

Blanket of the Sun

Nez Perce cowboy Waaya-Tonah-Toesits-Kahn not only rode with Chief Joseph but was also named Saddle Bronc Riding Champion of the World at age 53.

By Rod Miller

At the tender age of 14 (or maybe 13) Waaya-Tonah-Toesits-Kahn (usually translated as “Blanket of the Sun”) accompanied Chief Joseph and his followers on their attempted escape to Canada during the Nez Perce War in 1877. The boy was wounded in battle but was among the few to make it to Canada. He stayed there for a time, and there are claims that he lived with Sitting Bull. But he came back across the Medicine Line, as tribal members called the border between the United States and Canada, and lived for some 30 years on Montana’s Flathead Reservation.

Taking advantage of his inherited Nez Perce skill as a horseman, he made his way by breeding, breaking, training, and raising horses. In his late 40s he competed in bronc-riding contests and rodeos, riding against cowboys half his age. For rodeo, he adopted the name by which most remember him today: Jackson Sundown.

In 1911, Sundown entered saddle bronc riding at the Pendleton Roundup in Oregon. His bronc rides in the early rounds won him a place in the finals and what would be one of rodeo’s most memorable contests. Riding against black cowboy George Fletcher and white bronc rider John Spain, Sundown’s mount crashed into the horse carrying one of the judges and he was disqualified. The crowd believed Fletcher had made the winning ride, but the judges awarded the prize to Spain.

Sundown returned to his Nez Perce people in Idaho in 1912 and continued working with horses and competing in area rodeos, including return trips to the Pendleton Roundup. Not only did his riding skill

impress the crowds, but also he wowed them with his wardrobe—a decorative band on a flat-brimmed hat, colorful scarf, fancy gauntlets, and woolly chaps dyed orange.



SCREENSHOT FROM WIKIPEDIA

“Many years I ride and many times I win money, sometimes little, sometimes plenty much. But never did I get first place before.”

In 1915 Sundown again entered bronc riding at the Pendleton Roundup and placed third. He was 52 years old. Believing he would never win the championship in

Pendleton, he announced his retirement from the rodeo arena. His friends and fans weren’t having it, however, and an artist who was sculpting Sundown convinced him to give it one last shot and paid his entry fee for the 1916 contest.

Again Sundown rode for high scores in the early rounds, bettering broncs Casey Jones and Wiggles to qualify for the finals, where he pulled Angel, one of the toughest horses in the string. That ride made rodeo history and enshrined Jackson Sundown in rodeo legend, lore, and record books. He

rode the big bay bronc to a standstill—there was no such thing as an eight-second ride in those days—and was declared, at age 53, Saddle Bronc Riding Champion of the World.

“Many years I ride and many times I win money, sometimes little, sometimes plenty much. But never did I get first place before,” Sundown told a reporter from the *Oregon Daily Journal*.

He retired from rodeo for good after that and went back to a more settled life among his people and his horses. Seven years after winning the championship, pneumonia did what few broncs could do—it got the better of Jackson Sundown. He died on Dec. 18, 1923.

Gone, but not forgotten, the Indian cowboy is remembered as a hero in the Nez Perce and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla. He holds a place in the American Indian Athletic Hall of Fame, is enshrined in the Rodeo Hall of Fame at the National

Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum and the Idaho Hall of Fame, along with many other honors.

All three of 1911’s multicultural competitors—Blanket of the Sun, George Fletcher, and John Spain—have been inducted into the Pendleton Roundup and Happy Canyon Hall of Fame. ■

Rod Miller writes fiction, poetry, and history about the American West from Sandy, Utah. This story is reprinted, with permission, from Cowboy State Daily, Oct. 26, 2024.