

Rodeo and the Women's Barrel Racing Team at Cal Poly

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by

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1980 El Rodeo there is a picture captioned, “The smallest barrel racers in town.”¹ It is a picture of an Australian shepherd dog used in the herding events working the barrels with a monkey strapped to its back. It emphasizes the fact that barrel racing is always entertaining, especially with “smaller” barrel racers. This paper will look at the history of rodeo at California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo and how it affected student life. It will also look at a few different schools that had the capacity for a rodeo team. Rodeo has been an important sport for many years at Cal Poly and this paper will look at its growing popularity in the 1950s-60s and how gender played a role in the competition events. Rodeo was the front-runner for women sports and a progressive step forward to gender equality in athletics.

In general, to have a rodeo program on a college campus, the school needs enough room for horses and cattle. Some rodeo events don't require cattle, but team penning and bull riding require cattle. The Rodeo was a popular event at the Poly Royal Open House. It also went from being a club sport to being endorsed by the school directly and partially funded by the school. In the early 1960s, there is documentation of a women's barrel racing team as part of the rodeo team that also traveled to events. At this time women were beginning to be let back into the Cal Poly lifestyle, yet women had strict rules to follow that men did not. However, when it came to the rodeo, women could compete in barrel racing, helping them break from the strict rules and dress codes of the time.

The Rodeo is an integral part of Cal Poly's history. Rodeo started in 1939 as a club sport and didn't receive funding from the school until sometime in the 1950s when it increased in popularity. Women weren't allowed back into the school until the post-war period in 1956. This

¹1980 El Rodeo Yearbook, (California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo), pg. 68

paper will look at a series of questions. How popular was the Rodeo program through the years? What events caused it to become funded by the school? Why were women only allowed to participate in barrel racing and “calf-tying” and not other sports such as roping? What does this say about gender roles at Cal Poly in the 1960s? Was the women’s barrel racing a front-runner for women’s sports at Cal Poly?

These questions are important because the Rodeo goes back to the definition of Cal Poly as an agricultural school. This paper also looks into gender roles in sports right after women were allowed back at Cal Poly in 1956; the barrel racing team started in the year 1960. This topic on barrel racing is unique because there isn’t a lot of literature written about the Cal Poly rodeo specifically, and there is even less about the role women played with their barrel racing team. The information that does exist is about one person; or specific events in time, such as where the team competed, and who was on the team.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

The history of the rodeo is mostly told through Mustang Daily articles, El Mustang articles, and the El Rodeo yearbook. These newspaper articles focus on one point in time, and not on the continuing history of the rodeo. Some articles cover a single rodeo event, and others cover a whole rodeo at a time. One such article talks about three Cal Poly women competing for the title of rodeo queen. There are also some primary sources such as Poly Royal programs and Alumni reviews on the topic of the rodeo team. There is not a surplus of accessible information on barrel racers throughout history.

There is a thesis written about female barrel racers in Canada where Desirae Weninger talks about the gender roles in rodeo and how rodeo has historically been a male dominated

sport.² This particular thesis takes an in depth approach to the question of how gender roles affected women in the rodeo and more specifically women competing in barrel racing in Canada. Weninger explores the opinions and experiences of women barrel racers in professional rodeo and acknowledged that there is little information on the topic. There has also been a senior project about professional rodeo and if it should become a team sport. There are few books written about this topic, yet there are a few books who touch on gender roles in the rodeo. One such book is *College Rodeo*, by Sylvia Mahoney. Mahoney has “put together a comprehensive account of the history of college rodeo,” and lightly touched on gender roles in her section on “NIRA Creates a New Vision and a National Finals” where she discusses barrel racing briefly and when it became a part of NIRA.³ Another book that touches on gender roles is *Riding Pretty*, by Renée M. Laegreid who has put together a history of rodeo queens and how that title has adapted through the years. What started out as just a show with no horsemanship has turned into a competition that involves horsemanship and riding ability. *Rodeo in America* is another book that briefly touches on barrel racing in a few paragraphs. This book covers the later history of barrel racing starting in 1984,⁴ which isn’t entirely relevant to this paper. Another book that is somewhat relevant is *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, which covers professional rodeo and not college rodeo.⁵ There is little information specifically related to College Rodeo at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, which makes this paper unique to the topic.

² Desirea Weninger, “Subjectification of Female Barrel Racers.” 2015 Thesis, (University of Ottawa, Canada). Title page.

³ Sylvia Gann Mahoney, *College Rodeo* (Texas A & M University Press) pg. VII, XI

⁴ Wayne S. Wooden, Gavin Ehringer. *Rodeo in America*. (University Press of Kansas) 1996, pg. 190-199

⁵ Mary Lou LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*.

COLLEGE RODEO AND NIRA

Cal Poly competed in its first intercollegiate rodeo on April 8, 1939.⁶ NIRA (the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association) became an official unified program in the late 1950s. NIRA was an important part of the college rodeo lifestyle. Several other universities such as Texas A & M, Eastern New Mexico University, University of Wyoming, University of Idaho, Colorado State University, Fresno State, and many others were a part of NIRA in the 1960s.⁷ All of these schools had the capacity to have a rodeo team. This meant that these schools had a decent amount of land to be able to have livestock and horses.

NIRA began in the 1950s, but became firmly established in the year 1960. Mahoney, the author of *College Rodeo*, states that there was a significant change in NIRA here, “The fourth change [amendment] expanded the point-award events to include the girls’ barrel race and the optional girls’ event.”⁸ 1960 was the year that barrel racing was officially added as an event by NIRA. It meant a progressive step forward for college rodeo. Women could now compete on almost equal ground with the men in rodeo. Women could compete in barrel racing, but were still referred to as girls and not women.

The first official college rodeo team at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo was formed in 1947⁹, but women were not involved in the program until the 1960. The rodeo at Cal Poly was around before an official team was created though. It has been an important part of Cal Poly history for many long years. There was also a certain stereotype for “Aggies” at Cal Poly. It wasn’t necessarily a negative stereotype for the members of the rodeo team, but it was there

⁶ Nick Wilson. “Cal Poly celebrates 75 years of rodeo.” *The Tribune*, (San Luis Obispo, California). March 18th, 2015. pg. 3

⁷ Mahoney, *College Rodeo* pg. 82, 83

⁸ Mahoney, *College Rodeo* pg. 80-81

⁹ Poly Viewpoint, December 5, 1966

nonetheless. This stereotype is seen in a cartoon in the April 17, 1964 *El Mustang* student newspaper. It portrays a dorm room with bull horns on the wall, a cow skin rug, a pair of cowboy boots, and a rope on the set of drawers, with the caption, “How’d you know my roomie was an Aggie?”¹⁰ The stereotype was based in fact with the cowboy boots and rope, but the cow skin rug might be a bit of a stretch for what an Aggie’s room actually looked like. In reality, a cowboy was dedicated to the sport, and would practice often to maintain a professional representation of the school when competing.

Cal Poly’s rodeo team started to gain popularity and awards in the 1950s and early 1960s. Rodeo had always been a somewhat important program at Cal Poly, but it went specifically into the spotlight with Cotton Rosser’s success as a member of the Cal Poly rodeo team. Cotton Rosser won the title of “national all round champion” in 1951. Because of his success, the rodeo program made the first page of the *El Mustang* on May 18, 1951.¹¹ His success in NIRA and at Cal Poly led to the eventual installation of rodeo as an official sport at Cal Poly. The rodeo team’s success led to the eventual installation of barrel racing and women in rodeo. The women’s barrel racing team was a new concept for sports at Cal Poly.

GENDER ROLES AT CAL POLY IN THE 1960s

Gender roles at Cal Poly were directly related to the women’s barrel racing team. Women on the team still had to conform to these gender roles, but they had more leniencies because they had a sport they needed to practice for. Gender roles in the 1960s were far different than today’s Cal Poly. Women were first allowed back into Cal Poly in 1956, after nearly 30 years without them. Women were referred to as Coeds, girls and other terms and were not often

¹⁰ “How’d you know my roomie was an Aggie?” *El Mustang*, April 17, 1964 pg. 2

¹¹ Bob McKellar, “Rosser Upsets Harley May for National Rodeo Honors.” *El Mustang*, May 18, 1951, pg. 1

called women. Women were also under strict curfews in the 1960s, while the men did not have such curfews. Women could not leave their dormitories after a certain time of day. They could not leave campus without permission either.¹²

Rodeo was a sport that women could compete in for once. They were somewhat restricted by what events they could do, but they had more freedom with participating in rodeo. They did not have to conform to the expectations put in place by the university, such as following a strict dress code and set of rules. However the language used to refer to women in rodeo was still slightly sexist. This is seen in the title of a particular article about the competition for rodeo queen in the April 2, 1969 Mustang Daily. The title of the article reads “Pretty coeds exhibit skills.”¹³ This article title is clearly sexist and barely implies that the article has anything to do with rodeo. The article title does not suggest that the girls are going to be getting dusty as they ride for victory in a couple of different events including barrel racing. “As an added attraction the girls were asked to end their performance with an entrance to the arena, ‘rodeo queen style’.”¹⁴ This quote illustrates that the women were being called “girls” and they were there to put on a performance that the men would not be expected to do.

Rodeo queens also enhanced strict gender roles at Cal Poly. This term’s meaning has changed through the years, but at Cal Poly in the 1960s, the term referred to the cowgirl who got top honors, or the most points in the rodeo queen competition during the rodeo. Rodeo queens in the 1930s had to prove that they could actually ride instead of just sitting pretty on top of a horse during a parade.¹⁵ These new obligations led to pictures of rodeo queens riding rearing horses, which shows off their riding skills. This new trend in the 1930s led to the rodeo queens at Cal

¹² “Campus Cues”

¹³ “Pretty Coeds exhibit skills,” *Mustang Daily*, April 2, 1969, pg. 1.

¹⁴ “Pretty Coeds exhibit skills,” pg. 1

¹⁵ Renée M. Laegreid, *Riding Pretty* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press) 2006, pg. 98

Poly being able to actually ride. Later in the 1960s at Cal Poly, barrel racers could compete for the title of rodeo queen. Before women were allowed back into Cal Poly, there was still the title of rodeo queen, but the queen did not have to have specific riding skills.

Barrel racers also realized that there was a dress code for the rodeo. Although the women involved in barrel racing were not wearing skirts, they were still expected to uphold the professionalism as someone representing the school. Along with jeans, they would be wearing nice button up shirts, a belt and cowboy boots along with a cowboy hat. It was also the first instance in the 1960s of women being allowed to wear pants instead of following the strict dress code of dresses and skirts. They were representing the school, and had to live up to the expectation of being professional while competing. A woman was expected to wear skirts or dresses all of the time in the 1960s. However, the women competing on the Women's Barrel Racing Team wore pants so they could properly compete without a skirt impeding their movement. This change in gender roles with the women's participation in rodeo was a new concept in the conservative 1960s.

WOMEN INVOLVED WITH THE CAL POLY RODEO TEAM

Carla Jean Kaufman is a name that continues to appear in records. She was a very talented barrel racer and was also gifted in calf-tying. She won the title of all around cowgirl in 1959 because of her earlier successes.¹⁶ She is one of the frontrunners for successful women involved in sports. On the rodeo team, women could only compete in barrel racing and calf-tying, but they were able to compete. Rodeo as a sport, was dominated by men, yet women could now compete as near equals.

¹⁶ "Coed takes Honors at Arizona Rodeo" *El Mustang*. (California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo), November 20, 1959, pg. 4

Barbara Baer was another woman who was a part of the Women's Barrel Racing Team in the late 1960s. She competed against four other "cowgirls" in 1966 for the title of rodeo queen. She participated in barrel racing in 1969 as well when the Cal Poly rodeo team was suffering in popularity.¹⁷ However she was a very skilled barrel racer because she won first place at the rodeo at University of Arizona in Tucson in 1967.¹⁸ She also took home a second place for barrel racing at the nationals in Sacramento in the year of 1968.¹⁹

Sharon Meffan was another barrel racer in the 1960s. She was the runner-up for the 1969 NIRA. She was also a talented barrel racer who helped get the third place nationally for the Cal Poly women's barrel racing team in the 1968-69 season.²⁰ These women were a part of the first generation of women's sports at Cal Poly.

BARREL RACING AS A WOMEN'S SPORT

At Cal Poly, there was a women's barrel racing team that began to appear in the 1960s after women were allowed to enroll in Cal Poly again. Barrel racing was seen as a women's sport, probably because it was more predictable than bronc riding and working with full-sized cattle. Cattle can be extremely unpredictable, especially when they are angry. This is a reason that only men compete in bull riding and bronc riding.

Barrel racing specifically deals with three barrels and no cattle. The rider must go around the three barrels in a cloverleaf pattern as fast as they can. The time starts when the first whistle blows and stops when the rider passes the finish line, which is across from the middle barrel. Time plays an important part in the event because it dictates which cowgirl wins first place. If a barrel is knocked over, the rider is docked points. Barrel racing was originally developed as a

¹⁷ "Rodeo team drops title" *The Mustang student newspaper*, July 2, 1969 pg. 4

¹⁸ "Rodeo teams rope firsts" *Mustang Daily*, November 15, 1967, pg. 4

¹⁹ "Rodeo team lassoes sixth place in finals" *Mustang Daily*, July 12, 1968, pg 4

²⁰ "Rodeo team competing in Redding for opener." *Mustang Daily*, October 15, 1969, pg. 4

women's sport in the 1940s, and started out with two patterns. These patterns were the cloverleaf pattern and the figure-eight pattern. The figure-eight pattern was dropped somewhere along the line and the cloverleaf pattern is the official pattern to make it a little more difficult to maneuver around the three barrels. The rider may choose which of the two barrels closest to her to start with, but she has to complete the correct pattern to get full points. Overall the points are based on the fastest time, and there are few mistakes besides falling off or knocking a barrel.

Barrel racing was seen as an entertaining but somewhat difficult sport because the horse had to make three sharp turns to successfully navigate around the barrels. However it successfully got women directly involved in the rodeo. "Barrel racing is the contest that has put girls in arenas all over the country."²¹ This sentence from the February 7, 1969 *Mustang Daily*, enhances the stance that rodeo was the front-runner for women's sports. It also shows that women were written about in student publications as "girls" in the 1960s. They were still referred to as girls even though it was 1969, and not listed as women. Barrel racing has been popular for a long time because it is a "crowd favorite right behind bull riding."²² It has always been an entertaining sport because of the high speed that the horse and cowgirl are riding at. Bull riding is more dangerous because cattle are extremely unpredictable. Therefore barrel racing was slightly safer than bull riding because horses are generally more predictable.

Barrel racing is a unique sport because it isn't completely separated from the men's portion of the rodeo. The women's barrel racing team at Cal Poly was still a part of the rodeo team, and was a front-runner for women's sports. Other sports are specifically segregated into,

²¹ "Barrel Racing demands good skills and a strong, maneuverable horse." *Mustang Daily*, February 7, 1969, pg 4.

²² Wooden, Ehringer. *Rodeo in America*, 1996, pg. 190.

for example, women's soccer and men's soccer.²³ The same is true for baseball and softball, two different sports that are gender specific and segregated as such. Barrel racing also requires a lot of practice to get the quick turns right and as fast as possible to win a first place. "A barrel racer must showcase her strong work ethic at all times;"²⁴ this statement furthers the argument that barrel racing is not an easy sport and requires the ability to be an excellent rider before approaching barrel racing. Barrel racing was a step forward towards gender equality at Cal Poly.

CONCLUSION

The rodeo team is an important part of Cal Poly's history. The rodeo team may have started out small, but it is now a popular event and sport at Cal Poly. Their successes in the late 1950s led to the team becoming funded by the school. This success led to the creation of the women's barrel racing team that became a popular part of the Cal Poly rodeo program. The women's barrel racing team was also a front-runner for women in sports at Cal Poly. Other sports, such as track and field had records of a women's team as late as 1997.²⁵ Softball records first appeared in 2006,²⁶ and women's soccer was first recorded in 1992.²⁷ All of these sports came decades after women's barrel racing at Cal Poly.

Gender roles were also a prominent subject at Cal Poly in the 1960s because of the dress code for girls and their stricter rules. Women had many more restrictions than men in the 1960s. Even though there were strict rules to follow, women managed to break free somewhat from them and participate in rodeo where they could not logically wear skirts or dresses. To properly

²³ Weninger, "Subjectification ...Barrel Racers," pg. 47

²⁴ Weninger, "Subjectification ...Barrel Racers." pg. 48

²⁵ <http://www.calpolymustangs.com/sports/track/Archives>. Accessed March 11, 2016

²⁶ <http://www.calpolymustangs.com/sports/sball/archive>. Accessed March 11, 2016

²⁷ <http://www.gopoly.com/sports/wsoc/Archives>. Accessed March 11, 2016

compete, they needed jeans. However, they still upheld a dress code and a sense of professionalism when competing. They were representing Cal Poly on a public sphere.

The women's barrel racing team has become a significant part of the rodeo team and barrel racing is still well loved today. Women in the 1960s had to work hard to accomplish the titles of rodeo queen and all around cowgirl. They also had to overcome the stereotype that girls in the 1960s must wear skirts. Stereotypes aside, the barrel racing team was allowed to travel with the rodeo team even in the 1960s to events put on by NIRA. These events helped publicize the rodeo team and the barrel racing team at Cal Poly. Barrel racing is a difficult sport and requires discipline and practice from the rider. She must practice long hours to get to first place in barrel racing. Barrel racing is based on how fast a cowgirl rides, and is therefore very entertaining and an important part of the rodeo team.

There were also several other schools that were able to compete against Cal Poly such as Eastern New Mexico University, Texas A & M, and several others. Cal Poly generally competed in the nationals for several different years and have taken home 45 titles overall.²⁸ This includes the barrel racing team and in general. Cal Poly's rodeo team has a rather successful history when it comes to taking home titles and belt buckles.

As time passed however, women were allowed to participate in other events. Women now compete in roping and other events they were once excluded from. They now also outnumber the men on the rodeo team. As of 2015, there were 32 women and 18 men on the Cal Poly rodeo team.²⁹ What started out as a small amount of women barrel racing, has turned into a large number of women competing on the Cal Poly rodeo team. The rodeo team will hopefully continue to be an important part of Cal Poly and its athletic program for years to come.

²⁸ Wilson. "Poly celebrates 75 years of rodeo," pg. 3

²⁹ Wilson. "Poly celebrates 75 years of rodeo," pg 2.

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