

ARTS

Remarkable women of the rodeo get a good 'Ride' in documentary

By Valerie Scher
STAFF WRITER

Cowgirls were the heroes of my childhood imagination," says documentary filmmaker Amanda Micheli.

And in her first film, begun while she was a 20-year-old Harvard University student, Micheli meets rodeo champions Fern Sawyer and Jan Youren, and becomes a cowgirl herself.

"Just for the Ride" — airing at 11 p.m. today on KPBS — is an illuminating tribute to grit and gumption, a stirring salute to female rodeo riders who are overlooked and underpaid, compared to their glorified male colleagues.

This is a show for anyone with an appreciation for rodeo, female role models, and fine documentary filmmaking. Those who identify with the 23-year-old Micheli — who learned the ultra-controlled English style of riding as a child but became a Western convert — may want to tape the program and watch it again, with horse-crazy friends.

Micheli occasionally overdoes the stoicism, as when a bull crashes into a fence, knocking her, and the camera, to the ground. It was a harrowing fall, though in true cowgirl fashion, she never tells us about her bruises.

Through the use of newsreels, interviews, and visits to ranches, rodeos and the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame (now moving from Hereford, Texas, to Fort Worth), "Just for the Ride" chronicles a proud tradition that harks back to Annie Oakley.

As the program points out, women competed with men in rodeos in



Rodeo model, Fern Sawyer, all-round champion in the first professional "all-girl" rodeo in 1947, died literally in the saddle during filming of a documentary to be seen on KPBS.

TV REVIEW

"Just for the Ride"

A one-hour documentary by Amanda Micheli, presented on the PBS independent film series "P.O.V." 11 p.m. today, KPBS, Channel 15.

★★★★

the early years of the century. But after a female rodeo rider was killed in 1929, women were banned from bronc riding and gradually consigned to less dangerous events, such as barrel racing.

Cowgirls, however, were not deterred. In 1948, they formed what was to become the Women's Pro Rodeo Association, the oldest organization of professional female athletes in the U.S.

Sawyer — who died during the making of "Just for the Ride," at age 76 — was the all-round champion in the first professional "all-girl" rodeo in 1947, a year before the association's founding.

Considered the greatest cowgirl in New Mexico's history, she drove a sky-blue Cadillac Eldorado with "FERN" license plates and tended

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Rodeo

Women can't make as much money as men

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cattle on her New Mexico ranch, despite two heart attacks and two hip replacements. She also gave tours of her walk-in closet, packed with glittery rodeo outfits and custom-made boots.

"When I was roping calves in rodeos, I wore my best clothes," says Sawyer, resplendent in Spandex. "I didn't want to look like a man."

Word of her fatal heart attack — which occurred on horseback, just as she would have wanted — adds a special pathos to the documentary. Missing her, Micheli seeks out the

remarkable Youren, a four-times-married mother of eight and grandmother of 37 who's a national roughstock rodeo champion.

Youren logs more than 70,000 miles annually driving to rodeos. But so low are the winnings that she earned only \$3,700 in 1984 while men won many times that amount.

She has competed with a broken back, busted ribs, dislocated shoulders and countless other impediments. Yet instead of being a masochistic martyr, the 51-year-old Youren is a vision of cheerful tenacity, who finds bliss on a bucking horse.

"Just for the Ride" makes us feel the tension in the bucking chute and

sense the intensity of trying to stay on a gyrating horse for a seemingly interminable six seconds.

"Bronc riding is like grabbing hold of a freight train," says Micheli, who attends Youren's Idaho rodeo school. "It's the wildest rush of adrenaline, speed and power, and then reality bites when you hit the dirt."

Entering a bronc-riding competition in Muskogee, Okla., she comes away with \$3.78 in prize money and "a very sore back."

It matters not. "Just for the Ride" is still a marvelous romp. Get a leg up, and see for yourself.