

The History of Women in Rodeo

By Cindy Lea Bahe

Many sports in today's world are open to both sexes, yet rodeo was one of the first sports to include females. Though rodeo was dominated by men, from 1890-1942, more than four-hundred women had professional rodeo careers in saddle bronc riding, steer roping, relay riding and trick riding. However, rodeo didn't discriminate on gender and it certainly posed risks to men and women alike. In 1929 at the Pendleton, Oregon Round Up, veteran bronc rider Bonnie McCarroll was thrown and trampled to death. Following that tragic incident, many rodeos banned women from competing.

In 1929 the Rodeo Association of America (RAA) was formed but women were banned from participating. The Cowboys' Turtle Association was formed in 1936 but women were also banned from competing. Despite their limitations, women continued to compete in smaller rodeos across the country. Eventually they formed the Girls Rodeo Association (GRA) in 1948. It took two more decades of lobbying to participate in barrel racing and in 1967, this event became official for women at the PRCA's National Finals Rodeo (NFR). The GRA was later renamed in 1982 as the Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA). Barrel racing became the dominant rodeo sport for women also offering the largest payoff, though women also competed in tie down, team and breakaway roping.

Mattie Goff Newcombe was a famous trick rider and travelled around the world. She won several All-Around Cowgirl Championships and Trick Rider Titles through her career. Mattie has a special section on the first floor of the Casey Tibbs Rodeo Center which displays her memorabilia and actual 1920's horse trailer alongside a 40-foot mural of her former Cheyenne River ranch. Watch for future articles that will highlight Mattie's life.

South Dakota cowgirls Theresa Sully Humphrey and Connie Stinson Price were both racing stars, and were also race horse jockeys and trainers of barrel horses. Closer to home, Fort Pierre's Sisters Grace and Anna Giddings were among the early cowgirls in horse races and roping events. Jill Moody, 2008 NFR Average Barrel Racing Champion has her saddle, buckle and photo on display at the Casey Tibbs Rodeo Center as well as other cowgirl's artifacts.

Madge Runyan, shown in this photo, was racing horses for her dad at age nine and was on her own in rodeo by the time she was a teenager. It's understandable once a child is introduced to the rodeo world at a young age, it is part of them throughout their lifetime.

It would be difficult to imagine not having women participate in certain rodeo events. Today the sport is alive and full of women participants. Had the women not relentlessly lobbied for that extensive amount of time to be competitors in rodeo once again, rodeo would not be what it is today.