Six Utah State University Eastern students will be competing in the College National Finals Rodeo June 13-19 in Casper, Wyoming.

Though still a young program, students on USU Eastern’s rodeo team have proven that they can compete with the best, with the men’s team earning the reserve champion title in the Rocky Mountain region this year. Within the region are several past national champions and perennial contenders for the title, including the College of Southern Idaho, Utah Valley University, and Weber State University.

Clayson Hutchings and Scott Lauaki will be competing in both the saddle bronc riding and team roping events. Austin Allred will arrive in Casper bearing the title of Rocky Mountain region champion bull rider, Kale Lamb will be participating in the team roping event. Bowdie Jacobson will compete in the tie down and team roping events. Autumn Snyder qualified as an individual in barrel racing. The trip to Casper will be the first for USU Eastern's team.

“Nationals was never really in my sight,” said Leon McElprang, assistant professor in the Department of Aviation and Technical Education and rodeo team advisor. “I mean, of course we want to do well, but the idea for a rodeo team came about because we wanted to give back to the community. We wanted to give kids who wouldn’t normally consider going to college the opportunity to go. The rodeo team is a way to encourage that.”

McElprang and fellow coach Monte Jensen both rodeoed for the College of Eastern Utah during their collegiate years. McElprang always wanted to start a team at USU Eastern but didn’t have the support needed to begin.

“I was in an administrative meeting a few years ago and the question about recruitment came up,” said McElprang. “They asked what more we could do to recruit, and I asked what USU Eastern was doing to give back to the community. I mentioned one thing we could do would be to start a rodeo team and get local kids involved. Everyone just kind of stared at their shoes and moved on.

“Gary Straquadine came poking around my shop one day after he took things over and he asked me why we didn’t have a rodeo team. I told him what had happened and that was the beginning of it all.”

The team received support from the community in the beginning, and has been gaining traction and more recognition with their success.

“Another reason for a rodeo team here is to keep the talent local,” said Jensen. “Southeastern Utah has a lot of talented rodeo competitors and we’d obviously rather see them compete locally than go away to bigger schools. We have a unique opportunity to give them an education in a field they’re interested in while they do something that they love.”

The men’s team has competitors in both rough stock and timed events, making them well-rounded and ready for the stiff competition in Casper.

“Our men’s team really has a shot at placing deep next week,” said Jensen. “Clayson was the All-Around Champion in our region this year, Scott was Reserve Champion. And our guys can do both events, too. Everyone can rope and everyone can ride so I’m really looking forward to watching them compete.”

As the sole woman qualifying, Autumn Snyder is going to nationals with a positive attitude.

“My plan is to be a teammate with my barrel horse,” said Snyder. “I need to stick to that plan before entering the arena and all the way to the end. Most importantly, though, I want to enjoy doing what I love to do!”

The first events in Casper will be Tuesday, June 15 at 7 p.m. The cowboys and cowgirls will compete all week for a chance at a national title, which will be awarded Saturday, June 19. The complete schedule, daily results and other news is available on the College National Finals Rodeo website, cnfr.com and live coverage is broadcast on ESPN3. Details about ways to access the coverage are on the event website.
Utah State University Eastern’s rodeo team is headed to the College National Finals Rodeo in Casper, Wyoming. Team members are (left to right) Kale Lamb, Scott Lauaki, Bowdie Jacobson, Autumn Snyder, Austin Allred, Clayson Hutchings, with coaches Monte Jensen, and Leon McElprang.

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