

Rodeo Cowgirls

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During the past two decades, there has been a revolution in women's sports, with both professional and amateur opportunities greatly increased. Along with this growth has come a vast increase in popular and scholarly literature on the subject. Most authors contend that women were unable to earn a living through professional athletics until the 1970s. They ignore the fact that from the 1890s through the 1940s, women's contests, as well as events open to both men and women, were staged at many rodeos, including the prestigious

Madison Square Garden Rodeos. Some of the cowgirl stars of the 1920s and 1930s earned from twelve to twenty thousand dollars a year, placing them near the top of their profession.

Despite the success and popularity of women's contests in the 1930s rodeo producers and later contestants formed organizations such as the Cowboys Turtle Association (CTA) now the highly successful Prorodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA), to regulate and sanction rodeos. but they did not require inclusion of contests for women. Consequently by the early 1940s, women's competition in roping and bronc riding had disappeared from major rodeos never to return. This ended a significant era in women's sport history.

Before dropping real cowgirls from their programs, however, many producers had added other women's events. Teenage ranch beauties billed as amateur riders exhibited fine horsemanship by riding figure eight patterns around barrels or cutting livestock from a herd. Originating in Texas in the early 1930s, these Sponsor Contests in which beauty and attire were more important than horsemanship, spread throughout the west and to the Madison Square Garden rodeo.

However, cowgirls still aspired to be legitimate athletes, and resented the beauty requirements on the only rodeo events then open to women. They founded the Girl's Rodeo Association, now the Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA), in order to compete in the traditional rodeo events and to make barrel racing a timed event rather than a beauty contest.

As rodeo producers found continuing interest in women's events, they began adding barrel racing to their programs, and by 1967 it had become part of the most important rodeo in America, the PRCA's National Finals Rodeo (NFR). There, the 1986 World's Champion Barrel Racer brought her annual earning to over two hundred thousand dollars. However, contestants on the women's tour still toil in obscurity, their winnings inadequate even to make expenses.

Despite the progress of women's barrel racing, women's place in rodeo is far from secure. They participate in the NFR as "guests" of the PRCA, and are paid far less in prize money than their male counterparts. Hence, it will probably be many years, if ever, before the real cowgirls regain their rightful place in rodeo, the one sport in which men and women were once truly equals.



Mary Lou LeCompte, John Dewar, and Betty Spears presented diverse sport biography papers.