

Women's Sports Run by Women: The Women's Professional Rodeo Association 1948–1991

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The Girls Rodeo Association (GRA), now the Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA), was formed 28 February 1948, by twenty-three women who met for that purpose at San Angelo, Texas. These women had previously discussed the idea for the organization during an historic all-girl rodeo produced at Amarillo in September of 1947, by two Texas women, Nancy Binford and Thena Mae Farr, both founders and future Presidents of the GRA. Officers included Margaret Owens Montgomery, President; Mary Ellen Barton, Vice President; and Mrs. Sid Pearson, Secretary-Treasurer.

The purposes of the GRA, which was open to professional cowgirls of all ages, included the following: "To organize professional rodeo contestants. . . for their mutual protection and benefit. . . raise the standards of cowgirl contests so they rank among the foremost American sports . . . [and] . . .

protect members from any unfair practices on the part of rodeo management.” To achieve these goals the women established rules for all-girl rodeos and for women’s contests included at rodeos sanctioned by the Rodeo Cowboys Association (RCA, now the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association or PRCA). The women worked closely with the RCA and rodeo managers, and in 1955, GRA President Jackie Worthington and RCA President Bill Linderman signed an historic agreement (still in effect) whereby women’s events at RCA-sanctioned rodeos must be GRA-sanctioned.

Since 1973, headquarters have been located at Blanchard, Oklahoma, home of Secretary-Treasurer Lydia Moore. Because of the WPRA, women’s barrel racing has become a standard contest at most major rodeos, where women’s competition had virtually disappeared during World War II. Their notable recent achievements include obtaining sponsorship from several major national corporations, holding the GRA barrel racing finals at the RCA’s National Finals Rodeo (NFR), and having over six hundred rodeos agree in 1980 to offer women prizes equal to those awarded men by 1985. As a result, rodeo is one of only two professional sports in which the top female contestant has earned more in a single year than the top male.

Membership has grown from 74 in 1948 to 1,800 in 1990, with total prize money increasing from 829,000 to over 2 million dollars. In 1950 members came from eleven states and Canada, with nearly 75 percent from Texas. Today members come from the entire country, and no single state has over 10 percent. Dues and fees from participating rodeos provide most of the financing for the organization. The organization was renamed the WPRA in 1982, and in 1990, won a landmark lawsuit which allows it to remain an all female association. A major success story, the WPRA is the oldest organization of female professional athletes in America, and the only one controlled and managed entirely by women.