

Cowgirls at the Crossroads: Women in Professional Rodeo 1886–1922

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Rodeo cowgirls were among America's first female professional athletes. They entered the arena during the formative years of rodeo between 1886 and WW I, but had very limited opportunities until rodeo began its transition from local, almost amateur event, to modern, international sport between 1912 and 1922.

Between 1912 and World War I, women's position and popularity within rodeo was established. This transition was orchestrated largely by Guy Weadick, who organized and produced the 1912 Calgary Stampede, and the 1913 and 1916 Stampedes at Winnipeg and New York City respectively,

all of which were publicized throughout North America. Weadick included numerous contests for women at these events, and also permitted men and women to compete as equals in some contests. He personally recruited talented cowgirls from both the performing Wild West shows and the small contest rodeos, offering them handsome prizes and international fame.

The women responded with outstanding performances, and from the first day of the 1912 Calgary Stampede won enthusiastic, unbiased coverage from the press, something which few female athletes have enjoyed until very recently. They demonstrated that women were capable of far greater physical achievements than was generally believed possible, and with their athletic ability, courage, and showmanship also won the support of audiences and fellow professionals. Thereafter, the number of contests and the sizes of purses for women increased steadily. Cowgirls enjoyed a central role in the 1922 Madison Square Garden rodeo which set the stage for a new, more professional era in which athletes could earn a living from the sport.

My thesis is that Weadick's three Stampedes were a turning point in the history of women's rodeo, and that the cowgirls involved revolutionized both the costume and the skill level of their events. They also firmly established women's right to compete for and win world championships. Although the importance of these Stampedes to rodeo itself has been thoroughly analyzed, their impact on women has thus far been overlooked. Analysis of vintage newspapers, primary sources previously ignored, and the careers of such outstanding athletes as Lucille Mulhall, Tilhe Baldwin, Fannie Sperry-Steele, Florence LaDue, and Bertha Blancett, illustrate that these were indeed pivotal events. They changed not only the sport of rodeo, but the role of the professional cowgirl and both public perception and status of the female professional athlete in North America.