

SIGNIFYING ANIMALS

17 *Rodeo Horses: the wild and the tame*

ELIZABETH A. LAWRENCE

Rodeo, a legacy from the days of the American trail and range cowboy, is extremely popular throughout the western United States. Rodeo is an integral part of traditional life for many people in the Great Plains, where there is historical continuity between the cattle frontier and ranching, and the modern 'cowboy sport' that developed from them. The origins of rodeo can be traced to the Wild West show as well as to the sports and contests that were first held by early working cowboys for their own amusement (Lawrence 1982, pp. 44–82). Rivalry between cowhands as to who could ride the wildest bronc for the longest time or rope the liveliest calf or biggest steer led to riding and roping matches. Ultimately these events became popular with spectators and developed into full-scale rodeo, in which the utilitarian skills of cowboys became intensified as the sport of cattle country, comprising both performance and contest.

In its particular social and cultural context, rodeo is an important ritual event, participated in and sponsored by the ranching population as well as others who share that group's ethos. My research reveals that the sport serves to express, reaffirm, and perpetuate certain values and attitudes characteristic of the cattle herders' way of life. Rodeo picks up on the main themes from the work of the cowboy, identifies and magnifies them, and makes them explicit through patterned performances, almost all of which involve interactions with horses. Just as the cowboys' horses, their essential helpers in all tasks, were and are of prime importance to them, so these horses also play a pre-eminent role in contemporary rodeo. Horses are involved in virtually all standard professional rodeo events, with the exception of bull-riding. Various classes of equine animals take the role of the rodeo participants' antagonists in bronc-riding events, and of their partners in the various mounted contests in which cattle are chased and roped or subdued.

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Symbolic conquest

Findings from my long-term field studies of the Great Plains ranch and rodeo complex indicate that by means of the range and diversity of equine contests and performances included in rodeo, information is communicated about people's perceptions of, and interactions with, the species of animal whose subjugation and use was vital in the 'winning of the West.' On a deep level, human-horse interactions, in the various forms in which they are presented in rodeo, have come to symbolize that conquest itself, the subduing of the wilderness, the transforming of nature to culture through the process of taming that which was wild and controlling that which was free, as it was enacted upon the American frontier.

The equine animal is remarkably well suited to re-enact and represent symbolically the wild-tame transition, for within a single species it encompasses the extreme polarities of wild and tame and embodies the varying degrees between them. In their differing categories within the structure of the sport, horses exhibit characteristics ranging between the oppositions of wild and tame. The balance between the amount of control over the horse that the rider demonstrates and the amount of wildness and rebellion or tameness and obedience that the horse displays varies with each event, and both control and wildness are determinants of the contestant's success or failure. The dramatic countering of forces makes the process of exerting human dominance over animals particularly evident.

To become useful for human purposes each individual horse must first be transformed by taming, even though its species is domesticated. Though in many cultures the schooling of a colt is a gradual process, a Western range horse may come to its first day of training with little or no past experience with people and no knowledge of being subject to their domination. Thus there is a sudden and intense human-animal contest in which a person opposes the brute strength of the horse with his own type weapons – whip, spur, and bit, the instruments of culture – because he is inferior to the animal in physical strength and power. The resulting dramatic process, characteristically abrupt and violent, known to cowboys as 'breaking a bronc', becomes universally symbolic for the act of conquering. Working cowboys are by necessity intimately concerned with this process because the maintenance of their way of life depends on mounts that do their bidding. Further training beyond the 'broke' status refines the horse's repertoire, making it into a reliable working partner.



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