

Ground Improvements Highlight the Rodeo Events at the 2017 Walker County Rodeo

By Cortney Guidry, Safe Arena Footings (SAF) Executive Director

We recently visited with Rusty Wallace from the Walker County Fairgrounds in Huntsville, Texas about their arena for the Walker County Fair and Pro Rodeo. In addition to the PRCA pro rodeo events, the arena also hosts 4H horse club events, ranch rodeos and outdoor concerts.

When asked about his most challenging aspect of managing the arena surface Rusty indicated the he considers the elements, or weather, to be his biggest challenges for this outdoor arena venue.

In March, the arena surface underwent a renovation to improve the performance conditions there just prior to the 2017 Pro Rodeo and Fair Rodeo events. To assist in this process, Rusty called upon SAF members Michael DePew and Steve Thornton to assist in the process. According to Rusty, "Michael did the soil evaluation for both the existing ground as well as both clay pits we had access to. Steve coordinated with Michael and myself to get started, then Steve came over for a day to help spread the 20 loads of clay we had brought in and to supervise the project. We could have not gotten this ground in as good a shape as it is in now without the help of Michael and Steve."

Rusty continued, "I have been involved with the Walker County Fair Association for 40 years and this ground has never been in this great of shape. We had approximately 126 barrel racers at our Pro Rodeo this month and not a horse slipped or fell because of the ground. These Pro girls were beyond pleased and blasted it on Facebook as well as telling me personally how pleased they were. When you get this kind of response, you got to feel that a good job was done by all. I could not be more pleased with the way it all worked out."

Stevi Hillman had a great performance placing first in the barrel race and had these comments, "Awesome, well done on Huntsville (arena surface) and also at the NFR, for sure. Wow, big difference and a huge thank you for that. Huntsville should no doubt get most improved ground this year."

Lacy Kimball also had a great barrel race in Huntsville and added, "I have run here in the past and it has been heavy and deeper. This year it felt very good. It held my horse in the turns without slowing him down or requiring him to be cautious."

Josh Peek who posted a 4.1 second performance in steer wrestling offered these comments on the arena footing, "I thought the ground was good today. It seemed very easy to control my feet in the bulldogging and the surface was safe for horse footing. I appreciate the support of Walker County Rodeo and that they did the surface renovation. Because believe me, I was just at a different rodeo where the ground was awful, dangerous for both the cowboy and the horses. Nothing like that here at your rodeo!"

We reached out to Michael DePew of Environmental Technical Services about his work with arena soils and what he did with this arena. "We routinely perform testing and consulting services for arenas.

Some are private arenas and others are competition arenas. We work with some target values for certain soil parameters which we have developed within our company and also with the cooperation of SAF. We then examine the test values in the light of how close they match the target value ranges. We then also suggest the type of material, the quantities, and depths they may want to consider adding to improve the arena footing conditions. For Walker County, their sand was almost perfect for a sand component of an arena but there was very little clay. So, basically what we did is identify the type and amount of clay which would improve this arena without messing up the sand size. Most clay amendments are not 100% clay so we also have to consider how much silt they have and the sand particle size within the sand fraction. In this case, we had to blend two clay-rich amendments together before application to the arena sand.”

**Stevi is referring to the work at the 2016 NFR by SAF members John Jamison and Michael DePew, in modifying the ground soil composition and preparing it for the event.