



Pendleton Round-Up Queen Kylee Jensen gallops around the arena. Each year the rodeo names a queen and three princesses.

MOLLY MORROW

# Sweet Hearts OF THE RODEO

Despite dwindling numbers, rodeo queens are still the Western horse culture's best ambassadors.

By TIM KELLER and CHRISTINA BOYCE

**A**VOIDING THE DEEP SNOW ON THE SURROUNDING SLOPES, Micheli Walton and Anne Sporleder ride a snowpacked road around a frozen Colorado lake. They ride easy and well, not surprising to anyone who saw them sprint their horses around Colorado's Las Animas County Fairground arena last Labor Day weekend, when Anne carried the flag as Trinidad Round-Up Rodeo Queen and Micheli was the junior queen.

Twelve-year-old Micheli is the fifth generation of her family to live on Sugarite Canyon Ranch, which straddles the high Colorado-New Mexico border east of Raton Pass. She grew up horseback and has been working cattle since she was 6. Anne is part of the fourth generation on her family ranch near Walsenburg, Colorado, and at 18 she's been riding much longer than Micheli. Now a barrel racer and avid photographer, she enters college this fall, hoping to become a trauma or surgical nurse.

Last fall, the A.R. Mitchell Museum of Western Art in Trinidad, Colorado, created a window display of past rodeo queens going back 105 years. Included were photos of some of Micheli's relatives.

"A few of my aunts and cousins were queens," Micheli says.

With impressive horsemanship and ranch skills, and long lists of other accomplishments, Anne and Micheli are ideal representatives of Western ranch and rodeo culture. It's not surprising that they emerged from the rigorous competition required to become queens of the rodeo.

Except there was no competition. No one else entered.



Since she was 7, Anne Sporleder has waited in lines to get autographs of rodeo queens that she admired. Now 18 and the Trinidad Round-Up Rodeo Queen, she enjoys signing her own autograph sheets for lines of kids at the National Western Stock Show in Denver last January.

♥  
**DECEMBER'S MISS RODEO AMERICA** pageant in Las Vegas drew representatives from 33 states, up from 27 just two years earlier, but participation at state and local levels has fallen to not just single-digit numbers, but sometimes to ones and zeroes.

"We are losing numbers," concedes Dayna Jenkins, a former rodeo queen and now executive assistant at Miss Rodeo America, Inc. "And we're in danger of losing our culture if we don't fight for it. Rodeo queens are uniquely positioned to represent not only rodeo, but ranching and the Western lifestyle. Rodeo contestants don't have time to serve as representatives because they're busy competing and earning paychecks and moving on to the next rodeo. It's the rodeo queens that are available to meet the fans and make personal appearances and represent the rodeo."

Long active in the Miss Rodeo Nebraska program, and sister to a former Miss Rodeo America, Tricia Schaffer has been director of the National High School Rodeo Association queen contest for more than 20 years.

"NHSRA membership now includes 42 states, five Canadian provinces and Australia, for a total of 48 potential contestants, making it the largest rodeo queen competition in the world," she says. "These are the best kids. They're responsible and hardworking. They've been taking care of horses. They're from great families. The product they're selling is rodeo."

But the world is changing.

"Girls participate in a lot more activities these days," Schaffer says. "Schools used to have [only] volleyball for the girls, but now they're in sports and other activities all year. The decline in queen programs in recent years is a social phenomenon, too. Media doesn't promote the good girls. It promotes the bad girls. Look at magazines and ads. It's not a wholesome look. Girls don't want to look like their grandmas."

Jamie Rauch, a judge for Miss Rodeo USA (affiliated with the International Professional Rodeo Association), says another issue is that people stereotype rodeo queens "as dumb blonde, pretty girls in pretty shining shirts, a girl that can't ride a horse to save her life." The

TIM KELLER



Sisters and rodeo queens Jana Mills (right) and Ashlee Rose Mills enjoy a winter ride at home in Eagle Nest, New Mexico. Jana rides Beau, her black 19-year-old gelding, while Ashlee Rose rides Rio, her 20-year-old gelding.

author of *Teach the Teachers: A Guide for Rodeo Queen Committees*, Rauch runs Rodeo Queen University & Bible Camp each summer in her home state of Washington.

"Rodeo queens are more than cowboy hats and rhinestones," she says.

Schaffer adds that "nine out of 10 of our high school rodeo queen contestants are also entering rodeo events. They can look pretty and also ride and rope."

Big smiles and beautiful outfits are part of the package, but if you can't ride a horse you can't enter the arena.

♥  
**ASHLEE ROSE MILLS** started life without horses.

"Mom watched John Wayne movies and I fell in love with the horses then," she says. "I've always been drawn to them."

Her dad arrived in northern New Mexico's Moreno Valley as a new teacher drawn by the area's rich hiking and fishing opportunities. There, he met Ashley Rose's mother, and he is now the longtime principal of Eagle Nest Elementary-Middle School.

TIM KELLER

"One of Dad's teachers offered to teach me to ride in exchange for cleaning stables and other chores," Ashlee Rose says. "I got my first horse in the second grade."

Soon she was in 4-H, then entering several events in a biweekly summer youth rodeo series.

"My love of horses grew into my love of rodeo," she says.

At 15, Ashlee Rose began an eight-year run of rodeo queen competitions that included two reigns each as Cimarron Maverick Rodeo Queen and Colfax County Fair & Rodeo Queen, in addition to Eastern New Mexico State Fair Queen and, finally, Miss Rodeo New Mexico, which sent her to Las Vegas to represent her state at the 2013 Miss Rodeo America pageant. The other MRA contestants voted her Miss Congeniality.

Ashlee Rose was the only entrant in that year's Miss Rodeo New Mexico competition.

Low contestant numbers have become common around the country. For the past four years, Miss Rodeo Mississippi has had only one contestant, or none. DeShannon Davis was Miss Rodeo Mississippi



Micheli Walton (left) and Anne Sporleder enjoy the view as Junior and Senior Trinidad Round-Up Rodeo Queens.

1998. She's since earned a doctorate degree, and has served as Miss Rodeo Mississippi national director for 11 years and as a member of the Miss Rodeo America executive board for seven.

"Having only one contestant has not stopped our queens from doing well on the national level," says Davis, adding that her state's queens won Miss Rodeo America in 2010 and 2014, with a top-10 finish in 2013.

The falling numbers may threaten the existence of rodeo queen programs, but pageant organizers say the quality of today's rodeo queens reflects the strength of the Western horse culture they represent, its families and ranches, and the sport of rodeo.

"In a time where you have iPhones, instant Wi-Fi, fast food, everything here and now," says Ashlee Rose, "it's easy to forget the traditions that our country has. Rodeo is such a great tradition that needs to stay special to our country."

The skills she's developed through queen competitions are taking her far.

"You address your weak areas," she says. "You say, 'This didn't work; what am I going to change to improve?' You always compete to win. You win or you learn. And as a rodeo queen, you represent something so much greater than yourself."

One semester after her Miss Rodeo America competition, Ashlee Rose graduated from the University of New Mexico with a degree in criminology and minor in psychology. In May of 2017 she'll graduate from UNM School of Law.

"I want to work my way up to the New Mexico District Attorney's office," she says. "My heart is with the victims."

Around her hometown, she's already known as Judge Mills. In 2014, she became the municipal judge, the youngest elected official in Eagle Nest's history. She credits horses with teaching her faith, patience and persistence.

"When you're bucked off, you get back on," she says. "You learn to push through and not quit."

Although six years younger than her sister, Janna Mills admits to a fiercely competitive nature that's kept her close on her sister's heels.

"When Ashlee started riding alone, I had to ride alone," Janna says.

Janna's own successes include competing at the National Little Britches Rodeo Association Finals in goat tying. She started entering rodeo queen competitions one year after Ashlee and has since won many of the same titles, plus New Mexico State

Fair Rodeo Queen, a title that eluded her sister.

"Entering rodeo queen programs has taught me to set goals and work through the ranks," Janna says. "I started in a county program and I'm working my way to the national level. Anything is possible. I'm starting a career as an elementary school teacher and I want to become New Mexico's Secretary of Education. My success will depend on the skills I've learned through rodeo queen programs."



"EVERYONE KNOWS that earning Eagle Scout [in Boy Scouts of America] takes hard work, that it's a pinnacle of success. We want people to realize that rodeo queens go through a comparable process," says Miss Rodeo America's Dayna Jenkins.

Competition typically lasts all day at the local level and several days at the state level. Vying for Miss Rodeo America requires a week, and judging includes a personal interview, an on-camera media interview, a prepared speech, answering extemporaneous questions that include current events, and modeling Western fashions.

A Miss Rodeo America contestant must ride a prescribed horsemanship pattern, done in the arena, followed by a horsemanship interview. A written test on horsemanship and rodeo is so rigorous that Ashlee Rose credits it with helping prepare her for law school. In addition to equine science and horsemanship, test questions cover Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association leaders, names of stock contractors, ProRodeo Hall of Fame members, *ProRodeo Sports News*, the 300-page PRCA Rule Book and the 600-page PRCA Media Guide.

"Studying the PRCA Rule Book helped me read cases in law school," Ashlee Rose says.

The horsemanship and rodeo portions of the competition count for almost 50 percent of the final result.

Each winner spends a year or more representing rodeo and her community. Micheli and Anne have ridden in parades and helped present children's

TIM KELLER

# STOP THE STOMP!

Shoofly LEGGINGS™

The Best Fly-Bite Protection on the Planet (for horses)



Use loose-fitting, chemical free Shoofly Leggings™ during fly season to prevent painful fly bites and reduce stressful stomping which leads to hoof damage and leg fatigue.

Available in 3 colors & 5 sizes

Gray | Orange | Blue  
Mini | Yearling | Small | Medium | Large

www.shooflyleggings.com

- ✓ Prevents painful bites from flies & other biting insects, reducing leg stress from stomping
- ✓ Prevents Botflies from laying eggs causing hoof damage
- ✓ Decreases healing time of abrasions & wounds by allowing air flow
- ✓ Easy to attach, comfortable to wear and will not sag due to their unique sewn-in plastic stays.
- ✓ 100% Manufacturer's Guarantee



Patented Design US6508205B1  
Exclusively Distributed By:

**STONE**  
MANUFACTURING & SUPPLY COMPANY

1212 Kansas Ave. Kansas City, MO 64127  
816.231.4020 • Fax 816.241.3336  
www.stonemfg.net

Gist SILVERSMITHS

The Rio Rancho Collection



Esquisitely Styled

Proudly Made in the USA

SHOP ONLINE • GISTSILVERSMITHS.COM



events at the rodeo. Anne has represented Trinidad Round-up Rodeo at four other Colorado Pro Rodeo Association events. She has especially loved appearing at the National Western Stock Show in Denver for the past three years.

"I've been fascinated by rodeo queens since our first trip to Cheyenne Frontier Days when I was 7," she says. "Getting their autograph sheets is special. You get to meet someone in the rodeo."

Now kids line up to meet her. In Grand Junction last September, she says she went through all 75 of her autograph sheets in one evening.



Dayna Jenkins of Miss Rodeo America, Inc., is shown with Miss Rodeo America 2015 Lauren Heaton. Jenkins says rodeo queens are a big part of the Western culture, and she is concerned about a decreasing number of participants in queen contests.

"Kids lined up to meet me. They get excited," she says.

"Part of the job is being accessible," says Janna. "You're part of the community. As a queen, I've attended everything from football games to flea markets to concerts. I've traveled to various PRCA rodeos. It's opened my eyes to seeing that there are thousands of children out there who love horses, love rodeo, but don't have the opportunity. People love horses."

Ashlee Rose created a weekly rodeo show for KRTN radio in Raton.

"It allowed me to promote rodeo, and then when I went to Cheyenne they had me announce the saddle bronc event on the radio," she says. "You encounter people who have never

SHOOTER ENTERPRISES/COURTESY OF MISS RODEO AMERICA, INC.

experienced rodeo. You're an ambassador and a promoter. The more crowds you can bring in, the better support that rodeo has."

Ashlee Rose agrees that stereotypes have hurt queen programs.

"The reality is that becoming a rodeo queen is a huge accomplishment," she says. "You've studied and practiced and impressed the judges. They've chosen you to be the one out there promoting their program."

Jenkins says the media is the rodeo queen's best ally in fighting negative stereotypes.

"This year's Miss Rodeo America, Katherine Merck from Washington, is in law school and she knows how to weld," she says. "Having her in the media helps eliminate stereotypes."

And Jenkins sees nothing wrong with the way rodeo queens look.

"You can be conservative without looking like your grandma," she says. "In order to be a rodeo queen, the girls have to be conservative. They're representing ranching and the Western way of life, where you wear the clothes to get the job done."

Concerned about falling participation in local and state contests, Jenkins suggests that local programs redouble their promotion and recruitment via the media, including creating attractive and informative websites, and using Facebook, Instagram and other social media to help draw in new potential queen candidates.

Janna Mills has gone further. She recruited her own competition, enrolling three girls, even loaning them horses and giving them lessons. She's presented monthly summer riding clinics. Four kids came in June, and by September the group had grown to 12. This summer she's even recruiting her own rodeo team, helping with everything from lessons to entry forms, "to open up doors to kids who would never have that opportunity," she says.

In a fast-changing world, there's plenty of room for innovation.

ANNE SPORLEDER AND MICHELI WALTON like the challenges of rodeo queen competition, and they love

being public ambassadors for rodeo, ranching and the Western lifestyle. Most of all, though, they enjoy living that lifestyle. They are horsewomen far more often than they are rodeo queens.

Crossing a high snow-covered pasture on the Sugarite Canyon Ranch, they're just two Western schoolgirls having fun, laughing, riding horses. 🐾

TIM KELLER is a writer and photographer based in Raton, New Mexico. His wife, CHRISTINA BOYCE, is director of the A.R. Mitchell Museum of Western Art in Trinidad, Colorado. Send comments on this story to [edit@westernhorseman.com](mailto:edit@westernhorseman.com).

# Another Happy Customer

**Dr. Thornley's HAY BALANCER**  
Vitamin & Mineral Supplement for Horses

Developed by Veterinarians & Nutritionists

**30 Days Free at HayBalancer.com**

# RIDE & SLIDE!

Celebrating 20 years of Helping People Ride a Better Horse

Divisions for All Skill Levels of Horse & Rider  
Show in One Class or All Four  
Stock Horse Pleasure • Trail • Reining • Cow

May 20-21, 2016 *Dripping Springs, Texas	September 23-24, 2016 *Bryan, Texas
June 10-11, 2016 *San Antonio, Texas	October 7-8, 2016 *Stephenville, Texas
July 22-23, 2016 Sulphur Springs, Texas	2016 Western Horseman Stock Horse World Championships October 28-30, 2016 Abilene, Texas
August 5-6, 2016 *Hamilton, Texas	
September 9-10, 2016 *Vernon, Texas	*Shows also feature AQHA Ranch Riding and/or VRH

855-846-SHOT (7468) • [stockhorsetexas.org](http://stockhorsetexas.org)