Abstract

This chapter illuminates the meaning and importance of women rodeo fans and locates the social, cultural and historical contexts in which their fanship emerges and is sustained. Three general, but not mutually exclusive, types of women fans are identifiable by their expressed motives for following rodeo: circuit friends, helpmates, and buckle bunnies. This research finds that women’s fanship is structured by conditions and pattern of women’s subordination and male dominance inherent in the sport. However, women fans of all types construct personally meaningful roles through complex combinations of resistance and co-operation that often broaden normative conceptions of gender.

Introduction

As a cultural practice rodeo serves to perpetuate and reaffirm the values and sensibilities of ranching society, past and present. Moreover, because fans of the sport tend to embody the cowboy way of life, they are integral to the creation and maintenance of rodeo culture. Women fans are especially important in this regard and play vital roles both in the public and private spaces of rodeo life. Like the prairie women of the North American frontier, they are the unsung heroines and architects of community, expending emotional and physical labor, dedicating time and marshaling resources for the creation and support of the rodeo. As is consistent with most large animal herding societies, American cattle ranching culture is
male dominant (Lawrence 1984; Allmendenger 1992; Sachs 1996). Consequently, ranch life, and rodeo as a reflection of that life, place cowboys front and center. In the words of the cowboy turned author John Erikson, “Maybe cowboying should be a gender neutral profession, but it never has been, and, as far as I know, it’s still not.” (Erickson 2003: xvii). However, while their place in the American West is deeply influenced by the ethos of patriarchy, women’s roles have not been as affixed to traditional conceptions of womanhood as one might imagine. Instead, their participation has been varied and complicated and as historical and contemporary narratives reveal, women have participated broadly in all aspects of ranch life and rodeo.

Rather than subscribing strictly to the Victorian Era views of domesticity that were widely held by their eastern counterparts, Anglo inhabitants of the Western-frontier adopted broader views of women’s roles and expectations for behavior varied by social and geographic location (Schlissel, Ruiz and Monk 1988). The greater elasticity in gender roles and proto feminist views of women were by-products of the challenging social situations and spaces that westerners inhabited during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some aspects of frontier life had democratizing effects on women’s lives, but these were always mediated by and made sense of in light of domestic ideology. Griswold (1988) traces how, during this period, ranching families like mining and farm families relied heavily on wives labor for survival. However, for ranch wives, life on the prairie meant the additional hardships brought on by isolation from towns, churches, schools, friends and other socializing forces. Moreover, the nature of ranch and livestock work meant that husbands are away from home for long periods of time, especially during the labor intensive spring and summer months. In fact, summer cattle drives which involved moving and tending
cattle on horseback over vast areas of land to get livestock to the nearest railhead city for auction and/or transport via train to stockyards took as long as two months. Also, with smaller ranches, hiring labor for daily operations was not affordable, so all able bodied family members, including wives, worked side by side performing ranch work. Consequently, the ranching environment gave women independence to perform all types of work, including activities that were considered men's work, e.g., hunting, slaughtering animals, horse training, rough stock work, and managing finances (LeCompte 1993). In addition, women were primarily responsible for work associated with the home and family, the household garden, food preparation, laundry, housecleaning and childcare etc. (Grisworld 1988).

The harsh and demanding business of ranching also meant that both daughters and sons of ranchers are expected to provide labor. Even their playtime involved learning and sharpening work related skills through games of competitive roping and riding. Upon reaching marital age, however, domestic ideology was re-emphasized in young women who were encouraged by their families to hone their feminine skills in preparation for taking on traditional roles (Jordan 1992; LeCompte 1993). It appears, that less rigid definitions of women’s work did not untether Western women from the deeply embedded belief that a woman’s primary calling in life is that of wife and mother. Nevertheless, in the context of male monopolization of economic and political spheres the domestic sphere was a culturally valid position from which women could negotiate power, status, and respect. Thus, women rarely participated in what was considered the cowboy life, which required groups of men to work and travel together, herding across large expanses of land. No matter how liberated or skilled, women seldom pursued a professional
rodeo career because this was the domain of the cowboy. This tradition continues to dominate
the ideological superstructure of rodeo, even as women have begun to make inroads into aspects
of the sport previously off-limits to them. In interviews with well-known rodeo cowgirls in the
'70s and '80s, Jordan (1992) discovered that many of these pioneers of women’s rodeo, although
constrained by tradition, ultimately succeeded through sheer determination and love for the sport.
The legendary Carol Goosetree said, “… my parents didn’t want me to rodeo because they
thought the world of rodeo wasn’t the best place for a young lady” (Jordan: 245). Although she
did marry, she also became a competitive barrel racer and won two national women’s finals. In
most instances, resistance from family was enough to effectively discourage young women from
pursuing competitive rodeo careers. One young fan interviewed as part of this study shows how
lack of parental support caused her to stop competing and confine her participation to spectator
and supporter. As she explains,

When I was in High School I raced and I was good, won a few junior
championships. But, as soon as it looked like I was going to try and go pro my
parents said that I could if I wanted, but they didn’t see much of a future in it for a
girl that I should go to college and get a teaching degree, or something I could
count on for an income. Now that I am in college, I still go to rodeos, but go to
watch my friends and keep up with what’s going on.

In other cases, however, it was the encouragement and support of unconventional parents, that
inspired women to actively pursue their love for rodeo and push the limits of women’s
involvement in the sport. Jan Youren, world-champion bronc rider and 1993 Cowgirl Hall of
Fame honoree, was encouraged by her family, especially her father to become a professional
rodeoer. In an interview at age 64, she tells of her childhood and father’s dedication to her
participation in rodeo:
My dad rodeoed. He rode bareback horses and wild-horse raced and rode a few bulls. I’d been riding calves since I was 4 or 5 years old, mainly at the Cattleman’s convention... Then, when I was 11, Dad came home from a rodeo and said, ‘Babe, I saw some something you’d really like’ (Boone 2008: 1).

Jan’s father had seen girls riding bareback horses and bulls at a rodeo. It was not customary for women to participate in bull riding even though in late 1800s some women had begun to do so. The death of the famed cowgirl Bonnie McCarroll, who was thrown while bronc riding at the Pendleton Roundup in 1929, had moved the professional rodeo community toward limiting women’s participation in what were deemed dangerous events. By the late 1940s, women’s participation in professional rodeo was mainly reduced to barrel racing and beauty pageants. But, in 1955, Youren’s father, recognizing her determination and talent, decided to organize an all-girls rodeo to enable his daughter to compete. He came to the same conclusion that many cowgirls and their supporters had, women-only rodeo was an infrastructural solution to the exclusion of women. Thus, for the last 60 years, the Women’s Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA) has been the primary way that women have participated in the sport.

Appreciating the complicated, and often contradictory, social and ideological landscape of early ranching families is vital for understanding the contemporary role of women fans of the rodeo. Not unlike their foremothers, many of the women who are fans of and participants in rodeo today have socialization experiences that directly connect them to the sport through ranching culture. LeCompte’s (1993) finding that eighty-five per cent of professional cowgirls in the United States come from the cattle frontier regions of the West—with Texas, Oklahoma and Montana
producing the majority—attests to this fact. Thus, the connection of women rodeo fans to the ethos of ranching culture is the starting point of this research. In further exploring that connection we hope to shed light on how contemporary women make sense of, negotiate, and create meaning and their own sense of womanhood through rodeo fanship.

This analysis is part of a larger study of the rodeo in the Western and Southwestern region of the United States. Our data consist of seventy-four interviews with current and former professional rodeo cowboys and women fans who attend and/or participate in various aspects of rodeo. Forty-five men and twenty-nine women were interviewed. Initially subjects were identified using several key informants and subsequently via snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). Interviews were conducted using an open approach, that allows interviewees to present and interpret their experience of rodeo in their own voices. Content from Internet rodeo groups and online discussions is also used to expand upon and support interpretive aspects of the analysis. Postings from three rodeo focused groups on popular internet platforms were followed for a period of one year and relevant content was analyzed. In addition we draw on the thematic content of Western folklore and song, and historical accounts, including biographies and life histories of rodeo participants, cowgirls, and frontier women.

The long and colorful history of women’s involvement in rodeo has been largely ignored by scholars (Jordan 1992; Lecompte 1993; Roach 1990). This is especially true regarding women’s dedication to and fanship of the sport (Forsyth and Thompson 2007). This research is an attempt to fill this void by illuminating the meaning and importance of rodeo to women fans, and by
exploring motivations for and the social, cultural and historical context from which women's fanship of the rodeo emerges.

Women Fans of the Rodeo

Our interviews reveal three general, but not mutually exclusive, types of women fans, based on their expressed motives for participating in support activity. The first and most prevalent type of fan, the *circuit friend*, knows the rodeo inside-and-out because of her socialized involvement in the sport. Her fanship resides in love for the game and a deep socialization into rodeo culture provides her with the knowledge and skills to become a vital member of a backstage support team for cowboys both on the road and at events. The second type of fan, the *helpmate*, has a commitment to the cowboy directly through family relationships. Her support is primarily, although not exclusively, motivated by adherence to the gender role expectations of wife and mother. The helpmate’s support is primarily driven by cultural and personal expectations about marriage and child rearing and demonstrates the extensive reliance of the rodeo and its cowboys on women’s paid and unpaid labor. The third type, the *buckle bunny*, is primarily involved in support of cowboys for the excitement derived from association and the desire to have a sexual or romantic relationship with a professional cowboy.

Feminist and gender theories provide a useful framework for understanding the social and cultural dynamics of fan types. Women’s fanship is shaped to a large extent by gender constraints that are part and parcel of the hegemonic masculinity of rodeo culture. According to
Connell (1995) hegemonic masculinity is the configuration of gender practices that legitimate patriarchy and guarantees (or is assumed to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. In this context gender is structured relationally and hierarchically. Moreover, the structure and processes encoded in hegemonic masculinity are connected historically to power relationships among and between men and women, and gender is constructed within, and influences those processes, which include labor, power relations and sexual social relationships. While in rodeo there is less gender segregation of labor than in some other sports, rodeo life clearly demarcates men’s and women’s work practices and roles through contrast. Although men and women may have similar skills, when women utilize those skills they customarily do so in a separate arena from men. Moreover, they exercise those skills outside of the competitive arena as supporters and followers of men and/or children. Such support facilitates the cowboys participation in the public arena, thus reinforcing and reproducing hierarchical gender relations in rodeo culture.

Our fan types also reveal the architecture of gender relations are manifested in three strong stereotypes from Western folklore, the helpmate, the cowgirl and the prostitute (Stoeltje 1975). Consistent with Connell (1987) and Boyle and McKay (1995), these stereotypes reflect tensions inherent in hegemonic masculine cultural systems whereby definitions of sexual attraction and forms of socio-emotional attachments are linked to structural conditions of subordination and domination. Within these limits, individuals and groups adopt personal and collective strategies that, while allowing for complex combinations of resistance and co-operation, continue to legitimize the subordination of women (Connell 1987: 183-84). Through these forms of
resistance and co-operation Western women sometimes broaden normative conceptions of
gender. However, the simultaneous veneration and devaluation of prostitutes and bad girls is
integral to establishing competitive hierarchical social relations between women who vie for
value against the backdrop of male domination and authority in the sport (Boyle and McKay,
1995; Thompson 1999a; Forsyth and Thompson 2007). As our analysis will show, these
stereotypes, hierarchies of power and social dynamics pattern women’s fanship.

Circuit Friends

She’s a wild prairie flower and daughter of a pioneer.

Chris LeDoux (Capital Records 1989).

The vast majority of women we interviewed fall into the category of circuit friend. Like early
frontier women, their involvement typically stems from childhood socialization experiences and
parental role modeling and continues as a result of individual accomplishments and expertise that
binds them to rodeo as a lifestyle. Their support for rodeo is part of lived experience and rooted
in a grounded social identity. Becoming socialized into fanship appears to be as vital to the rodeo
community as becoming accomplished as a rodeo athlete. Family involvement is a major avenue
for the development and maintenance of the circuit fan’s devotion to rodeo. Many respondents
talked of attending stock shows, horse shows and/or rodeos as children and their deeply
embedded childhood involvement in Western life, as typified by the following statements:
My husband and I both grew up on farms with horses and cattle … we have been able to ride horses since we could walk … We have farmed and rodeoed all our lives.

I’m from a little town and everybody rodeos …. That’s all there was to do on the weekends, so if you didn’t like it, you didn’t have anything to do.

When I was little, the minute me and my brother got home from school, we’d grab some food, change and do our chores and get out to the barn fast as we could to play in the roping pen until dark.

As the next quotations suggest, one of our most significant findings was the amount and the nature of parental involvement, especially fathers’ involvement:

The rodeo is how I’ve grown up. My dad wears boots and a hat every single day, I like that. That’s the kind of person I want to marry.

My dad rodeoed and I would watch him when I was a kid …. I still associate rodeo with him and I guess that’s why I love it so much …. out there watching him … that was something special to be part of.

For some respondents maternal involvement was critical in fostering their current love and participation in rodeo.
I am horse woman, grew up with [th]em, been around them all of my life. My mom trained horses and was tending to horses the day I was born and then right back right after .... she brought me with her to the barn. You could say I was born to it.

Momma would have us packed up so we could hit the road as soon as we got home from school .... She cooked for us on a little ol’ RV [Recreational Vehicle] stove .... she’d drive three or four hundred miles one way to get us there …

Circuit friends are experienced and competent in the ways of Western life that undergird the rodeo. These fans are authentically connected to the sport through their own skill and expertise and therefore can be considered rodeo experts. Many of those interviewed had competed in rodeo events at some point in their own lives, typically in junior events. However, most of them later shifted to activities such as training, showing, and/or organizational work or other rodeo related support. One such circuit friend explains,

My dad and brother are PRCA [Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association] team ropers. I raced some but got into reining in college and love it. I still train for my Dad and brother when they need me … I go out on the road sometimes when they need an extra hand with the horses.

Women fans who participate in rodeo in their own right are recognized within rodeo subculture as having much to contribute and as one woman reported are thought of “just like one of the
boys.” Correspondingly, a rodeo cowboy participating in an online discussion spoke about the expertise of women fans:

Some of the girls on the circuit aren’t just good riders … … they seem to know more about feed, nutrition and so on … . and a good bit about get on a horse legged-up [conditioning a horse for competition].

Some people out there think that a woman's place in rodeo is Miss Rodeo and that’s just plain wrong headed …. These girls on the road, even the pageant gals, are real serious about rodeo. They travel to rodeos all year long, and some of ‘em ride better than men I know.

However, in both interviews and discussions, circuit fans revealed that the form and substance of their rodeo involvement is constrained by a normative environment that effectively locks women out of competition in most events. In fact, barrel racing, a timed event in which a horse and rider complete a clover leaf pattern around barrels is the only women’s event allowed by the PRCA, a powerful organization that oversees a significant proportion of all rodeos held in the United States (Morris 1993; Stern and Stern 1992). Our respondents acknowledged the exclusionary practices that disadvantage women in participating in rodeo events. One fan explains,

It’s sad we can’t compete and maybe there aren’t rules saying No you can’t do it. But take a look ladies and you will see they don’t have events for women and rules or not if
[you’re] are a woman you can’t enter bull riding. I don't really know why we don't have other competitive events, we do at WRPA [Women’s Professional Rodeo Association].

Not surprisingly, women’s exclusion from participation in events is sometimes discussed in the context of sexism, a term most are reluctant to accept. As the following excerpts show, two circuit friends resist defining rodeo as sexist, but nevertheless express their frustration at the exclusion of women from events.

I wouldn't go as far to say that they are sexist. I just believe there should be another event open for women … As women we can compete in it up to college level, but unless it's a WPRCA rodeo, the PRCA does not include it.

I don’t know if rodeos are sexist. There is truth to what everyone says ... honestly if I could change one thing in the PRCA it would definitely be to allow women to do team roping and bull riding. I have a roping horse and if I ever got good enough to join PRCA, what use would it do? I wouldn't be able to compete in team roping. But yeah, like I said I'm pretty sure rodeos aren't sexist.

Women fans that deny that rodeos are sexist prefer such terms as “tradition” and “heritage” in discussing limitations on women’s involvement. Some acknowledge that the outcome of that tradition is that women’s participation in rodeo is blocked by culturally entrenched gender-specific expectations and attitudes.
It’s not sexism, it’s tradition. Rodeos haven’t changed too much since Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show.

Some women respondents saw no problem with barring women from certain forms of rodeo participation. This interview with a circuit friend demonstrates this perspective,

Let's face it, women just can't and shouldn't ever be allowed to compete in the regular PRCA events. Like I said before, there are many other places where women are more useful in rodeo than in the arena …. Look to the production side of things … without women secretaries, timers, producers, mothers, wives and sisters our men wouldn't be able to rodeo anyways …. making it happen so our men can go out and compete. Rodeo is about our tradition and our Western heritage where a man was a man and a woman was a lady.

In contrast, the majority of circuit friends that we interviewed held the belief that women should be able to compete in any aspect of the game which they qualified. Two fans voiced their opinions about equal participation,

If a woman has the desire and the talent, she should go for it …. females with or without families can participate at rough stock and roping events at women’s rodeos. In my way of thinking about it as a real competition this means that they should be able to compete in any rodeo if they qualify.
It isn’t right that people expect girls to not compete in events they’re good at just because they graduate from high school or have a kid. It shouldn’t matter, but it does.

An important aspect of circuit friendship that surfaced in both interviews on online discussions was concern over being confused for groupies and/or cowgirl wannabes. This was especially important for fans whom are or have been romantically linked to cowboys. Women fans are aware, and for the most part respect, that most rodeo cowboys are married or have regular girlfriends. In order to distinguish themselves from groupies it was common for circuit friends to emphasize their social connection to rodeo and adopt a protective orientation toward rodeo cowboys with the aim of supporting traditional relationships. Some respondents speak of cowboys in familial terms, as being part of the “rodeo family.” Some talk about themselves as surrogate family members and as someone who knows cowboys from an insider point of view:

We have to stick together because it is tough work on the road for all and they [cowboys] need help from trustworthy and reliable people just like we do. I know some of the girls these guys are married to, some of them from the juniors … and they know I lend a hand if I have the time and I don’t mess with them [husbands and boyfriends].

All of the ropers I’ve known are like brothers to me, so they are off limits for me, but they all cheat … always on the go …

I guess I’ve grown up and worked around one too many rodeo cowboys to ever be infatuated by one of them.
It was common for both single and married fans to empathize with the wives and girlfriends of rodeo cowboys and they were quick to discredit women who pursue cowboys for only sexual ends. Many circuit friends expressed concern about rodeo cowboys having many opportunities to be sexually unfaithful. One fan complained “When NFR [National Finals Rodeo] was here … I saw so many sickening things …. There were so many fakes there it would make you sick …. cowboys were droolin’ like a dog over a lamb chop.”

As demonstrated from posts, interviews and life-histories, generous amounts of financial and practical support are provided by circuit friends. These women know the ins-and-outs of rodeo, and while they are sometimes involved in affective forms of support, primarily they provide backup services to the cowboy and day-to-day support of the rodeo enterprise. It is not unusual for circuit friends to attend hundreds of rodeos per year. Those who participate may compete in one or two hours in a weekend period, spending the remainder of their time watching and tracking various events and shoring up rodeo friendships. One such fan claims,

I’ve been to sixty-nine rodeos this year, my truck sitting out there has about thirty-eight thousand miles on it and I’ve had it seven months. Before that there’s no telling how many miles I drove … And occasionally there is a bull rider or a bareback rider or a team roper or a calf roper or somebody who needs a ride I’ll take along. (Jordan, 1992: 245)

Helpmates
“Stand by your man.”
—Tammy Wynette and Billy Sherrill (Epic Records 1968)

Much like the cowboy role, the role and image of woman as helpmate is a cultural artifact of frontier culture. Stoeltje (1975, 41) insightfully asserts that the helpmate or comrade is the most successful symbolic role for women in the West imaginary, “the more capable the woman, the more successful in adapting she was, the more the woman assumed the comrade position.” The ideal wife for a cowboy or rancher, as portrayed in Western stories, song and verse is a woman who could take care of the home, the ranch, the children, and do whatever was necessary to support her husband. These images remain salient in contemporary rodeo life and they explain why cowboy wives are among the most loyal and useful fans of rodeo.

Families living on ranches or farms are becoming less and less common. However, Western ideology and traditions endure, especially the role of the helpmate wife. Many rodeo families find themselves living in cities, suburbs and or small towns and wives are supporting often absent husbands who are involved full-time in the grueling physical occupation of rodeo cowboy with extreme time and financial demands. Early in marriages, before children are born, wives often travel and work with their husbands on the circuit (Forsyth and Thompson 2007). These times, while admittedly hard, are often referred to in sentimental and nostalgic ways by wives, as the following account demonstrates:
We had a little trailer and we carried one horse to the rodeos when he roped calves. Most of the contestants that roped in the timed events have their own ... a lot of times he'd fly out and say I'm leaving you here, for instance he left me in Nampa, Idaho and he flew to Salinas, California and he said I'll see you in Cheyenne. So I had to drive from Salinas all the way to Cheyenne ... and then I drove to the airport to pick him up at the end of that week ... I traveled a lot by myself.

In terms of the political economy of rodeo, all of the wife’s support related labor aids in the production of the occupation of rodeo cowboy. Her domestic work, labor force participation, and rodeo related unpaid labor allows for the creation and maintenance of the rodeo enterprise. Behind the scenes work creates the cultural space for his public identity as the independent, lone cowboy and the helpmate’s parenting initiates the next generation of rodeoers into the lifestyle. By marrying a woman who conforms to the gender expectations of Western and frontier traditions, the rodeo cowboy increases his likelihood of success and the rodeo is perpetuated as the primary past-time among Western families. While this type of marital division of labor occurs in other occupational fields that are male dominant, for example the military, police and corporate management (Finch 1983), it is a prominent feature of rodeo.

Stoelte (1975) argues that the comrade or helpmate image was most often portrayed as non-sexual, because the primary traits of the role were “economy and industry”, which were key to husbands’ success. Interestingly, cowboys commented openly about the assistance that wives offer and the necessity of such work for his survival as a professional rodeo cowboy. As is consistent with Western tradition, the appreciation for a good wife is something for which a cowboy is openly grateful.
There are a lot of obstacles to being a professional cowboy. Once you devote yourself to it full-time ... those cowboys in timed events who have to bring their horses with them ... I don’t know how they make it ... I always had my wife as my partner ... She worked and in her spare time she traveled with me to help.

Last year I competed at 94 rodeos .... Without my wife’s help we would lose the dream. If we don’t make it before we have kids, I guess we will have to give it up.

Indeed, although perhaps surprising, given the apparent hyper-masculine public image of the rodeo career, the married cowboys we interviewed were quick to acknowledge the important contributions their wives made to their success.

Similarly, wives understand that helping husbands is a demanding part of the helpmate role. On Internet sites, humorous posts reflect the tension women experience over the expectation to maintain a household, raise children, and work for their husbands. For example, a popular rodeo discussion site posted humorous guidelines for ranch wives. The tenth and most important guideline:

Know that when you step out of the house you move from the “wife” department to “hired hand” status. Although the word “hired” indicates there will be a paycheck that you will never see, rest assured you will have job security. The price is just right. And most of the time you will be “the best help he has”, even if...
it is because you are the *only* help he has.

As might *be* expected, socialization into *the culture of the American West*, including exposure to relevant role models, *is the typical route to the role of rodeo wife*. Many narratives of childhood included talk of wives/mothers who had supported husbands/fathers who were working in rodeo or stock show related occupations. *Specifically*, wives recalled seeing their mothers *assuming gender roles* (West and Zimmerman 1987) by assisting with scheduling, taking care of finances and most of the household details so that husbands would have a greater chance of success. Among these respondents, a few of the wives are actually rodeo cowgirls who either still compete or have retired from competition *and* who remain active fans and participants of rodeo culture and organization. These wives are the most directly and fully involved in the support of their husbands, and vice versa, because *the wives* possess many of the skills of rodeo hands. *These examples* can be considered dual rodeo-career families. While these types of marriages were not common in our study, our analysis of thirty of the top ranked earners for 2009 listed on the WRPA website shows that twelve are married to rodeo or former rodeo competitors and five are married to men in rodeo-related professions such as stock contractor, farrier, and cutting horse trainer.

A common theme in *Internet* discussions was the struggle with the on-again-off-again nature of male presence in the household. After having children, many wives attempt to maximize the amount of time with husbands by facilitating and supporting their children in rodeo. Consistent with research on children’s sporting activities and mother support (Chafetz and Kotarba 1999;
Jambor 1999; Messner and Bozada-Deas 2009), rodeo moms describe their contributions to maintaining rodeo as a family tradition:

My four kids rodeo .... We are on the road most weekends in the summer .... Soccer moms got nothing on rodeo moms. My Volvo has a trailer hitched to it pretty much year-round.

The goal of the rodeo mom is to make rodeo a family affair, a fully integrative cultural experience. A significant byproduct of such efforts is that family involvement in rodeos and stock shows aids in cultural transmission.

Feminist scholars have pointed out that women’s work often includes not only domestic and workforce labor but also includes the work women contribute to husbands’ careers (Lopata 1971; Fowlkes 1980; Pavalko and Elder 1993). Papanek (1973) went as far to describe this structural marital arrangement as a “two-person single career.” Our analysis confirms the work of Pavalko and Elder (1993) on women’s support of men’s careers, which identifies three supporting roles that we apply to rodeo wives: the true partner, the auxiliary worker, and the career enabler. The true partner is involved in the daily operation of her husband’s career; the auxiliary worker lends support through unpaid direct labor related to the occupation; and the career enabler supports her husband by protecting him from mundane work unrelated to occupation and by providing him with services that allow him to do his job. While the specific role of the wife may vary through the course of the marriage, early on, she is most likely to be a true partner, traveling with the
rodeo cowboy and assisting him in the everyday work of his career. Later in the marriage, she will be more likely to play the career enabler role. The auxiliary worker role is common throughout the course of the marriage, probably because of the early socialization into rodeo life that teaches skills such as livestock care and arranging for, acquiring, and maintaining gear and/or livestock. Of course, some wives participate in all three kinds of support simultaneously.

Another challenge to the rodeo marriage is managing the threat and reality of infidelity. Some wives in interviews and in the online discussions demonstrated their awareness of the rodeo groupies and what can happen on the road. The research of Gauthier and Forsyth (2000) on groupies speaks to this issue directly. Wives are aware that there are groupies and husbands who do not respect the norms of marital fidelity. Some wives and ex-wives of rodeo cowboys discuss specific transgressions, and some seem reconciled to this as a part of rodeo life. In interview and Internet narratives concerning marital challenges, some wives ignore their suspicions of infidelity on the road and choose not to talk about it with husbands or other wives. While some wives worry about possible transgressions, they choose not to allow the possibility of infidelity to undermine faith in the marriage. However, when infidelity is openly discussed and groupies are mentioned, wives and ex-wives showed obvious anger and disdain for cowboy groupies.

The common belief among rodeo cowboys and wives is that the groupie and cowboy relationship is a sex-only, transitory affair. Among rodeo cowboys, bull riders and steer wrestlers receive the most attention from groupies and in turn have the worst reputations among cowboys for infidelity. Wives and circuit friends share a common definition of the situation (Thomas 1923),
adopting a common stance of protection of cowboys and stigmatization of groupies.

Buckle Bunnies

“Cowboys tell them they love them but they’re gone by the dawn’s early light.”
--Joe Rainey and Tanya Tucker (MCA Records 1981)

As has been well established, groupies are fans known for being available for and willing to have sex with celebrities, most commonly musicians and athletes (Elson 1991). Groupies are often willing to trade sexual favors for celebrity attention. The groupie’s interest is therefore focused more on the cowboy as a celebrity than on the sport of rodeo. Researchers have noted that groupies in the rodeo subculture are referred to as buckle bunnies (Carroll 1985; Gauthier and Forsyth 2000). Wives, circuit friends, and cowboys are acutely aware of the presence of buckle bunnies at professional rodeo events.

There’s a lot of them [buckle bunnies] … at the bigger rodeos. If you were in one certain area for a while … you’d see a lot of the same groupies. It’s just like in any sport … I guess it is the ruggedness of a cowboy that they like (Gauthier and Forsyth 2000, 351-52).

According to interviews with fans and cowboys, it appears that buckle bunnies and cowboys have a give-and-take relationship. Bunnies are looking to have fun with cowboys and are often given admission to sold-out rodeos, either with a companion pass or through favors from.
insiders. In return, many groupies allow the rodeo participants to stay in their hotel rooms or
homes. Because some competitors stay in the same place for four or five days and can return
annually to the same rodeo, some bunnies have yearly contact with particular cowboys. When a
rodeo participant connects with a buckle bunny, his friends might also benefit from the
arrangement by having a place to shower, a home-cooked meal, or a place to relax between
events. For a cowboy, there is also a good chance of having sexual contact with the buckle bunny.
if the situation is not too complicated. Previous research on rodeo cowboys indicates that
groupies are available at all rodeos (Gauthier and Forsyth 2000; Forsyth and Thompson 2007).

Rodeo cowboys interviewed revealed some of the motivations for associating with buckle
bunnies on the road. They disclosed opinions and their impressions of buckle bunnies;

There ain’t nothing wrong with buckle bunnies.... When there ain’t no one around to talk
to and you’re a thousand miles from home, anyone to talk to is nice. Some of your buckle
bunnies actually got good hearts.

When you’ve spent the past two weeks in a truck with the guys, its nice to find a little
feminine attention after a show. I can only take so many clown jokes, farts, best rides,
and worst wreck stories … before I have to find a change of company.

… They’re all wannabes and everything…. I learned the bunnies are nice company. We
have our fun and go our separate ways…
Although fans and cowboys readily talk about rodeo groupies, very few women admit to being a buckle bunny. This is most likely the result of the unforgiving stance taken toward bunnies by some cowboys, wives and circuit friends. As the following Internet post demonstrate, acceptance of the groupie status does not mean acceptance of the buckle bunny stigma:

I guess I was a groupie, maybe I was … but, I wasn’t loose though. I met [a bull rider] in Denver and then my girlfriends and I traveled all over Texas and Oklahoma to watch him and a couple of other guys compete … but, I wasn’t just hooking up with cowboys like Bunnies do.

Another instance of the unwillingness of women to accept the label of buckle bunny is demonstrated by this fan who admits to being called a buckle bunny, but rejects the stigma by claiming genuine fan status and impeaching the integrity of some of the cowboys to whom she was previously attracted:

Some idiots called me a buckle bunny, but what did they know. I followed rodeo for years and watched all the events, even barrel racing. Still do. But, I have to say that bull riders are something else altogether and I fell for quite a few in my day. They’re born liars and cheaters … I ended up seein’ that the hard way. You can’t just blame the Bunnies, they get addicted to the hype and those big egos, just like I did.

As interviews and Internet posts illustrated, the buckle bunny tag is a rodeo subculture catchall phrase for women participating in sex for pleasure, outside of relationships. This label, which is
often synonymous with whore situates the buckle bunny as a deviant social type. The label not only denigrates the buckle bunny who is an outsider but also represents a form of social control of women inside of the subculture of rodeo. It is a vivid reminder that the only acceptable routes to legitimate membership in the rodeo culture are through marriage or participation in non-sexualized forms of fanship.

Whereas circuit friends and helpmates appear to accomplish gender by conforming to normative conceptions of women within the context of rodeo culture, buckle bunnies do so by stylizing and capitalizing on the ‘bad’ girl image to gain interior access to rodeo subculture, Bunnies, helpmates and circuit friends all inhabit moral domains that provide them with varying forms of power and meaning. Bunny power is strongest within the micro relational context, where she gains direct access to the rodeo glitterati without the burdens or sacrifices of ordinary forms of women’s work. In this sense, bunny power is similar to the power that gained by groupies in other sport arenas (Crawford and Gosling 2004).

The sexualized fan accomplishes gender via the normative expectations associated with subordinate form of power. In contrast, circuit friends believe that they exert legitimate influence through authentic connections to cowboys and the rodeo, manifested in participatory and supportive roles. They see buckle bunnies as possessing insufficient cultural knowledge to be legitimate, and see groupies as inauthentic and self-serving. Says one respondent:

A buckle bunny is like a rodeo groupie. I'm hoping you know what a groupie is. They do anything to hook up with a cowboy and I mean anything! Basically these girls are sluts. They aren't even particularly interested in the cowboy or the lifestyle. They just feel there...
is some sort of status to be gained by being with them.

By providing sexual, emotional and/or material support for rodeoers, the bunny is perceived as a threat to the stability of both circuit friends and helpmates relationships with the cowboys. The ritualized process of discrediting bunnies involves an interesting inversion, whereby cowboys sometimes reward or credit buckle bunnies while simultaneously devaluing and discrediting them by passing judgment on their outsider status (Goffman 1963; Thompson 1999). Indicative comments include:

I can’t stand those girls who know nothing about horses, nothing about rodeo, and nothing about being country.

Buckle bunnies won’t stand by a man when he is injured, won’t understand the sacrifice of time and expense, and probably won’t shut up when you are trying to clear your head before you’re up.

Thus, the good girl-bad girl, whore dichotomies are visibly created in this interactional environment. Many of the same cowboys who benefit in material and non-material ways from bunnies’ normative defiance are quick to denigrate them in the presence of others. It is indeed ironic that not only do buckle bunnies give cowboys comfort, adoration and sex, their presence and association also confers status to the cowboy and, indirectly, to the helpmate who has been incorporated into his career (Finch 1983). Regardless of their feelings about bunnies, wives, fans and cowboys know that to have buckle bunnies around is a status indicator and symbol of success for a rodeo cowboy.
Discussion

In light of recent fan theory, Jacobson’s (2003) view that fanship is more than spectatorship fits with our findings. The women fans we identify are devotees of the sport and their love and devotion extends beyond events. Although in different ways, all three types use rodeo to maintain and support their personal and social identities. Relative to Giulianotti’s (2002) work on spectator identities, we place circuit friends and helpmates in the categories of “traditional” given their cultural identity and personal and emotional investments, “thick,” because they possess a strong sense of solidarity and belonging, and “hot,” because they originate in, inhabit and exemplify the cultural lifestyle of the rodeo. They see rodeo as a symbolic representation of Western community and the embodiment of their core values. However, buckle bunnies also fit within the category of traditional fan, not because they are products of that world, but because they intensely follow it. They are thickly connected to rodeo only because they establish instrumental relationships with cowboys, but they are what Giulianotti calls “cool” fans, because they only experience the sport as followers and organize their personal identities around an ‘imagined community’ (2002: 35).

Traditionally, rodeo, like many sports, has not offered significant participation roles for women. Although some women fans question the power and gender arrangements within the rodeo and the limitations placed on their participation, many find ways to assimilate into the culture. The roles of circuit friend, helpmate and buckle bunny, each in their own way, represent ways for women to maximize personal involvement in rodeo that simultaneously give meaning to their
construct legitimate and normatively safe ways of doing gender in a male dominant cultural arena, whereas buckle bunnies struggle to create personal meaning and relationships as cultural outsiders. Taken together, their actions—whether in the form of personal attention, caretaking, organizational labor or athletic skill, and whether consistent with or defiant of the dominant cultural ethos—define the cultural arena of the contemporary rodeo.

Notes

1. The Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA) originally formed in 1948 in San Angelo Texas under the name Girls Rodeo Association (GRA). The organization was created and organized by cowgirls to promote and advance women in the sport of rodeo. The major influences in GRA were cowgirls who were fed up with an all male rodeo system that did not grant women competitive opportunities in the arena. In 1981 the GRA changed its name to the Women’s Professional Rodeo Association. It is the oldest continuing womens sports association in the U.S. and is governed entirely by women. Smaller women's rodeo organizations such as the National Barrel Horse Association operate alongside and are regulated by the WPRA (Morris 1993; Atchinson 1998; Weisman 1991).

2. The online groups utilized in this research are found on popular platforms such as Yahoo, Google, MySpace and Facebook and are easily accessed by Internet users. And while it is possible to view some discussion content from Internet groups without joining groups, most platforms require general membership in the form of an account to access groups and
discussions. Also, in most cases sites allow users to protect their identity by choosing varying levels of security and computer nicknames to hide identifying information from other users. However, many users are inexperienced and do not realize their name, email address and discussion content are accessible to members and that their comments can be linked to some identifying information. Moreover, without realizing it, individuals on group sites do sometimes reveal detailed information such as their location, occupation, nicknames etc. While it is certainly a conservative response, as researchers we do not identify the specific groups we monitored in order to minimize the risk of users being identified. Also, for the same reason, we do not identify or link on line posts to discussion topic titles, or usernames. However, it should be noted that the information we accessed is public in the sense that any user could access this content on popular platforms for groups related to rodeo.

REFERENCES


