

CROCKETT MIDDLE SCHOOLER IS RODEO ROYALTY IN TITLE AND PERFORMANCE



Above: Ky was selected as the TYRA Queen for the organization's 2024-25 season.

By Ron Barry

When you hear "TYRA," what comes to mind? Tyra Banks? Thyatira (for you biblical scholars)? "TYRA Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree"?

How about the Tennessee Youth Rodeo Association? That's where a Crockett County middle schooler from Friendship is making her mark, both as a competitor and as a representative.

Rising CCMS eighth grader Kyleigh Kelley – fresh off a Top Ten finish in the season standings for the 2023-24 TYRA season for Grade 5-8 cowgirls – capped her list of achievements by also being named TYRA Queen for the 2024-25 season, which means she'll be representing the organization all year.

Ky, the daughter of Kayla and John Kelley, took the crown by demonstrating her riding prowess and also making a convincing speech to the judges. As part of her duties, she'll be leading the opening parade at each of the events and carrying the American flag for the national anthem.

As her victorious speech indicated, Ky isn't just goofing around or killing time when it comes to being astride her horse Fly, which she's owned for a little less than a full year.

"Rodeoing means the world to me," Ky told the judges. "It is not just a hobby or sport for me; it is a way of life!"

Anyone who's seen her ride will attest to that.

Ky competes vigorously – and successfully – in barrel racing, pole bending (in which she must guide her galloping horse in and out of a line of flexible poles, much like a slalom skier), goat tying (her favorite competition), and breakaway roping, her latest addition, in which she has to rope a runaway calf from horseback.

She did well enough in those events to place in the TYRA Top Ten in her age group for the past season, even though she missed three of the circuit's rodeos. Some of her strongest performances were in the TYRA Finals at Selmer, where she had several Top Ten finishes even when all the competing age groups were combined.

And if Ky can sketch out her future, her recent performances are just the beginning.

"Some of my long-term goals are getting a scholarship to continue to rodeo in college, as I pursue a degree in animal science," she said. "I also would like to see myself qualify for the NFR (National Finals Rodeo, the premier championship rodeo of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, which showcases the talents of the PRCA's top 15 money winners in the season for each event) in the future."

That's quite a lofty goal – but Ky remains guided by an even bigger prize, building on a Bible verse shared with her by Crockett County Director of Schools Phillip A. Pratt. Ky's mom Kayla is the front office manager for the district's supervisors building.

"Mr. Pratt shared with me 1 Corinthians 9:24: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize."

Ky's approach to fulfilling that advice shows a maturity beyond her years.

"I always want to compete to win," she said, "but always remain humble in all that I do."

Another part of what she does is playing basketball on the CCMS team, which helps broaden her approach to rodeo as well.

"I do play basketball and have since elementary school," she said. "Both sports require you to have trust. In basketball I must trust my teammates and in rodeoing I have to trust Fly, my horse, to be able to compete successfully in both sports. And they both require me to be physically in shape as well."

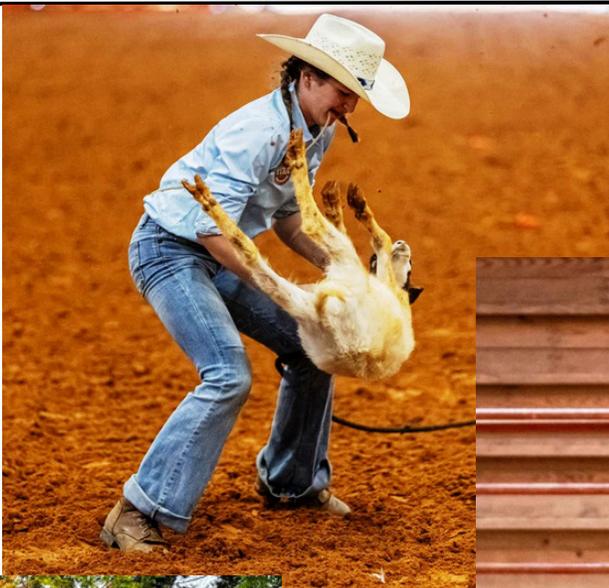
Ky competed in the Grade 5-8 division of the TYRA, which also offers competition in Pre K-4 and Grade 9-12 groups. Her younger sisters Ali and Charlea Kay are involved too. TYRA is offering a 14-rodeo slate for 2024-25; the season schedule is in one of the graphics that follow.

There are other junior rodeo associations with which Ky enjoys competitions. So if there's a rodeo ring near you, it's a pretty good bet the team of Ky & Fly will be making an appearance.



Above: This is the 2024-25 schedule for TYRA. Each rodeo has two performances, providing 14 total competitions, before the Finals in Selmer.

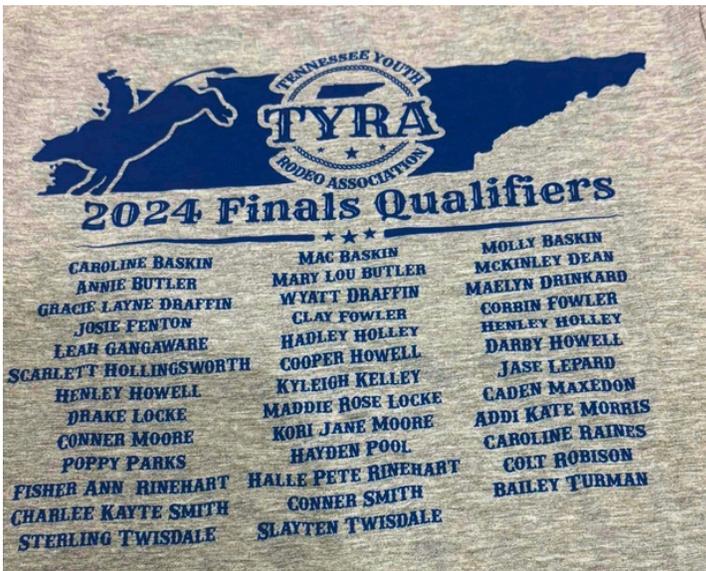
Right: Ky's favorite event is goat tying. She rides into the ring on her horse to a stake, to which a goat is tied. Ky must lift the goat, upend it, and tie its legs together with a rope in the fastest time possible. (Photo by Dalton Swafford)



Below: Ky and Fly.



Above: Kyleigh Kelley and Fly spin around the final barrel in the barrel racing component of a recent rodeo. (Photo by Dalton Swafford)



Above: Ky did so well in the 2023-24 season as a competitor that she earned her way onto a T-shirt and a berth in the Finals.



Above: As TYRA's representative for the 2024-25, Ky is going to have to be no stranger to a microphone.

Below: Fly always lives up to its name once Ky climbs aboard. (Photo by Dalton Swafford)



Above: The latest addition to Ky and Fly's repertoire is breakaway roping, in which the rider must accurately lasso a runaway calf. (Photo by Dalton Swafford)



Above: Another event for Ky and Fly is pole bending, similar to slalom skiing for horse and rider. (Photo by Dalton Swafford)



Above: Ky and Fly adorned for competition.