

Research Notes

The Equestrian Standing Race and Its Ancient Antecedents

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At many modern rodeos across North America there can be seen a “contract act” called Roman Riding during which a rider (who may or may not be dressed like an ancient Roman) stands with each foot on the back of a pair of horses (see Figure 1). The team is then raced around the arena.¹ The popularity of this event is widespread and those who perform it even advertise their skills in magazines such as *Rodeo News*.² But is this event actually one which can be documented in ancient Roman times? Perhaps it developed as an erroneous interpretation of the Latin *desultores* or from a misreading of images on Roman coins by equestrian showmen of the eighteenth century and popularized by the promoters of Wild West shows at the end of the nineteenth century.

Roman Riding is an event performed by men or women. In her book *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, Mary L. LeCompte mentions several women who not only won the event but beat an all-male field to do so.³ In 1913, Tillie Baldwin finished first at the Winnipeg Stampede; in 1914, Bertha Blancett was unbeaten at the Pendleton Round-Up; in 1919, Florence Hughes Randolph (whose stage name was Princess Mohawk) prevailed at the Calgary Stampede.

That the event is not undertaken by women of only a bygone era is made clear in a recent article in *Western Horseman* which features Roman Riders Julie and Rama Jean Griffeth, daughters of Mel Griffeth of Rexburg, Idaho.⁴ Preparations for this spectacle through general horsemanship as well as dance training to develop balance and leg strength are the foundations for these riders. The horses

1. This spectacle also can be seen in some acts in places such as Las Vegas as well as in numerous films, such as *Rio Grand* (1950) starring John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara. In a scene involving riding skills of the troopers, Victor McLaglen's character enthusiastically proclaims, "Now after that, come the Roman teams. Now that's easy. It's the way the Romans used to ride—the ancient Romans—standing up—STANDING UP!" In a recent interview, Ben Johnson acknowledges that both he and Harry Carey, Jr., did the Roman Riding sequence in the film themselves. See David G. Brown, "Last of a Breed," *American Cowboy*, Sept/Oct 1995, 43.

2. One such modern Roman Rider, Mr. S.L. Pemberton of Union City, TN, has graciously provided photograph of his act to include in this study. Mr. Pemberton uses two and four horses in his act, not only racing them around the arena but also jumping over fire and hurdles. Personal correspondence with the author dated 9 May 1995.

3. See Mary Lou LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois, 1993), 27, 42, 59, 74.

4. See Paul R. Christensen, "Roman Riding," *Western Horseman* vol. 54, no. 12 (December 1989): 106-107.

are worked together as a team by being ridden side by side and even in doing ranching chores.

Modern writers rather casually refer to the event as part of the ancient Roman circus games. Certainly, chariot racing is well documented, as are horse races with the rider astride the animal. In his book *A Pictorial History of Performing Horses*, Charles Philip Fox mentions the Roman standing race as having developed in the late Republican period but does not give any ancient documentation.⁵ Whatever its origins in the ancient world, the event was popularized through early circuses and the Wild West shows which were promoted in the late nineteenth century by entrepreneurs such as William F. Cody. Despite the popularity of the standing race, it was apparently not part of the program of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Between 1883 and 1913, 86 events were performed at various times and although races and trick riding were part of the show, the standing race is not specifically mentioned.⁶

In the 1920s, Ringling Brothers featured Roman riding done by girls; the 101 Ranch Wild West show also featured the event.⁷ Earlier, in 1906, Barnum & Bailey featured "three teams in a desperate Roman Coliseum Two-Horse Standing Race-three times around the track, three riders on six horses."⁸ During the five-year European tour of the "Greatest Show On Earth," around 1900, Barnum & Bailey's circus performed the standing race and chariot racing in such classical settings as the amphitheaters in France at Arles and Nîmes and in England at Chester.⁹ The setting of the amphitheaters was deliberately chosen to enhance the prevailing idea that the standing race was performed by the ancient Romans. And in 1898, an ad for the Forepaugh and Sells Brothers Circus featured "thrilling Roman bareback Standing Races, A realistic reproduction of Imperial Coliseum Equestrian Contests."¹⁰ While the event is normally done with two horses, a 1916 photograph shows a rider with the "101 Ranch and Buffalo Bill Show Combined" on four horses harnessed abreast.¹¹ In some acts today, teams of two horses are jumped (see Figure 2), but there is no evidence that the ancient Greeks or Romans held jumping contests of any sort.¹²

The publication in 1880 of Lewis Wallace's *Ben-Hur* is generally credited with introducing Roman chariot racing to a general readership and as the popularity of the book spread, several Wild West shows began to include chariot racing as a spectacular event.¹³ The 101 Ranch Wild West show would eventually include a

5. Charles Philip Fox, *A Pictorial History of Performing Horses* (New York: Bramhall House, 1960), 14.

6. Sarah J. Blackstone, *Buckskins, Bullets, and Business: A History of Buffalo Bills Wild West* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986). 53-54.

7. Fox (supra n. 5), 81.

8. *Ibid.*, 101.

9. Earl Chapin May, *The Circus From Rome To Ringling* (New York: Duffield and Green, 1932), 3.

10. Fox (supra n. 5), 139.

11. Don Russell, *The Wild West* (Ft. Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1970), 115.

12. J.K. Anderson, *Ancient Greek Horsemanship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 105-109. Obviously, horses would have jumped over ditches and such in rough terrain but Anderson finds no evidence for any competitions involving jumps.

13. See Russell (supra n. 11). 5.

spectacle called “Julius Caesar: A Picturesque Revival of the Sports of Ancient Rome.” However, Wallace’s descriptions of activities in the circus preceding the chariot races do not include the standing race.

Ancient sources, however, are not clear on the so-called Roman standing race. Ridden horse races were introduced in Greece at Olympia in 648 B.C., during the 33rd Olympiad, and remained popular throughout ancient times. Variations developed, such as those involving *desultores*, events in which the rider dismounts to complete the race on foot. While some authors maintain that the rider got off to finish the race on foot,¹⁴ other authors suggest that the contestants rode one horse, accompanied by a second to which the rider changed during the event.¹⁵ Representations in art of the dismount maneuver are easily recognizable because the rider has both legs on the same side of the horse, as though beginning to slide off the horse.¹⁶ Pausanias (V. ix, 2) mentions a race called kalpé which was introduced at Olympia in 496 B.C. in which the rider gets down and finishes the race by running alongside his horse, holding it by the bridle. This race was apparently discontinued by 444 B.C.¹⁷

In Greek art, the dismount seems to be accomplished by swinging the right leg over the neck of the horse, and then sliding off with the rider’s back to the animal. As J.K. Anderson points out, this method would be especially suitable if the rider were carrying a shield on his left arm.¹⁸

Roman lamps occasionally show a rider astride one horse, accompanied by a second, to which he presumably will be changing during a race.¹⁹ In the several examples known, however, the rider is always shown astride one of the horses, not standing on either horse’s back.

Descriptions of the various circuses sponsored by the leading figures of Rome seemingly do not mention the Roman standing race although, once again, modern authors refer to it frequently. In describing the circus provided by Pompey the Great in 55 B.C., Earl May refers to the extraordinary display of 500 lions and 20 elephants without citing any ancient source, adding that the populace was thrilled to see riders leaping “from one bare backed horse to another...” and to witness “a colorful Roman standing race.”²⁰ Ancient writers mention the animals, some authors expressing dismay over the slaughter, and refer to the horse races involving *desultores*, but not to a standing race.²¹ In describing a

14. See John H. Humphrey, *Roman Circuses: Arenas For Chariot Racing* (Berkeley University of California Press, 1986), 11.

15. See Donald M. Bailey, *A Catalogue of the Lamps in the British Museum, Vol. 2. Roman Lamps Made In Italy* (London: British Museum Publications, 1980), 59.

16. The Tomba del Maestro delle Olimpiadi, an Etruscan tomb dating ca. 530-520 B.C., shows both variations of the *desultores*. See Mario Moretti, *New Monuments of Etruscan Painting* (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1970), 121 ff. In both styles, the rider is astride the horse or with both legs on the same side of the horse, not standing on the back of the horses.

17. See H.A. Harris, *Sport In Greece and Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 158-159.

18. See J.K. Anderson (supra n. 12), 84.

19. See Bailey (supra n. 15), 59, Bailey calls this the *desultores*, too.

20. May (supra n. 9), 3.

21. See Cass. Dio XXXIX 38, 2; Plutarch. *Pompey*, 52; Seneca. *De Brev vitae*, 13,6; Pliny, *N.H.* VIII 20, 53, 64; and Livy XLIV 9.4.

circus sponsored by Caesar, Suetonius mentions horse racing also but only races in which riders jump from back to back of a pair of horses.²² Even in the "Troy Games" described by Vergil, the riders do not stand on the backs of horses.²³ In this event, the riders sit astride the horses, wheeling and turning them in complicated maneuvers, bearing down upon one another with lances in what Vergil himself calls a mock cavalry battle (V. 585).

It seems clear, then, that neither the Greeks nor the Romans participated in the standing race. So how did it evolve and who labeled it "Roman"? Circus acts of the 18th century often used horses as their only animal acts and with an audience attuned to horses for daily use, such acts would be particularly suitable. In London, in 1770, a billboard for Philip Astley's British Riding School depicted "an equestrian with a foot on each of two running horses, after the manner of old Roman *desultores*."²⁴ From London, such equestrian events were introduced into America during the Revolutionary period with showmen like John Bill Ricketts.²⁵

An etymological dictionary published in 1727 correctly translates *desultores* as those who leap from horse to horse in the ancient Roman games.²⁶ Sir Thomas Urquhart's 1653 translation of Rabelais also refers to *desultores* as leaping from horse to horse and horses trained for this as *desultories*.²⁷

While a rather free translation of *desultores* on the part of circus entrepreneurs may have led to the idea of a "standing race," evidence from numismatics may have contributed visually to the notion that the Romans performed it. Roman coins depicting chariot racing from the Republic and Early Imperial periods generally show the chariot with its driver and either two or four horses moving obliquely across the field. Sometimes the horses are standing still; other times they are shown at a full gallop. A portion of the chariot and one of its two wheels is clearly visible. Examples of ridden horses on coins show the rider astride the horse.²⁸ However, examples of quadrigas shown frontally, such as on the double sestertius of the Roman emperor Probus (A.D. 276-282), have the horses divided in pairs along a central line and the driver apparently standing on the backs of the two central animals (see Figure 3). The chariot is little in evidence.²⁹ The coin types of Probus are numerous, including those examples showing the oncoming view of the quadriga.³⁰

22. Suetonius, *Caesar*, XXXIX 2, uses the phrase *equos desultorios* in the Loeb edition.

23. Vergil, *The Aeneid*, Book V, 545-603.

24. May (supra n. 9), 7.

25. *Ibid.*, 14. May also adds that Mrs. John Bill Ricketts is known to have occasionally performed the standing race (p. 206).

26. See *Oxford English Dictionary* (1993), p. 262 which cites Nathan Bailey, *An Universal etymological English dictionary*, published in 1727. I am indebted to Dr. David R. Cole for this suggestion.

27. See OED, p. 262; Rabelais I, xxiii.

28. See Harold Mattingly, *Roman Coins from the Earliest Times to the Fall of the Western Empire* (London: Methuen, 1928; reprint 1962), plate I, no. 6 which is a didrachm of ca. 235 B.C. and plate VII, no. 5 which is a denarius of ca. 100 B.C. Plate XXXV, no. 1 is a denarius of Augustus with a quadriga, dated ca. 17 B.C. These coins are in the collection of the British Museum in London.

29. See Mattingly, *ibid.*, plate XXXIII, no. 8. This angle of view is referred to as a "spread quadriga."

30. See s. W. Stevenson et al., *A Dictionary of Roman Coins* (Chicago: Argonaut Inc., 1967, reprint 1889), pp. 654-655 and Harold Mattingly et al., *The Roman Imperial Coinage* (London: Spink & Sons, LTD, 1933, reprint 1968, vol. V, part 2), esp. pages 29 and 112.

By the latter part of the eighteenth century, with numerous western Europeans traveling in the Mediterranean area and in the Near East, an interest in archaeological material increased. As early as 1732, the Society of Dilettanti was established in England, meeting in London “to bring together those who had done Italy and the Grand Tour...”³¹ With the growing awareness of ancient Greek and Roman coins in England, it is highly probable that men like Philip Astley had seen numismatic specimens such as those minted for the emperor Probus and derived from them the rather exciting if erroneous idea of the Roman standing race.

During performances, rodeo announcers describe the standing race as one done by the ancient Romans, thereby generating heightened interest on the part of the audience. Even though the ancient Romans appear not to have performed the standing race, this should not detract in the least from the exhilaration inherent in watching a modern rider galloping around an arena standing up on a team of horses.

31. See Glyn Daniel, *A Short History of Archaeology* (London Thames & Hudson, 1981), 15 ff.

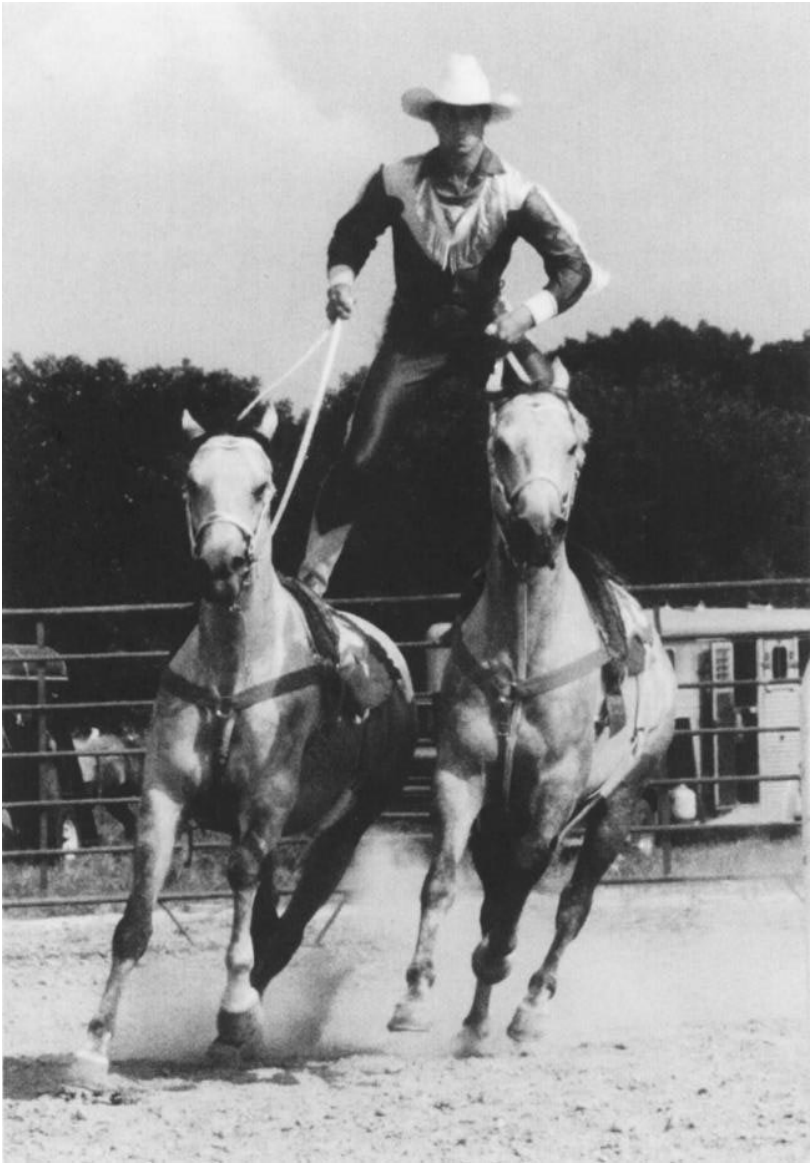


Figure 1

The Equestrain Standing Race and Its Ancient Antecedents



Figure 2



Figure 3
Double Sestertius from the reign of Probus
A.D. 276-282

Courtesy of The British Museum