

# Women want piece of rodeo action, challenging old image Kaleidoscope

"It's incredible that a lady would be allowed to endanger her neck in competition." — Sam Savitt, *Rodeo: Cowboys, Bulls and Broncs*.

"Today, the women's pro rodeo has 2,000 members." — Lydia Moore, executive director for Women's Professional Rodeo Association.

Times have changed.

Women athletes who once were relegated to volleyball or tennis now lift weights, run marathons and compete in rodeos — all-girl rough-stock rodeos, with bulls, saddle-broncs, calves and everything.

The word "rodeo" conjures up images of lanky, tough-as-nails cowboys pitting strength and grit against unmannered livestock in a re-enactment of life in the Old West. Rodeo, since its beginnings in the late 1800s, always has been a man's sport.

The occasional woman who dogged a steer or rode a bronc was considered doing a man's job.

George Pfeiffer, UNL rodeo club sponsor, remembers a lady who rode saddle bronc in an exhibition.

"It was kind of sexist," Pfeiffer said. "They treated it a little like Mark Twain's talented dog, the one who could stand on his hind legs. You were surprised not that he could do it well, but that he could do it at all."

Pfeiffer said the woman was a spectacle.

Women simply were not taken seriously as participants. Indeed, barrel racing, the event most fans associate with women and rodeo, was added in 1945 as an afterthought; a chance for women to show off their sequins, instead of their abilities.

"Back then, femininity was held up most in mind," Moore said. "Now, the dress is much more casual."

And the women are much more serious, because a living can be made in the Women's Professional Rodeo Association.

"The top all-around cowgirl last year

earned \$51,000," Moore said.

Although barrel racing still is the standard women's event, and the only one on the men's pro rodeo circuit, the WPRA has 12 all-girl rodeos, with a final in Fort Worth, Texas, every year.

Along with barrel racing, college and amateur rodeos have incorporated additional women's events, like break-away calf roping and goat tying, an event similar to the throwing and tying of a calf, except with a goat.

Deb Walker, captain of the UNL women's team, participates in all three events and also does some team roping.

Walker says the qualities necessary for women's rodeo are a good horse and physical ability.

"You've got to keep the horse tuned up," Walker said. "Plus, it's just like any other sport, you've got to be in pretty good shape so you won't get injured."

When she was younger, Walker rode a steer at an all-girl's rodeo, but she said she does not plan to make it a habit.

"I think they're going away from the rough stock because it's so easy to get hurt," Walker said.

Moore agrees with Walker's assumption.

"The women aren't built to withstand the punishment," Moore said.

"Ropers and barrel racers can last for years, but the rough stock riders are around for only one or two."

Moore said new girls are not attracted to all-women rodeos because the purses are small.

"The biggest thing right now is to get equal money," said Glory Ann Kurtz, editor of the Women's Pro Rodeo News. "Only the 'daredevil' type of woman participates presently because the money isn't there."

Kurtz said times have changed, but not to the extent that rodeo is no longer a man's sport.

"Number-wise and event-wise, the men dominate," Kurtz said. "But women don't want to take over the sport. They just want a piece of the action."



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Clockwise from upper right: Rodeo clown Steve Mewry takes a break from the action. Rodeo performers prepare for upcoming events outside the Coliseum. Bronc-buster Shane Cowan of South Dakota State winces in pain after his saddle-bronc riding event. Cowan broke his foot when the horse he was riding rolled over on him. It's the end of the trail for this dismounted cowboy.

