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Horses: How Saddle Style Defines a Culture and the Skeletal System

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Horses and Humans:

The Cultural and Biological Effects of the Western Rodeo

Elizabeth Brandon

ABSTRACT

Throughout history different cultures have been greatly impacted by horses and their uses. Today horseback riding is still a very popular sport, and though it is more dangerous than other forms of transportation, such as motorcycle riding, horseback riding is still used in entertainment, occupational, and leisure activities. Saddles have long been an important piece of equipment for riding. As the horse became a mode of transportation, many cultures had their own saddle style, but today there are two prominent saddle styles, the western and english styles. The western saddle style is used more for leisure, occupational, and rodeo riding. The research makes it clear that riders can be affected by injury from this riding style. This paper will look at different variables such as: gender, saddle, type of riding, and training and compare how each can affect the injuries riders may sustain.

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Introduction:

The horse has been a part of the history of human societies for thousands of years. Whether horses were used as a source of food, a mode of transportation, or in war, there have been archaeological and historic records of their uses and importance in many different cultures starting as far back as Bronze Age Mesopotamia. Horses were used in war in many different cultures, from the ancient Greeks and Romans with their chariots, to knights in Western Europe and also in cultures of southern to northern Africa. Today, horses are primarily used for agriculture/livestock occupational purposes and entertainment; the development and consequences for riders and horses alike from the latter will be the focus of this paper. In particular, one large entertainment industry that has risen relatively recently from horse culture is the rodeo. In this paper I will focus on the transformation of uses of horses and, more specifically, on the cultural and biological effects of the rodeo in modern human history.

History of the Horse in Entertainment:

One of the more well known early examples of horse entertainment comes from the Middle Ages. In medieval Europe, knights would have tournaments to practice and prove their skill in battle, which transformed from competition to crowd entertainment. These tournaments would involve swordplay, as well as competitions with other weapons used in melee combat that could occur both on foot or mounted, and jousting on horseback (Jankovich, 1968). Jousting involves two mounted knights charging each other with lances. The goal is to knock the

opposing knight off of their horse without being struck by that knight's lance. This was used to demonstrate a knight's skill in battle as in real life scenarios, pikemen were used to stop advancing footmen and cavalry with their long spears (Anthony, 2011). If a knight could successfully break through the line of pikemen, then foot soldiers and other knights on horseback could break through. While this is very practical skill to master for warfare, it also provided great entertainment for the rulers and the spectator public. This form of competition was seen all across medieval Western Europe. Currently, it is purely a form of entertainment portrayed in popular media and in niche settings like renaissance festivals.

Other forms of entertainment developed from the jousting competitions of the Middle Ages that were originally used to showcase a knight's skill. Some of these forms of entertainment on horseback include dressage, show, and various types horseback racing. These show the skill and speed of the horse. Several types of racing exist, ranging from flat racing, to dressage, and even to long distance cross-country racing. Each different style shows a different skill that the horse possesses, whether it is endurance, speed, or agility.

Horses In The Americas:

After the Middle Ages, the use of horses in entertainment began to spread. Not only were horse events found in Europe, but also Asia and Africa. It wasn't until explorers came to the New World that horses were even introduced to the Americas. It is thought that horses were first introduced to the Americas during Spanish

colonization. Two prominent theories exist on how horses were able to populate in the Americas.

One theory is that the mid-16th century conquistadors Coronado and DeSoto abandoned some of their horses in the Great Plains region (Haines, 1938). This theory is more than likely incorrect due to several reasons. Early Spaniards had very detailed records about their horses, so it would not have gone unnoticed that a large number of horses had gone missing. It would be very unlikely that more than two or three horses would have escaped, been lost, or abandoned and not noticed. Another flaw in this theory is that if two horses had been lost or abandoned, the chances of a herd forming from such a small number is not very high (Haines, 1938). With a new environment comes new diseases and predators. If a new disease were to infect these two horses, their immune systems would have not had any chance to build up immunity, thus making their chance for survival slim. If this herd were to survive the new diseases and predators, there would be a large amount of inbreeding that would likely cause defects and cause the herd to die out (Haines, 1938).

Another theory is that in the early 1600's while Oñate was in the Great Plains region looking for gold, he and his men were creating stock out of horses at the settlements they had created (Haines, 1938). In the Santa Fe, Texas area, Oñate and his men were most likely caring for the horses and showing the Native Americans their importance and the multiple uses they had. It would have been important for Oñate and his men to show the Native Americans how to care for the horses (Haines, 1938). For this reason, this theory is thought to be more likely than the first. Horses were thought to have begun to be distributed after 1600 and probably not regularly

used by Native Americans until after 1650 (Haines, 1938). These horses were more than likely introduced to the Native Americans in the area around Santa Fe, TX (Haines, 1938). From there they would have spread out across the Great Plains region of the United States. After becoming such a reliable mode of transportation and useful for hunting, the horse stayed an important part of culture in the Great Plains region.

History of the Rodeo:

The rodeo gets its roots from ranch work done in Mexico and America in the 1700's by Spanish *vaqueros*, livestock herders that used horses to aid in this purpose (Meyers, 2012). There were many informal local competitions, in which *vaqueros* and cowboys, the American version of the Spanish *vaquero*, alike could demonstrate their skills in ranching, including roping and wrestling livestock as well as breaking horses. Today these could be shown in the different roping, wrestling, and riding events discussed later in this paper.

Although it grew in popularity in the U.S., it was not until 1929 that rodeo became an officially organized sport. "By the 1930s, championships were determined, and the sport of rodeo surpassed baseball, and auto racing in spectator attendance" (Meyers, 2012, 419). From there its popularity took off and now rodeos can be found in cities all over the country from California to New York. Even Canada has rodeos in Calgary, Alberta.

Until 1949, the competition was limited to grown men that had chosen this sport as a career. It was then that it became a collegiate sport under the National

Intercollegiate Rodeo Association (Meyers, 2012). Shortly thereafter it became popular with children and young adults in 1961 with the formation the National High School Rodeo Association and the National Little Britches Rodeo Association (Meyers, 2012).

According to Meyers (2012), rodeos often include roughstock riding, steer wrestling, and roping for male competitors. For female competitors there is team roping, which can be mixed gender, and barrel racing. More recently team roping has become a very popular event. Both men and women can compete in team roping and teams can be comprised of all men, all women, or mixed gender. This is new for the rodeo culture, as it has historically been represented as a male-dominated sport.

Rodeo Events:

In this section the rodeo events that are focused on in this paper will be stated and defined. In order to have a better understanding of how a rider can be affected physiologically by injury, the nature of the sport itself must first be understood. The most well known events in rodeo come from rough stock riding. This includes bull riding, bareback bronco riding, and saddle bronco riding.

In bull riding, a rodeo participant sits upon an angry bull. The goal of the rider is to stay on as long as possible while the bull is bucking and the rider may only use one hand to hold on to the bull. Previously, the time required to stay on was ten seconds, but the current required time is only eight seconds (“Rodeo”, 2014). This change in time requirement came about so it would be more similar to

bronco riding. Both the bull and the rider are given scores. The bull is scored on how it bucked. If it had no pattern of movement then the score would be higher and if the bull bucked in a straight line the score would be lower. This is because if the bull moves in a straight line, it is less difficult for the rider to stay on. The rider is also scored on making the time requirement, his posture and form, and the way he moves with the animal. While this event does not involve horses, it does use a saddle and riding techniques similar to that used in bronco riding. Bull riding is also one of the most popular events in modern rodeos (Meyers, 2012). This event often brings in the most spectators and is important to the economic factors that rodeos have on communities. These economic factors and more on rodeo culture will be discussed later in this paper.



Bull Riding (Connelly, 2013)

In bareback bronco riding, a rodeo cowboy sits, without a saddle, upon a horse. The rider can only use one hand and must stay on for eight seconds (“Event Descriptions”, n.d.). With only a leather strap that resembles the handle on a suitcase (“Event Descriptions”, n.d.) the rider must use a great amount of upper body strength to stay on the horse. The time, movement of the horse, and the

movement and control of the rider are all factored into the overall score (“Event Descriptions”, n.d.).



Bareback Bronc Riding (“Cheyenne Frontier Days,” 2011)

In saddle bronc riding there is only a one handed grip. This is very similar to the bareback bronc riding. Again, the rider and horse both receive scores via an identical system as the bareback bronco event. The goal is to stay on while the horse bucks for at least eight seconds. While a saddle used, there is no horn and the stirrups are more flexible so that the rider can move easier with the horse (“Rodeo”, 2014).



Saddle Bronc Riding (Cohen, 2012)

The next category of rodeo events is roping and wrestling. This often refers to cattle. Goat roping is an event, but it is not as popular in the professional circuit. In this category there is steer roping, steer wrestling, calf roping, and team roping. All of these events begin with the rider on horseback (“Rodeo”, 2014).

In calf roping the rodeo participant is mounted on a horse. The goal is to rope a calf, dismount, and tie three of the calf’s legs together in the shortest amount of time possible. The rider and the horse chase after the calf after it is released from its stall. Once the calf is released the time starts and the rider must wait until the breakaway rope has broken (“Event Descriptions”, n.d.). In steer roping, which is relatively similar, the rodeo participant is mounted on a horse and the goal is to rope a steer by the horns and trip it. Once the steer has fallen, the rider must dismount and tie three of the steer’s legs together in the shortest amount of time possible. Again, the horse and rider must wait until the steer has been released and then they may try to rope the steer (“Event Descriptions”, n.d.).

Team roping is similar to steer and calf roping in that the riders are mounted on horses. The major difference is that two riders need to use teamwork and perfect timing to rope a steer (“Event Descriptions”, n.d.). The riders are called the header and the heeler (“Event Descriptions”, n.d.). The header will do the initial roping and will catch the steer around both of the horns. The heeler’s job is to then rope the hind legs (“Event Descriptions”, n.d.). Only the hind legs may be roped, so if the second rider ropes the steer around the back or anywhere else, then the score will be negatively affected. Again the goal is to do this in the shortest time possible. This is an interesting event as it is the only one out of all those mentioned

previously in which both genders can participate. There can be both single gender and mixed gender teams competing in the same event.



Team Roping ("Team Roping", 2015)

In steer wrestling, a rider starts mounted on a horse. Once the steer is let loose from the stall, the rider will then chase down the steer. When the rider is in a good position he will leap from the moving mount and wrestle the steer down by its horns ("Event Descriptions", n.d.). Due to the high speed of the horse and physical contact with a frightened animal, there is a high risk of injury to the cowboy.



Steer Wrestling ("Steer Wrestling", n.d.)

Injuries Caused By Rodeo Events:

Even though there are multiple events within a rodeo, “the majority of acute musculoskeletal injuries sustained during rodeo competition occur during roughstock riding events, accounting for 75–87%” of injuries reported (Meyers, 2012, 821). While roughstock riding events are similar in nature, the types of injuries that are highest reported differ slightly.

In bareback bronco riding, the most highly reported injuries are in the elbow, lower back, and the hand. “Injuries in bareback riding can be sustained during the ride as well as when the athlete is bucked off” (Haney, 1999, 450). Bareback bronco riding is the only one out of all of the rough stock riding events that have highly reported injuries of the hand (Haney, 1999, 450). This event does not use a saddle, and a different type of handle is used for the rider to hold on to, indicating that this could be the cause of this injury.

Saddle bronco riding seems to incorporate injuries from both bull riding and bareback riding. The most common injuries seen are in the lower back, knee, arm (particularly the shoulder), the thigh, groin, and the ankle (Haney, 1999). Some of the injuries sustained that differ from those found in bareback bronco riding are most likely caused by the saddles that are used in this event. The injuries to the thigh and the groin are likely caused when the rider falls down into the saddle repeatedly while the animal is bucking. The reason for the injury to the knee and ankle may be a result of the use of stirrups in saddle bronco riding.

Roping and wrestling events involve contact between a rider and two other animals, the horse and the animal to be roped or wrestled, thus allowing for

different injuries to occur. In steer wrestling, injuries to the ankle and the knee are the most common (Haney, 450). These usually occur when the rider jumps off of their mount and grabs the steer. During the actual wrestling part of this event the cervical and lumbar area as well as the shoulder are the most frequently injured (Haney, 1999, 450).

The three roping events, calf roping, steer roping, and team roping, all have similar reported injuries. The thigh and groin can easily be injured during the quick dismount (Haney, 1999, 450). There is some danger of injuring different joints, such as the shoulder, ankle, and knee while tying the animal's legs once it has fallen. Due to the calves being smaller than the steers, the intensity of the injuries to the joints is less than when roping the steer.

	Bareback Bronco Riding	Saddle Bronco Riding	Roping Events	Wrestling Events
Most Prevalent Injuries	Elbow, lower back, and the hand	Lower back, knee, elbow, shoulder, the thigh, groin, and the ankle	Thigh, groin, shoulder, ankle, and knee	Ankle, knee, mid to lower back, and shoulder
Distinctions	Only rough stock riding event to have high reports of hand injuries	Differences are thought to be caused by the addition of a saddle and stirrups	The type of event can dictate the intensity of injury.	The type of event can dictate the intensity of injury.

(Haney, 1999; Meyers, 2012)

Due to gendered differences in the events and who is allowed to compete, most of the data that pertains to injury comes from males. While researching events that women participate in, such as barrel racing, there was a prevalence of reported

injuries to the horse and not the rider. In barrel racing, the joints of a horse's leg are prone to injury (Carvalho Menarim, 2011). There is a lack of research pertaining to the injuries that occur in events that women participate in. This corresponds with the overall masculine culture of the rodeo. The male is regarded more highly as a competitor, as they compete in more events, while women are often prevented from competing (Forsyth, (2007).

Taken together, it is obvious that different events result in different patterns of injury. While each event has its own most prevalent injuries, the most common injuries are not lethal. The injuries can range in severity, but are often found in the joints of the arm and leg. Each event incorporates a different style of riding or activity that causes riders to have different riding form, speeds, and levels of exertion. While there is little research on women's injuries in the rodeo, there is also still a lack of research when it comes to men's injuries from rodeo events.

Cultural Influences:

One problem with collecting data on the injuries associated with different rodeo events is the lack of reported injuries. The culture of the rodeo generally calls for the participants to be "macho" or to show a great deal of masculinity (White, M. (n.d.)). The word 'cowBOY' is synonymous with rodeos and, by a large margin, men dominate the rodeo scene. This is often linked to the large amount of danger that comes with many of the events in rodeo. "The bravado and 'machismo' characteristics of the rodeo cowboy are frequently demonstrated in the athlete's

willingness to compete in spite of nagging and debilitating injuries” (Haney, 1999, 444). Often smaller injuries will not be reported at all.

Rodeo riders tend to work through the pain (White, M. (n.d.)) “and injury awareness is often hampered by an individual’s behaviour and/or pain threshold” (Meyers, 2012, 819). This can cause injuries that are minor to progress and worsen. There are also some severe injuries that can occur in the neck, back, and head. Head protection is becoming more accepted and recommended among rodeo riders, especially with those riding bulls and doing both styles of bronco riding (Meyers, 2012, 831).

There is no set age for retirement of rodeo cowboys (Haney, 1999). Retirement often depends on the severity of injury or the lack of mobility that an injury can cause. Some rodeo riders will just retire from one specific event that has caused too much injury, then begin to compete in an event that has a lower injury rate in the area that they have been affected. They may also compete in events that have an overall lower injury rate. An example of this would be when a rodeo cowboy that participates in the event Steer Wrestling could switch to calf roping as it would be less of a strain on the ankles and knees. By allowing the cowboy to dismount at a slower speed.

While rodeo is often portrayed as a men’s only sport, there are very few rules against women competing in rodeos (Forsyth, 2007). Barrel racing is quite popular with female rodeo participants and team roping is one sport where teams can even be mixed gender. However, “women’s participation in professional rodeo events, which is mostly limited to barrel racing, is more the result of informal social

organization than formal exclusionary practices,” (Forsyth, 2007, 401). While they may not be culturally accepted into the arena, women do play an important role in the rodeo lifestyle. There are fans, groupies, and rodeo wives (Forsyth, 2007, 400). Each of these plays a different role in helping male rodeo riders travel the country and participate in the close to 150 events they may attend (Haney, 1999, 448).

Rodeo fans have often grown up in the rodeo lifestyle. “Most were directly involved with the rodeo at some point in their own lives and a few are current rodeo competitors,” (Forsyth, 2007, 400). They often have other family members that have participated or are currently participating in rodeos as well. The fans will offer housing, or help with the animals. The fans understand that most rodeo cowboys are married or are in a relationship, so they respect that and keep things professional and friendly. Fans “are extremely supportive and reliable, and for the most part are thought of as just like one of the guys,” (Forsyth, 2007, 401).

Rodeo groupies are often enamored by visions of cowboys and will provide places to stay for the rodeo cowboys. These “groupies” are different from fans. They are often willing to be romantically involved with the rodeo cowboys. “As evidenced in our interviews, the term “groupie” is usually derogatory when used by wives, fans, and some cowboys.” (Forsyth, 2007, 409) Another name for these individuals is a “buckle bunny” (Forsyth, 2007, 409). “Buckle bunnies and cowboys often have a give-and-take relationship” (Forsyth, 2007, 409). Often the “buckle bunnies” will sleep with the rodeo participants or allow them to stay in their hotel rooms so that they can get into sold out rodeo events. This relationship can benefit

both the groupies and the rodeo participant depending on the other's needs or wants.

Rodeo wives are everything from stable hands to drivers to personal chefs, their roles integral to the success of their partners and indeed, the rodeo life. As Forsyth (2007, 405) notes, their "contribution of domestic work, labor force participation, and rodeo-related unpaid labor allows for the creation and maintenance of the rodeo enterprise." Before children are involved a rodeo wife is the best free help that a rodeo cowboy can get. There was one reported instance where a cowboy flew to a rodeo and borrowed a horse, while his wife drove an entire twenty-four hours to meet him for another rodeo states over (Forsyth, 2007, 405); many other such acts are likely common. The wives will take care of both the animals and the cowboys. If they do not travel with the rodeo cowboy, then they can be a stable source of income back at home. The groupies can cause problems in this relationship, as rodeo wives are fully aware of their presence on the road. "You hope somebody would tell you if it were your husband, [but] what happens on the road stays on the road. It doesn't come back home" (Gauthier & Forsyth, 2000, p. 354 as cited in Forsyth, 2007, 409). While this is a concern to many wives as their husbands are on the road, they are still willing to live with and support the rodeo way of life (Forsyth, 2007).

As illustrated, there are gendered roles that occur in the rodeo lifestyle. Men are the athletes and women are often behind the scenes as both the labor and support. The culture surrounding the rodeo is very masculine. This causes a few problems. The first is that with the concept of masculinity also comes the need to be

tough. This has lead riders to continue competing through injuries, which can lead to further injury. Another concern is that women are not only behind the scenes as helpers, but are also often not included in research about injuries and improving safety. These concerns of the injuries to riders, gender disparity in access to event competition, and the effects of rodeo life on outside relationships are not the only issues that are challenging this form of entertainment. Animal ethics are progressively moving to the forefront of discussion.

Animal Ethics In Rodeos:

In more recent years, the ethics involving animals that are used in rodeo competitions have been questioned. Often it is said that rodeo events are similar to activities required in ranching. This is more than likely not the case, because ranchers would not urge their horses to buck as they are highly trained and a valuable asset to ranching (Larson, 1998). Ranchers would not want to risk injuring their horses by forcing them to buck. Livestock are rarely roped when they are being brought in to brand or handle, and instead, “calves are herded into a corral and chased down a chute into a head gate where they are humanely held until they are treated or prepared for the feedlot” (Larson, 1998, 115).

Often during rodeo events, animals are frightened into running at high speeds and are then tripped or violently pulled to the ground (Larson, 1998). By being forced to the ground in such an aggressive manner, rodeo animals can get hurt. There have been reports of animals breaking ribs and legs. Large animal vets have seen extensive bruising, punctured lungs, and “as much as two to three gallons

of free blood accumulated under the detached skin” (Larson, 1998, 115). These injuries can be seen in both animals used for rough stock riding as well as for rough stock roping and wrestling. These injuries can occur during the event as the animals are being pulled off of their feet; however, they can also occur in crowded corrals, the small chutes, and even the bucking straps that these animals are forced to wear (Larson, 1998). “The most serious rodeo injuries occur in the following events: 1) calf roping; 2) steer tripping; 3) steer wrestling; 4) wild horse "roundups;" and 5) horse tripping (Mexican style rodeos),” (Larson, 1998, 115). These events also cause injury to the humans that participate in the rodeo events.

The animals used in rodeos have great importance and meaning to this form of entertainment; however a lot of importance is placed on the horses and bulls, not the livestock, used in rodeo events. Often animals will be used repeatedly for practice until “are injured badly enough to be replaced” (Larson, 1998, 115). There are guidelines set in place to make sure that animals are treated humanly. Larson (1998) claims that the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) no longer supports the Professional Rodeo Cowboy's Association (PRCA) rules” (Larson, 1998, 115) pertaining to the treatment of animals. Other organizations, such as the Animal Welfare Committee, are debating about whether they feel this sport is humane (Larson, 1998). These organizations will strive to improve the treatment of the animals used in rodeo events.

Why Rodeos Are Still Around:

If people and animals are being hurt, and the treatment of the animals involved with these events is being questioned, then why are these rodeos still popular in modern America? Furthermore, rodeos no longer serve as a place for ranchers to show their skills due to the change in ranching techniques. While these practices may not be used in commercial farming, the masculine culture that originated in the past is what pulls cowboys in. "Rodeo is a thriving industry which incorporates the requisite elements of sport: physical prowess, institutionalized competition, and intrinsic and extrinsic participant motivation" (Coakley, 1998, as cited in Haney, 1999, 444). With the respect gained from man mastering animal, the cowboys are still given the romantic illusion of bravery, strength, and skill.

Rodeos are no longer just for cowboys either. These rodeos are a fantastic source of income for smaller towns and larger cities alike (Taylor, 1998). Over the years they have grown to include family friendly elements like fun food choices, celebrity musical guests, and areas for patrons to view the animals. In a way, rodeos have almost transformed into a fair with a rodeo theme. Those planning rodeos have also created events to attract a wide variety of guests. In the Greeley, CO event specifically, "the Stampede Fiesta offers a multicultural element, for example, and this year we're bringing in a one of the biggest demolition derbies in the country," (Taylor, 1998, 1C). Many rodeos are trying to implement the same amount of diversity in the events that take place during the rodeo to attract visitors, guests, and rodeo participants. By doing this, local economies are boosted and a great amount of annual income is generated in a small town by the presence of a rodeo.

Conclusion:

Since the domestication of horses, humans have used them for many purposes. The horse has been important in both farming and warfare. Horses have been used for occupational and entertainment purposes alike. The rodeo has risen as a large entertainment industry from horse culture in the Americas. It is often seen as a sport that requires great skill and mastery of an animal. Due to this preconceived notion, the participants of the rodeo are often viewed as extremely masculine and rugged. This has led to the belief that this is a 'man's sport' and as a result different roles based on gender have emerged. Although the sport can cause severe injury to both man and animal, it is still very popular for the romantic image of the western cowboy that it portrays. Through innovative marketing techniques and creating diversity in the events seen at a rodeo, the rodeo continues to grow in popularity.

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