

# Charrería: The National Sport of Mexico

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The myth that the first American rodeo took place in Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1847 has been refuted, but the letter on which it was based remains valuable. The account of a round-up in which cowhands contested in roping and throwing, and everyone danced in the streets as an accurate and lively description of nineteenth-century *charrería*, from the heart of the Mexican *charro* country.

The original *charros* were Mestizo ranch workers of the Mexican colonial period. They were exceptional horsemen who devised daring and difficult contests of roping, riding, and bloodless bullfighting. Also excellent marksmen, the *charros* were the popular heroes of the Mexican War for Independence, and in its aftermath many became landowners and ranchers. On their vast *haciendas* they raised fine horses and fighting bulls, and developed *charrería* into a more exacting sport. These contests became an integral part of the elaborate fiestas held in conjunction with annual roundups, auctions, and brandings.

Classical Spanish-style matadors often participated in the early fiestas, but by the 1880's, a new, Mexican style bullfight had evolved. Developed and popularized by *charro* matadors, picadors and banderilleros, it became the dominant style both on the *haciendas* and in the municipal *plazas de toros*. There were then, two groups of *charros*: the amateur *hacendados* for whom *charrería* was a gentleman's pastime, and an integral part of the life and work of the *hacienda*; and the professionals who earned fame in the *plazas de toros* and in *charro* contests, challenges, and shows.

When bullfighting was banned in Mexico in the early 1890's, numerous professional *charros* came to the United States, and many joined touring Wild West shows. Some, such as Vicente Oropeza, earned star billing; but all were advertised as *vaqueros* rather than *charros*. This, along with their close association with bullfighting, probably explains why neither *charros* nor their sport, *charrería*, became well known in the United States.

As the Mexican War for Independence had propelled *charros* to fame, the Revolution of 1910 ended their era of glory; their large estates were broken up and their sports and traditions vanishing. To retain this valuable cultural heritage, businessmen and *charros* founded the Charro Club of Mexico City in 1921. The National Charro Foundation was founded in 1933, and now includes over three hundred clubs.

At the highest level, American rodeo is a professional sport where individual cowboys compete for top prize money, while contemporary *charrería* is an amateur sport in which *charro* clubs compete for the highest points and a team trophy. Rodeo events are scored primarily for speed or tenacity, while in *charreadas*, points are awarded for difficulty, and subtracted for faults in style or execution.

One contemporary *charro* contest is bull riding, which originated in the sixteenth century as a form of bullfighting and later became a *hacienda* contest. Events originating with cattle ranching include *colear*: wrestling a bull to the ground by

twisting his tail, which was the standard method for grounding cattle from the sixteenth century until roping replaced it; roping, and breaking and riding wild horses. By the nineteenth century, all of these events were seen in *corridas* and on *haciendas*. Today, *charreadas* also include individual contests of horsemanship for men, team equestrian events for women, and dancing the *jarabe tapatio*.

Clearly, *charrería* made a significant contribution to the development of American rodeo. However, it is best understood and appreciated not as a “Mexican rodeo” but as a unique sport whose events reflect its origins: the *haciendas* and *plazas de toros* of centuries past.