

Eye on TV

Rodeo spirit infuses cowgirl documentary

By JERRY KRUPNICK

It's one thing for a filmmaker to tag along after her heroes and heroines and record their derring-do from a box seat. For Amanda Micheli, who admittedly grew up horse crazy, it was another to climb onto a bronco and experience first hand what that adrenalin rush was all about.

Micheli, with love and reverence and a solid sense of humor, does just that in "Just for the Ride," her point-of-view tribute to the legendary cowgirls of the old and modern-day West. This latest "P.O.V." saddles up for Channel 13 tonight at 10, and you don't have to be a rodeo fan to have a good time with this high-spirited documentary.

Micheli, who confesses she has always dreamed of being a cowgirl, headed West for this first film attempt and hooked up with two of the most legendary of women rodeo riders, following them from arena to arena as they demonstrated that women could compete as well and with as many thrills as the cowboys they rode beside.

Chief among these cowgirls was Fern Sawyer, who at 76 and still wearing spandex and gold leather, carried the American flag at rodeos for 20-odd years, while continuing to work calves on her New Mexico ranch.



Legendary cowgirls such as Jan Youren are the subject of Amanda Micheli's film airing at 10 tonight on 'P.O.V.' over Channel 13.

Star-Ledger
Newark, NJ
July 23, 1996. 1 of 2.

P.O.V.

In her heyday, Sawyer and her sister cowgirls were on an equal status with the menfolk, busting horses and riding bulls and taking the same daring risks side by side. However, after a fatal accident to one of the cowgirls, attitudes changed and the women were dropped from the main events, to be used mostly as glamor girls and trick riders at the various rodeo venues.

Thanks to Sawyer and a handful of others, however, the women in 1947 formed their own association (the oldest professional female athletic group in the United States) and organized "all-girl rodeos" so that they could continue to ride 'em, cowgirls.

Sawyer, who had two heart attacks and two hip replacements, tells the filmmaker as they drive from event to event in her special "Fern" Cadillac, "They say you're stupid if you're satisfied with your life. Well then, I'm stupid."

Showing off her huge wardrobe of custom-made cowboy boots in every conceivable color, made to match her most flamboyant of rodeo outfits, she adds, "When I was roping calves, I didn't come out in Levis. I didn't want to look like a man.

"I should've had a facelift a long time ago, but I'm not that vain. I never was good looking, so I didn't bother." As one of her daughters says admiringly, while examining the closet full of spangled and eye-boggling clothes, "It takes a lot of guts to wear Spandex at 70."

In 1993, this most legendary of all cowgirls died of a final heart attack as she must surely have wanted to, on horseback. But her memory rides on, and she is still honored at rodeos around the world for her achievements.

Micheli, with the dust of the arena mingling with the stardust in her eyes, next travels to Idaho to meet up with five-time national champion Jan You-

ren — mother of eight, grandmother of 38 — who has ridden broncs and bulls for 38 years and broken nearly every bone in her body.

"What keeps you doing it?" Micheli asks in pure wonder.

"I have a short memory," Youren responds. "I don't remember how bad it hurts."

Then, we watch along with this filmmaker aficionado as Youren wins her sixth Women's World Championship at the age of 51, after coming this close the year before despite two dislocated shoulders.

Jan recalls her first rodeo, when she was 12 years old and rode a horse called Meathead. "I was placing (among the top riders), she says, "and I had the big head fever. I really thought I was hot stuff."

Then the horse threw her and she came down face first with a mouthful of dirt. "He showed me real quick," she remembers, "there's always one you can't ride."

Finally, Micheli can't stand her passive role any longer. She enrolls in Jan's rodeo riding school and learns the basics, including how to roll away from the horse and realize that the dirt is her best friend.

When she feels she's ready, Amanda joins her mentor as they both enter into the bronc riding at a small rodeo.

"Bronc riding is like grabbing hold of a freight train," she says breathlessly after hanging on in her first ride for the requisite six seconds. "It's the wildest rush of adrenalin, speed and power... and then reality bites when you hit the dirt, and it's an accomplishment just to be able to walk away and give it another try."

For her efforts, she won prize money of two bucks and change, while Youren, the rodeo's big winner, was awarded \$200. Obviously, these women don't do it for the money.

"Just for the Ride" is certainly worth a try all by itself. We wouldn't advise you to try it at home, but the film is exciting and revealing about a subject most of us have never thought about before. Yee-hah!

Star-Ledger
Newark, NJ
July 23, 1996. 2 of 2.

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