



## Rodeo is rounding up more girls than ever

BY BREANNE GILPATRICK THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DAVIE -- Seconds before the red iron rodeo gate swings open, 17-year-old Leanne Hamrick holds her breath and tries to focus on the calf she is about to rope.

She has been awake since 5:30 a.m., and the adrenaline is pumping so hard she cannot even hear her mother cheering. She thinks about keeping her roping elbow high, pushing her hip out of the way and keeping her eyes on that calf.

Then, less than a minute later, it is over.

"I don't even remember half of it," Hamrick said.

Throughout Florida, young women like Hamrick, of Fort Pierce, have been swinging their lassos at rodeo events long dominated by men. To compete in steer riding and calf roping, they say, takes strength, bravery -- and a high threshold for pain.

"In calf roping ... if you jump off your horse and twist your ankle, you have to be able to handle the pain," Hamrick said.

Traditional women's rodeo events include barrel racing and pole bending, in which riders guide their horses around a series of barrels or between a line of poles. More than 100 women are members of the Homestead Everglades Posse Mounted Drill Team, whose riders lead their horses through different formations each year at the Homestead Championship Rodeo. And many women compete for Rodeo Queen honors, winning a satin sash and a silver crown to perch atop their cowboy hats.

But in the past few years, some have decided that rodeo should be an equal opportunity sport.

"Girls are just as competitive as men," said Dolli Lautaret, a member of the Women's Professional Rodeo Association who competes along with her 32-year-old daughter. "We like to compete as much as they do. And we want to win just as much."

Nationally, the Women's Professional Rodeo Association is looking at ways to promote the sport's rougher events.

In Davie, women from around the state competed this summer in the Tiffany Doctor Memorial All-Girl Rodeo series. For three weekends, competitors surrounded the Bergeron Rodeo Grounds with pickup trucks and horse trailers. Riders stood on the grass outside and practiced roping sawhorses or plastic dummies, the afternoon heat baking riders in their jeans, long-sleeved collared shirts and cowboy hats.

Others focused on coating their ropes with baby powder -- to reduce friction as the rope glides through the hands -- and keeping themselves and their horses cool as pens full of steers, calves and goats kicked up dirt nearby.

When Gwen Roberts, of Davie, started competing in rodeos more than 20 years ago, few women were taking the reins, especially in calf roping and steer riding.

She said it surprises her how many female steer riders she sees now.

"Eight years ago, you didn't see any girls ride steers," said Roberts, from the saddle of her brother's horse. "And so that's something that's becoming noticed. These women ride the bulls."

Most of the new female competitors are younger, like Hamrick. At the professional level, only a handful of women are registered to compete in traditionally male events, according to the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association.

But girls outnumber boys in the Florida Junior Rodeo Association, which includes youngsters through middle school, said Ron Westberry, the association's president and father of three daughters who ride rodeo.

Fifteen-year-old Kelsea Nodal decided she wanted to try roping a couple of years ago, after seeing other girls do it at one of Davie's Wednesday night rodeos.

"I was like, 'Where'd she learn to rope? I want to rope,'" said Nodal, who has been competing since she was 8.

Pamela Noakes, executive director of the National Association of Girls and Women in Sport, said girls often try a new sport after female superstars lead the way.

Mia Hamm is soccer's prime example, and Lisa Leslie is an inspiration for women in basketball.

"I think that really contributes to the success of the sport," Noakes said.

Kaila Mussell is rodeo's Mia Hamm.

Mussell, of Stephenville, Texas, became a professional bronco rider in 2000. She is the only professional female bronco rider registered in the United States and Canada.

And although some people still watch her in disbelief, others send her e-mails saying they want to follow in her bootsteps.

"More than anything, it's the challenge of the event and to go out there and prove that you're just as capable as anyone else," said Mussell, 29. "It's an equality thing."

The rougher events can be painful. As a calf and goat roper, Hamrick has torn open the palms of her hands with her rope and loosened a tooth as she grabbed her tying string from her mouth.

But she is used to bumps and bruises. She grew up surrounded by boys and never let them try something without her.

"When I was little, my mom and dad's friends all had boys," Hamrick said. "So I always looked at it as I had to do what they did. I couldn't show any weakness."