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Friendly fiddlers compete

Crowds tap their toes to 'a truly American art form'

By James Kruger, *Special to the Rocky*

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Zirl "Bubba" Hopkins takes his fiddling career seriously - but he takes the friendships he's crafted along the way even more seriously.

Sweaty and worn down after backing up several fellow fiddlers on guitar at the seventh annual Colorado Fiddle Championships on Sunday at the National Western Stock Show, Hopkins wasn't very optimistic about his chances of winning.

"I did all right, I guess. Playing guitar for everybody is fine - they're all my good friends - but it'll hurt your own fiddling," he said, turning and stretching his wrist after playing the second round in the champion division. "They'd do the same for me."

Hopkins, from Spavinaw, Okla., began playing at age 6, and 14 years later, stomping and swaying as he fiddled, he looked anything but tired.

"The difference between a violin and a fiddle is a violin sings and a fiddle dances," said Tex Ash, the master of ceremonies for the contest.

As the fiddlers took to the stage to swoon the audience with a slow, sad waltz or light them up with a frenetic, wild hoedown, plenty of feet danced and tapped in the packed Beef Arena.

It was a long way from the event's quiet beginnings.

"The first year, there was maybe two or three people in the audience," said Claradene Stewart, a volunteer since the beginning. On Sunday, there were hundreds.

Maybe more than anyone, Denice Carter is responsible for such success. A fiddler herself, Denice worked hard to create the championship and the Colorado Old Time Fiddlers' Association.

"When we first started this, people thought this was an oddity, and now people are coming back because they know about it," she said. "The only way to support an art form - which this one is a truly American art form - is to let people know about it so they can support it."

It's also turned into a sort of family get-together.

"It's a lot closer than your own family most of the time," Hopkins said, calm and collected as he prepared to back up another friend with his guitar, not worried at all about the finals hours away.

As Carter took the stage early Sunday afternoon with her group, Fiddlocity, she looked around at the more than 200 faces in the standing-room-only crowd. "I had this idea for a fiddle contest and it turned into this."

"I have bigger dreams," Carter added. "If they wanted to put us in one of those big arenas, well, that would be fine."

Decked out in a cowboy hat and sneakers, fiddler Nathan Sima, 7, seemed more interested in the ducks just outside the arena than in defending his crown.

"I don't understand what the difference between this duck and that duck is," last year's first-place small fry fiddler said as he examined two ducks, identical except for a blue ribbon on one cage and a red one on the other.

"He likes the little things," his mother, Qian, said.

Whatever he's interested in, from video games and chess to waterfowl, Nathan said, "I like fiddling more."

By the end of Sunday's competition and the heated final round of the champion division, Hopkins was triumphant. Being named champion and receiving the \$1,200 prize seemed to perk him up quite a bit - not that it really would've mattered. "Either way, everybody wins because we're such good friends," he said.

The winners*** CHAMPION DIVISION**

1. Zirl "Bubba" Hopkins, Spavinaw, Okla.
2. Tom Weisgerber, St. Peter, Minn.
3. Brook Wallace, Burlison, Texas
4. Katie Glassman, Denver
5. Doug Fleener, Leitchfield, Ky.
6. Jake Duncan, Jenks, Okla.

*** GRAND SENIOR DIVISION (60+)**

1. Larry Struble, Centennial
2. John Morrow, Lakewood
3. Ann Robinson, Casper

*** SMALL FRY DIVISION (8 AND UNDER)**

1. Ari Fierer, Denver
2. Nathan Sima, Fort Collins
3. Mackenzie Johnston, Highlands Ranch
4. Sean Costello, Firestone
5. Dani McCurdy, Franktown

*** JUNIOR JUNIOR DIVISION (9-12)**

1. Harrison Schumann, San Antonio
2. Celeste Johnson, Arvada
3. Gisela Coffey, Denver
4. Jessica Coffey, Denver
5. Julia Greenwald, Greenwood Village

*** JUNIOR DIVISION (13-17)**

1. Eischen Harkin, Canon City
2. Rachel Jackman, Englewood
3. Kaitlin Kenney, Englewood
4. Marina Pendleton, Tulsa, Okla.
5. Joshua Coffey, Denver

*** ADULT DIVISION (37-59)**

1. Cody Stadelmaier, Fort Collins
2. Trish Osthoff, Lakewood
3. Greg Fischer, Fort Collins
4. Lynne Walker, Denver

*** YOUNG ADULT (18-36)**

1. Aaron Carter, Levelland, Texas
2. Laura Hightower, Provo, Utah
3. Evan Meeker, Austin, Texas
4. Sydney Grohne, Denver
5. SallyAnn Wallace, Burlison, Texas

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