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Brianna Meyer

Riding In Circles:
Gender and Horse(wo)manship in the American Saddlebred Community

When I tell people what I “do” as an equestrian, I describe the practice as “riding in circles.” This is where the title of my paper comes from, which also serves as a metaphor for women who have worked so long to be accepted as trainers and serious riders in a historically male-dominated industry. Technically speaking, I practice English saddleseat—a very specialized and unique form of riding that can be done on any breed of horse, but for me has always been done on American Saddlebreds. Since the early 1800s, the industry has evolved into an economically elite community populated mostly by historically involved sets of influential families, with a few newcomers joining throughout the years. For this reason, issues of social class could be considered in the future, but go beyond this paper. Instead, I will focus solely on gender in the Saddlebred community. Growing up a third generation horsewoman, I have always been interested in the history and politics of the sport from a woman’s perspective. The research as a whole looks at the progression of involvement of women in the industry through time, focusing on the personal stories and connections that helped change the community from mostly male trainers into mostly women amateur riders. As breed journalist Brendan Heintz said to me in an interview, “The number of women exhibitors to men is still pretty vast—probably about 80% women and 20% men. Perhaps because historically, riding horses was *considered more of a woman’s thing to do*, which always amazes me at the number of men who end up becoming professional horsepersons” (emphasis mine).¹ His statement gave me the scope of this paper in particular, which examines how women receive little credit for driving the industry forward, while male trainers have ascended as figureheads for a community that has long been dominated

¹ Brendan Heintz (from *Around the Arena*) email message to author, December 1, 2016.

by a majority female population. I chose to explore the personal stories of some of the most influential and inspiring women riders of my time and see how their involvement has changed the industry today.

Because I have been personally involved with the Saddlebred industry my whole life, I consider this project auto-ethnography. Though I initially tried to consciously distance myself so that my insider status would not color my analysis, I quickly found that even I had a lot to learn from the research. I still had many misconceptions about how the logistics of the past have affected the present. Apart from theoretical sources, about a third of my research comes from historical documents, articles, and biographies from the breed archives in the American Saddlebred Museum. The remaining portion consists of personal interviews with women trainers and amateurs performed over a six-month period last year, when I was funded by a summer research grant from Augustana College. I spent around 40 days traveling to and attending shows in Illinois, North Carolina, Wisconsin, Kansas, and our World Championship in Louisville, Kentucky, where I interviewed ten longtime industry participants about women involvement in the Saddlebred community.

My research falls into a theoretical area between anthropology of sport and leisure studies. In her "Introduction to Anthropology and Sport" (2002), Catherine Palmer states that anthropologists can no longer ignore sport as a creator and transmitter of meaning (2002:253). She also notes that issues of gender are "crucially tied" to the study of sports and anthropology (253), and that prolonged personal involvement by the researcher "can only assist the anthropological enterprise" (254). In a case as niche as mine, a wealth of background knowledge is critical to understanding the macro-level issues of gender in the community. The other half of my argument uses leisure studies to explain how amateur equestriennes take their hobby as

mental and physical conditioning, much like a job. In their volume *The Discipline of Leisure* (2007), Coleman & Kohn cite Tom Hodgkinson's explanation of the difference between *pleasure* (a good time driven by drugs and drink) and *leisure* (a disciplined hobby). They propose a conflation of leisure and work in sport culture, especially in cases where physical and mental alteration starts as a distracting hobby and ends up as a job. As they say, participants "appear to need leisure *from* their leisure, further options for relaxation in relation to a chosen activity that is also a form of obligation" (6).

Every amateur participant of the Saddlebred industry, regardless of gender, fits this description. However the category of people I label "professional amateurs" has always been made up of mostly women. These women are not paid to train horses, but in the spirit of Coleman & Kohn's athletes, they have dedicated significant time, money, and energy to train *with* horses. They are the highest level of amateurs, and they are abundant. I watched hours of lessons in which ladies from my barn trained their bodies to react with autonomous two thousand pound living beings, with their only goal being acknowledgement in the show ring and mastered connection with their horses. During the show season, women don three-piece habits with derby hats, gloves, and boots despite the sweltering humidity of southern summers, and then go perform a draining class that can last up to a half hour. They take the time to put on makeup in order to remain feminine, while still pulling their hair back into a bun so it will not impede their performance. They spend time and money on this sport so that they can remain connected to the horses that have shaped their lives. But it somehow goes beyond just owning a horse in the backyard. The women of this community are drawn to Saddlebred culture as a whole, and I loved watching their stories of endless dedication come to life. These women were the focus of my research.

One of my interviewees, amateur Nancy Leigh Fischer, deeply discussed my topic: professional amateur women who drive the Saddlebred industry from behind the scenes. We discussed how over the years, many women have traditionally been restricted to winning only certain classes at top shows. Both she and my trainer Lynda Freseth said, “I think women still have to do twice the job to get half the credit.”² Overall, the general sentiment of women is that they have been underestimated in high stakes professional work, but dominate the amateur divisions at all levels. Plus, Nancy Leigh and I discussed how without the women of the past, the Saddlebred industry would not be what it is today. She mentioned Loula Long Combs, Why Worry Farm, Dodge Stables, and Callaway Hills (breeders of some of the greatest horses of all time). These women rode and drove, what Nancy Leigh called “real horsewomen, because they did it all, for the love of the animal.”³ Though male trainers got much of the immediate credit (and admittedly did deserve some of it), those matriarchs are the ones who gave the trainers their jobs in the first place. Without the passion, dedication, and love of the women who owned barns and bred horses, the industry might not even be here today. In a way similar to the athletes described in Coleman & Kohn’s book, these women dedicated their whole lives to the promotion of an industry that did not pay them to participate, nor even thank them for it. Today, women owners and amateur riders make up 80% of the equestrian body. Without these professional amateurs, there would be no industry. It is important to remember that.

If anyone exemplifies the dedication it takes to become a professional amateur in this niche sport, it is Nancy Leigh herself. In our interview, she mentioned that at one point, she did want to become a trainer. She got married and the moment passed—as she said, “when I wanted to be a professional, there were only two ones out there, one had just started. And I wasn’t sure I

² “You had to prove yourself twice to get recognition once.” Lynda Freseth, interviewed by author, December 26, 2016

³ Fischer interview

wanted to... Well A, I got married, so that kind of took care of it. But it would have been a very hard field to break into.”⁴ Nevertheless, horses have shaped her life in every stage. She told me, “I went to college in Kentucky because of them. I got to go to school, and my horses were right there. We later moved down here from Northern Wisconsin, which also brought us closer to the horses. My life revolves around them.” Over the years, Nancy Leigh has contributed endlessly to the industry. She works with top-notch horses at her local barn in Wisconsin and drives to a barn in Kentucky. And against all odds, she earned the most prestigious title of our sport: winning the Open Five Gaited Stake at Louisville in 2003. She was only the second amateur woman to accomplish this, the first being in 1988 (Weatherman 1998:56). As she stood between her two male trainer competitors, the announcer even called her, “a rose between two thorns”—a statement meant as a compliment to her powerful femininity, but still veiled in condescension (*Saddle Horse Report* 2003). Despite this, she proved her worth and continues to be one of the most passionate and competitive women in the sport.

Tracing professional amateur women goes all the way back to the late 1800s with Loula Long Combs, whom Nancy Leigh mentioned. Ms. Long was born on Longview Farm in 1881, died there in 1971, and spent 65 years of her life showing American Saddlebred horses. Her early involvement in the industry helped me correct one of the largest misconceptions I had, which was that women had to fight to show in any capacity. This was not the case. During Ms. Long’s time, women were restricted in most sectors of sport—certain practices such as riding astride were in general considered “unladylike.” Although the Saddlebred industry was already letting women show, this socialized stigma against serious women in competition affected how the Saddlebred industry made decisions regarding women riders—that is, they were restricted and

⁴ “And when I wanted to be a professional, the only ones out there were Helen Crabtree, basically, and Bonnie had just started. And I wasn’t sure I wanted to... Well A, I got married, so that kind of took care of it. But it would have been a very hard field to break into.” (from Fischer interview)

often underestimated. Because of her competitive spirit and need to impress, Ms. Long advocated her whole life for women to not only show horses and ride astride, but to truly *compete* with their male counterparts. Ms. Long made the first step toward equality in the Saddlebred industry, which inspired the same level of involvement for professional amateur women from then on.

Through the first half of the 20th century, many women pioneered participation in different classes. My grandmother entered the Illinois scene during this time with her father, Clifton Brown. Before her death in August of last year, I was lucky enough to sit with her one last time and interview her about growing up in the early Saddlebred industry. When asked how she got involved and why she stayed involved for so long, she replied, “Hugh [our trainer] used to say my dad was the best amateur around. But he liked it. Then he probably stirred that into me. I like the competition, and I like the horses.”⁵ She ended up going to college at MacMurray in order to participate in the thriving equestrian club that Saddlebred legend Helen Crabtree had started there. After college, my grandmother had the same experience as Nancy Leigh: they both left the industry when they got married. For my grandmother, it was to teach physical education and to start her family. Eventually, though, she had to get back in it, because as she said, “I never really got out of it, intentionally.”⁶ Since then, she went on to win eight straight years of World’s Grand Championships with her beloved driving horse. And Photographer Howie Schatzberg even called the team the “greatest combination of driver and horse, in my mind, of all time”⁷—a prestigious title for a woman who has no professional job in the industry, only a dedication to a lifelong sport. And in turn, she has inspired many women to keep doing what they love, even as get older. Her last time in the ring was a year before her death at 83 years old.

⁵ Nancy Anderson, interviewed by author, June 27, 2016.

⁶ Nancy Anderson, interviewed by author, June 27, 2016.

⁷ Howard Schatzberg, interviewed by author, July 2012.

By the 1970s, women had become so present in the industry that they started a movement to create their own specialized division, which remains the powerhouse division of the industry. Irene Zane felt the need to spearhead the movement for the amateur pleasure division, which allowed non-professional women an opportunity to show at a high stakes level with more “relaxed” horses (Layos 2016:32). Though pleasure horses are more “agreeable” than horses shown by professionals, they require just as much work, and can sometimes be just as temperamental. As this division became increasingly commonplace, countless women let horses shape their lives, furthering the connection between leisure and work in the Saddlebred community. Today, pleasure classes outnumber classes in all other divisions, and still remain the largest and most popular classes for amateur women. With the advent of this division, the equestrian body reached its 80% amateur women, which ousted professional men as the majority population.

Once the pleasure division allowed participants to show performances horses with relative ease, professional amateur women came flooding into the industry and have not stopped since. My mother was one of these women. In the early 1970s, she was hired as a groom at a Saddlebred barn owned by Leona Harris near her childhood home of Plainfield, IL. There, she discovered that horses had the power to shape her life—even if they would not end up as her paid profession. As she recalls, “For me, it was not a conscious decision. I bond with the horses. All my life. I didn’t have the opportunity to show until I was older, but I would go over with Leona just so I could smell the tanbark. Just so I could be around the animals.”⁸ Once her life settled into early adulthood, my grandmother asked if she would want to get into the business as a customer. My mother said yes. This would result in driving four hours round trip every Saturday. Because the drive got to be too much of a hassle, my parents ended up moving to Wisconsin.

⁸ Linda Meyer, interviewed by author, June 27, 2016.

And, as my mom said, “It was all for fun, for the love of the horse. And I was willing to do it because I had literally waited my whole life to have this opportunity, to get to ride a horse. That’s the only reason we’re up in Wisconsin. It completely changed the route of our life.” My mother would win three straight years of World’s Grand Championship titles with her cherished gelding, who is now happily retired and loved by our whole family. And she did this all “for the love of the horse.”

Saddlebred women fought for their rights to show because they could not give up being around horses. For them, not being allowed to ride or train competitively was not an option, and they were often willing to drastically change their life path in order to follow the horse industry—even if it meant that they would be “riding in circles” until they got the chance to be taken seriously. Though men have traditionally been given direct credit for winning prestigious classes, training the most competitive horses, and even heading governing industry organizations, women have had just as much influence over the development, evolution, and existence of the American Saddlebred community. Once women started to show their own horses in classes around the country, the entire nature of the industry changed. And the entire time, they have been willing to surrender their life paths to something outsiders might see as a hobby. This echoes the sentiments in both Coleman & Kohn and Palmer, which emphasize the ability of sport to not only help someone make meaning *inside* a subculture, but also shape their entire life *outside* of that subculture. For the professional amateur women I interviewed, the Saddlebred industry and their disciplined involvement in it gives meaning to their lives in a continual and intense process that I witness every time I see them smile after a class. I often say that no one can truly understand a Saddlebred horse show until they witness one in person. But no one can truly

understand the *meaning* of a Saddlebred horse show until they understand the dedication of the countless women who see this industry as more than just a sport. It is a way of life.

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