

Los Angeles Times

'Ride' Takes Refreshing Look at Female Rodeo Legends



By ROBERT KOEHLER
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Cowgirls used to ride alongside the boys in rodeos, until politics and a couple of deaths came along in 1929 to lasso the whole adventure.

Almost.

Amanda Micheli's film for the "P.O.V." series, "Just for the Ride," is out to declare that women bronc riders continue to buck tradition, expectations and the reasoned opinions of their doctors and surgeons.

Like many of her subjects, Micheli's personal document is cool and slightly flinty on the surface but warm and sympathetic underneath.

Micheli, who shot on location in New Mexico, Montana and Oklahoma while still studying at Harvard, injects the work with the urge to loosen her East Coast propriety for some Western wildness. Trained in highly controlled English-style horse riding, she realizes while filming such female rodeo legends as Fern Sawyer and Jan Youren that they have enveloped their lives in the rush of physical extremes.

Few things are more cinematically rapturous than a bucking bronc rider at full throttle, and the images here send us into the rush.

"Just for the Ride" doesn't insult us by using these personal stories as a metaphor for feminist liberation (though Micheli can't resist noting that Youren's 1994 winnings as women's world champ are about \$3,000 to the men's \$100,000). It simply strives to show the women as they really are: Sawyer is filmed just before her death at 76, a grand showoff wearing spandex and strutting at state fairs; Youren is more a blue-collar, play-with-pain grinder contesting with two dislocated shoulders.

Perhaps it's because of Sawyer's

and Youren's places in the Cowboy Hall of Fame, but no one—refreshingly—ever questions why these women are playing such bone- and life-crunching games. For the older women, it's been their lives for so long that there's no other life to consider. For younger ones like Micheli, it's "like grabbing hold of a freight train." The thrill recycles itself, from generation to generation.

■ "Just for the Ride" airs at 10 tonight on KCET-TV Channel 28.

Los Angeles Times
Los Angeles, CA
July 23, 1996.

P.O.V.