

LeCompte, Mary Lou. *Cowgirls of the Rodeo: Pioneer Professional Athletes*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993. Pp. xi, 196. Appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$22.50.

Mary Lou LeCompte has found and introduced to us arguably some of the greatest athletes of the last 100 years, in *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*. This book provides significant insight into the world of women participating in professional rodeo. The skills, the comradeship, the education, finance, travel and marital status of rodeo cowgirls are presented in this work. Sociological as well as historical aspects of rodeo cowgirls are explored. How these women got into rodeo life, their careers and progression through rodeo, and their exit from the sport are all addressed by LeCompte. Issues of gender, modernization, feminism, commercialism, amateurism, professionalism, and notions of the body are all interwoven in this study.

This work, as admitted by LeCompte, is limited because of its exclusion of women of ethnic heritage (p. 5). The reasons for the exclusion of African-American, Hispanic, and Native American women are watery. This is especially the case where the standard set forth is the inclusion only of those participating in rodeos, yet for the white women used, their participation in wild west shows, sponsored contests, and exhibitions was covered. There should not be a problem with the fact that the author covered primarily white females. LeCompte needs only to state this from the outset and not utilize excuses of non-participation and the well-known element of racism in sport to explain the exclusion of minorities from this work. This is not to say that LeCompte's reasons are invalid, because for the most part the lack of ethnic participation and racism are still deterrents today in many sporting endeavors. To cite the use of rodeo participation as the key element for inclusion, then proceed to list other elements of participation for whites, calls into question the original intent of this research. Further, to offer the notion of cultural prevention and lack of skills as reasons for non-participation in rodeos are unsubstantiated rhetoric. Women of ethnic minorities worked ranches and farms in the West, as did white women.

While addressing issues of gender, sexism, and feminism, this work tends to add fuel to the stereotyping of male and female roles. Cowgirls' performances are constantly being compared to those of cowboys. In this way, male performers are the role models and standard bearers. Why not have these women set the standards and stand alone, as was indicated by the author (p. 21)? The continued use of aesthetic beauty, and language of "pretty" and "lovely" to describe the costumes, performances, and the female participants themselves seem sexist and can be offensive to many readers of this work (pp. 82, 85, 108, 110, 115, 116). LeCompte acknowledges this sentiment when she states that "society and the media reinforced the stereotype that the only roles for women were as sex objects or homebodies" (p. 145).

Modernization is used to help explain the change over time for rodeos and the roles of cowgirls in these contests. Changing educational levels, travel, marriages, hardships, finances, fixed contests and exhibits, and the blurred connections between what is sport (rodeo) and what is theater (staged entertainment), made “it easy for dishonest operations to stay in business” (p. 73).

Continuing with the idea of popular entertainment and the romantic West, LeCompte makes it clear that professional rodeo participants and their associations could not survive without those big city contests being held in the East. The most noted of these Eastern contests were held in New York’s Madison Square Garden. Other major cities contributing to the prosperity of the rodeo included Boston and Chicago.

Cowgirls also brings forth the factors that led to the downfall of women’s events, and thus their undoing in professional rodeo. Chief among these factors, LeCompte maintains, is the entry of movie star cowboy, Gene Autry, into the business. With Autry’s emergence, the “rodeo cowgirls changed from genuine participants to mere props, whose primary purpose was to make the cowboys look good” (p. 137).

With *Cowgirls of the Rodeo* not only has LeCompte given insight into the world of some incredible athletes, but she has also shown the effects of many social and historical events on the sporting world, rodeo life in particular. The suffrage movement, World Wars I and II, prohibition, the Great Depression, the color-line, and the Olympic Games are amongst the events interwoven into the sporting web presented in LeCompte. In the end, this work is a major contribution to the growing informational network on women’s participation and contributions to the sporting world.

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