

# SHOW *of* SKILL

Bluebonnet team pits its abilities against the best in Texas at annual event

By Lisa Ogle

**S**EGUIN - A cloudy, surprisingly cool July morning greeted teams preparing for the physically demanding challenges of the 20th annual Texas Lineman's Rodeo. Dozens of new power poles and non-energized lines stretched across the field in Nolte Island Park on the Guadalupe River.

Nervous energy and anticipation filled the air as a light breeze blew through the bottom-land. Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative sent a team of 13 — six top journeyman linemen and seven up-and-coming apprentices — to compete against the best in the state.

The Lineman's Rodeo showcases unique job skills, such as connecting transformers and transferring equipment from one pole to another. Competitors also must balance between their teeth a tiny bag with an uncracked raw egg while racing up and down a pole as well as rescue an "injured" mannequin from atop a pole.

The linemen compete in teams of three, while the apprentices go solo. All are judged on time, and points are deducted for missing procedural steps.

"It's really my favorite time of year," said Randall Bownds, one of Bluebonnet's coordinators for the Lineman's Rodeo. "It's where I see the dedication and determination of our guys. We get to do what we love and compete and represent Bluebonnet at the same time."

Last spring's two record-breaking, multi-day power outages caused by severe storms and flooding in Bluebonnet's 14-county service area limited rodeo practice time but Bluebonnet won two trophies at the rodeo. Bluebonnet apprentice Andrew Kessler won third place in the Insulator Change event, and the Giddings barbecue team of Tim Grimm, Kyle Kasper and Brad Moerbe earned second place for their ribs in the barbecue cook-off.

Just participating in the rodeo helps the competitors build stamina and confidence and improves teamwork. And that benefits



Jay Godwin photos

the co-op and its members as a whole. For the apprentices, practicing for and competing in the rodeo allow the linemen-in-training to significantly improve their pole climbing and pole work. Those are vital skills, especially in rural areas where crews can't always get to poles using bucket trucks.

Recruiting the next generation of linemen is an industry-wide effort as baby boomers begin to retire. The Lineman's Rodeo has experienced an increase in apprentice participation, and so has Bluebonnet. Bownds praised the apprentices for stepping up to compete at the annual event.

"Bluebonnet is just one big team," Bownds said. "We are very fortunate to work where we work and to have the support we have." ■



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1. Apprentice Andrew Kessler wires a bank of transformers during rodeo competition and won third place for changing out an insulator in a separate event. 2. Bluebonnet's team, including, from left, Jeffrey Bolding, Jake Green and Danny Bolding, pay tribute to Bluebonnet Board Member Kathleen 'Kat' Handy, who died May 31, by putting KAT on their hard hats. 3. Apprentice Kendal Fiebrich rescues an "injured" mannequin from atop a pole during the hurtman rescue event. Fiebrich finished ninth overall, out of 119 apprentices. Teammate apprentice Troy Moore finished fifth.



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4. Apprentice Logan Lancaster looks over his notes with wife Raelyn before heading to his next event. 5. After competition, lineman Kenneth Roush spends quality time with daughters McKenna, 3, left, and Piper, 2. 6. Apprentice Dustin Tabbert uses a telescoping "hot" stick that allows him to simulate repairs to equipment at the top of the power pole. 7. One of Bluebonnet's rodeo coordinators Randall Bownds, far right, congratulates Kyle Kasper, left, Tim Grimm and Brad Moerbe (in background with sunglasses) for earning second place in the ribs cook-off. The team represented the co-op's Giddings Service Center.



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