuries to the handler. Farm animals, by nature, will flee when terrified, unlike dogs and cats, which attack when startled.

NomadFest Urban Rodeo knows that opposition to rodeos is rising, and its website offers information seeking to “dispel myths.”

For example, the animals are said to perform at most 15 times a year for a total of two minutes, with an extremely low chance of injuries.

But the types of documented injuries at rodeos — broken limbs, spinal injuries and heart attacks — speak for themselves.

“These stats are the animals injured during the rodeo, but there are injuries in qualifying rounds not compiled anywhere,” said Sophie Gaillard, lawyer for the Montreal SPCA’s animal advocacy department.

The NomadFest site explains what makes horses buck: While domestic horses are trained gradually to tolerate a saddle, it says, a “rodeo

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horse does not experience this treatment after birth; he will remain ticklish and sensitive to touch. When he feels physical pressure, his reflex is to make it go away. When a strap is tied near his flanks, he instinctively wants it removed. He will try to flee, or he will buck and kick.”

This is where the marketing of rodeos to children becomes problematic. Even if we accept the rodeo rhetoric that the animals are “athletes” who are “tickled,” we would not encourage a child to tickle another mercilessly, even for the eight seconds required for a “qualified” ride at a bull or bronco riding event.

As well, the safety of the animal cannot be guaranteed. Given that children are more likely to identify with the bull or bronco than with the cowboy riding it, there is a risk that kids will be traumatized if they see an animal suffering an injury.

Or they might come to accept the idea — as too many children and adults have — that watching the panicked struggle of a living creature is fun.

Besides, is riding a bucking bronco really heroic? Does this kind of risk-taking reflect the values we want to teach children?

In December 2015, the principle that “animals are not things” became part of the Civil Code of Quebec. However, Gaillard explains, this is “basically

a declaratory, symbolic statement. It says animals are sentient, but any provisions that apply to property will nonetheless continue to apply to animals.”

No wonder academics and lawyers are puzzled and, as Gaillard says, “they are asking what exactly it means that animals are not things but we can treat them as such.”

Gaillard says the act forbids causing an animal to be in distress “but there is an exemption that this provision doesn’t apply to agricultural activities such as fairs and exhibitions. It is not clear whether rodeos fall under agricultural activities.”

If a rodeo is an agricultural activity, another might be to take the bull by the horns and examine the economic impact of rodeos — \$47 million at the St-Tite, with 625,000 visitors, in 2015. Then, a truly “top-flight display of skill” would be to figure out ways to generate that kind of money other than, literally, on the backs of suffering animals.