

# Three Who Dared: Champion Cowgirls of Rodeo's Golden Age

Mary Lou LeCompte

University of Texas, Austin

The 1920s have long been referred to as America's Golden Age of Sport. Feminist writers and some sport historians now recognize that the twenties and thirties were an especially golden era for female athletes who then enjoyed almost as much publicity and acclaim as did female film stars. Although most of the popular female athletes earned their reputations in international amateur competition, professional rodeo cowgirls also enjoyed amazing success and recognition.

This paper examines rodeo cowgirls as professional athletes by attempting to answer several questions including: What characteristics propelled these women to the top of their sport? What traits do they have in common with female champions of other sports, and how are they unique? How did women come to select professional rodeo careers at a time when few women even worked outside the home? These questions will be answered through detailed study of three champion cowgirls of the twenties and thirties: Barbara "Tad" Lucas, Florence Hughes Randolph, and Vera McGinnis Farra.

Although they came from widely different backgrounds, the three had many characteristics and experiences in common, and together represent the experiences of most of the other professional cowgirls of their era. One trait common to professional cowgirls for over a century has been their love for horses, and skills in riding and handling them. It was a characteristic these three women possessed in abundance. Like a majority of rodeo cowgirls past and present, all three were married to rodeo cowboys. They were also stars of the Madison Square Garden era, when the New York rodeo, with its attendant national publicity, concluded each competitive season.

The three were performers as well as competitors, but the driving force behind their careers was unquestionably the desire to become and remain champions. In pursuit of these goals they were willing to train hard, and endure painful injuries, and make enormous personal sacrifices, actions which many writers suggest were not typical of female athletes until many decades later. However, unlike successful female athletes in most other sports, none of these women enjoyed the encouragement and support of their fathers.

The thesis is that western ranching heritage gave the nineteenth century cowgirls the skills and attitudes which enabled them to succeed as full time professional athletes without feeling they had compromised their femininity. Successful in life as well as in sport, these women have served as role models for succeeding generations of cowgirls, including those responsible for the renaissance of women's rodeo in the 1970s and '80s.