

RIDING AGAINST ODDS: A FEMALE BULL RIDERS'
NARRATIVE

by

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This thesis will explore the culture of female narratives in the bull riding and rodeo community. Female narratives are under-represented, quietly told and are not in the spotlight, especially in smaller sports, such as bull riding. Some female bull riders are entering the spotlight, however the difference between men and women is big. There has been lots of progress made in this sport due to some female athletes however still there is much more progress to be made. My goal is to look at four female athletes in the bull-riding community to highlight their careers and what they go through in a male-dominated and conservative minded sport. The sport emphasizes Western values, patriotism, and independence, making some think that rodeos are only for men.

I conduct a historical analysis of bull riding and explore women's role in bull riding and rodeos. I also interviewed Jorden Halvorsen, Breana Lafforthun and Dayna and Madison Eilert, who are all female bull riders, to gain a greater understanding of what some women in smaller sports like bull riding face as athletes. These athletes shared their stories of training, competition culture and what they experience as a female in this sport. I believe that these females do experience some sort of stereotype, whether it was during their early training days or competitions or currently. I also aim to investigate their sense of identity and sense of self to see

if their experience in their sport has shaped who they are today and what their biggest challenges have been.

Finally, I look at all these athletes' stories and see patterns that connect them as athletes. Do Halvorsen, Lafforthun and Eilert all experience the same thing, or do they experience different things?

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An Introduction into Female Bull Riding

Eight seconds is not a long time. It's long enough to form a first impression, take a deep breath, or hold a door for a stranger. But for bull riders, eight seconds can feel like an hour because they try to remain on a bucking bull with only one hand. It is known as the most dangerous eight seconds in sports. For every 1,000 rides¹, between 32.2 to 48.2 competitors get injuries including concussions, getting stomped by the bull, or dismounting the bull. To get a score in the sport, athletes attempt to stay on for eight seconds. If one fails to do so, a rider gets no score. The sport is a gritty, high-stakes rodeo event and is regarded as the "toughest sport on dirt". It has been around for centuries, beginning in the 16th century in Mexico, and there are countless narratives on elite bull riders. However, a female perspective is lacking.

Female narratives in sports are important for many different reasons, for they show young girls they can break stereotypes around feeling as outliers in male-dominated sports or feeling slower as a female athlete. Narratives also encourage many women to amplify their voice. Those narratives between women creates a "mirror" effect because when female trailblazers speak out more women engage. It seeks women to talk about sports and breaks down the sport for women to speak out. However, there is an inequality in female narratives, especially in smaller sports. Smaller sports are sports that are less in the mainstream popularity and have fewer athletes, like bull riding.

With the lack of sponsorships, media coverage and leadership roles, this can discourage women from joining and sharing their voices, especially in smaller sports like rodeo events.

¹ This information came from a 2012 six-year study looking at bull riding athletes in Australia. It was the first national study looking at bull riding-related injuries. It was published on National Library of Medicine.

There is an underrepresentation of women in bull riding. Women have been participating in bull riding for decades, and while it is not as common as men's participation, women do not receive the narratives that they deserve in the media. Over 700 women participate in multiple rodeo events according to the Women's Rodeo Championships², however, there is no exact number to how many women ride bulls. Some say that fewer than 100 women professionally bull ride yet there are over 600 to 800 male professional bull riders. Bull riding is a small sport, with the extreme injury possibility and dangers with riding the animal, not many people compete.

The Women Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA) is the oldest women's sports organization in the country. Founded in 1948, they had a goal to stake their own place in rodeos. They have empowered women all over the United States who are competing in barrel racing and breakaway roping, however, they are lacking in bull riding. While there are a fewer number of female bull riders, it's still important that they have a space to stake their own place within bull riding.

This thesis looks at the history of bull riding, the female disadvantage in the rodeo community through training, competitions and the culture surrounding bull riding and rodeos. I interviewed four female bull riders, who ride competitively in the United States. These interviews investigated both the athlete and the sport by gaining insight into the world of female bull riding by those who are exposed to the sport. Additionally, these interviews explored the challenge that these women face as bull riders and what could be done for these athletes since they are working through institutional misogyny. Those challenges could include discrimination

² Women's Rodeo Championships is one of the premier, highest-paying all-women's rodeo events with over \$800,000 in prizes. It is held annually in Fort Worth and Arlington, Texas, however they do not feature bull riding.

for being women by other athletes or individuals working the events or training for a challenging sport with such a heavy animal. I structured my research around three main questions:

1. How has the view of female bull riders in the rodeo community changed over time?
2. What stereotypes do female bull riders face in their sport?
3. How does being a female bull rider shape their identity and sense of self?

My perspective

I came into this thesis with not a lot of prior knowledge on rodeos. I am from Portland, Oregon where there is not a lot of rodeos around me. My first experience of a rodeo was going to the St. Paul rodeo in 2024 where I became invested in the culture of rodeos. I saw there was a female narrative missing from these stories. I knew that I wanted to conduct my research around women's narratives in sports, and I thought bull riding would be most beneficial because rodeo culture has generally been missing a female perspective.

When starting my research, I started searching on Google to find bull riders. I had many troubles finding female bull riders because I only got a few names, some of them being Australian, which was not helpful to my study. I reached out to over 15 female bull riders to try and get interviews. Many of them did not respond back to me or redirected me to other people because they did not want to or were scared to share their stories. Only four riders responded back to me willing and excited to be interviewed. I reached out to many of them over Facebook and through email. I reached out to bull riding and rodeo organizations like PBR and the WPRA. Only WPRA was interested in discussing women's rodeo roles with me. I got a lot of "no's" and no-response while trying to get interviews for my research.

Literature Review

Female narrative sport studies

There has been some past research done on bull riding, however, there has been much more research done for the importance of female narratives in sports. “The Impact of the Media on Gender Inequality with Sports” is a 2013 study done by Eoin J. Trolan that features the portrayal of female athletes in the media compared to the portrayal of male athletes. Media coverage often distinguishes between gender through narratives and framing. Trolan found that female athletes are subjected to objectification and invisibility compared to male athletes. Trolan wrote that “this inequality within sport will continue to exist until the media re-examines its portrayal of female athletes” (Trolan 2013). While some can argue that the media is starting to re-examine that and put female athlete’s first, the narrative of these women are still lacking. Some storylines feature more on what the women looks like with her body than being an athlete. The media creates these storylines, giving an inequality for female narratives.

A 2014 study was done on the airtime for ESPN *SportsCenter* and KCBS, KNBC and KABC ³ on their coverage of women’s sports. In the study “No Slam Dunk: Gender, Sport and the Unevenness of Social Change”, the authors Cheryl Cooky and Michael Messner found that there was a huge underrepresentation of sports airtime and female representation on televised stations. They found that these television stations only covered women’s sports 3.2% of times while male sport coverage was 94.4% in 1999. The authors also found that in 2014, there was zero Woman’s National Basketball Association stories featured during out-of-season play, where there were 20 National Basketball Association stories aired during that same time. While this

³ KCBS, KNBC and KABC are major television and radio stations serving in Southern California and Los Angeles market.

study is over ten years old, it is still relevant to see how much screen time women sports are getting. There have been further initiatives in media like *Everyone Watches Women Sports*⁴, to grow that number of viewership so that media outlets like KCBS, KNBC and KABC can highlight more out-of-season play stories female athletes.

Rodeo studies

There has been some research done in bull riding already, however, the research has featured Professional Bull Riding (PBR) and masculinity, power, gender and performance in bull riding. In the study done by Luke Winslow⁵ and edited by Barry Brummett, the author discusses a range of things from masculine power to terms that affect masculinity. The author shows “how masculinity is performed through a rhetoric of exclusion. Audience members watching the program are taught important lessons about masculinity by way of inversion” (Brummett 2009). This book emphasizes rodeo performance for men but lacks the discussion of female performance. Sports give identity to both men and women and without a female perspective, one only sees a side to a story but not the whole picture.

In the book, *Fried Twinkies, Buckle Bunnies, & Bull Riders*⁶, author Josh Peter focuses on a year inside a PBR tour. “Buckle bunnies” is a term for women who go to rodeos looking for a bull riding man. The book title itself gives insight to how women in those spaces are viewed – looking for a man and not competing. In 2004, women did not have a spot in those arenas to

⁴ Everyone Watches Women’s Sports is a viral slogan and movement that was launched by the media brand TOGETHR to highlight the rising popularity and viewership of women’s sports in the late 2020s.

⁵ This book studies the ways in which engagement is performed in popular culture. They look at different sports and the three themes of sports and games, performance and the rhetoric of popular culture.

⁶ The 2004 study on the PBR Tour looked at the rise of professional bull riding and how it continued to grow in the United States.

compete in, and the population of female bull riders was very small. It is lacking female athletes but gives space to the sport itself which is important.

Female spotlights in rodeos

With all these studies, there is a big piece that's missing and that is focusing on female athletes. It's been over 10 years for a lot of the studies that have been published, and those 10 years have changed many things in the sport, especially with an increase of female roles. No matter the gender of the athlete, they are still getting on the same 1,000-to-2,000-pound bull and hoping to ride for at least eight seconds. With the rise of social media, more women are in the spotlight as bull riders and more media attention is centered around these females. Male narratives have been published for years yet female narratives have only come out over the past five to ten years.

One of the first major female narratives that have come out in bull riding was *Not Her First Rodeo*, a 2025 Hulu six-part docuseries featuring five female bull-riders. The show follows the athletes as they take a shot at a championship title. Taking place in Texas, Colorado and Florida, this is one of the first pieces of media that has shown female bull riders in the spotlight. The show got a 7.2/10 rating on IMDb. The ABC News production is a reality style show that got mainly positive reviews. This shows that more female narratives should be in the spotlight for smaller sports. By no means is it equal, but women are changing the narrative. Jorden Halvorsen, Breana Lafforthun, and twins Dayna and Madison Eilert are women who ride bulls. They have worked extremely hard to ride today and each have a different background in the sport. This thesis will explore their narratives and highlight their stories and the work they have done. These four athletes are changing the narratives of female bull riding and making a mark on the sport.

Methods

This thesis features a background and a historical data analysis of the sport of bull riding using secondary data, while providing a background of women's roles in bull riding. I cover the sport itself and some of the challenges that all athletes face – featuring injuries, mental illnesses and the roles in rodeos. From there, I also discussed rodeos in general. As a historically conservative sport, it dates to the 16th century but got more popular in 1935 in Mississippi. The root of the sport celebrates patriotism and traditional gender roles, which makes it harder for women to get their feet in the door. For many rodeo locations around the United States, they are more than just a sport but also a community event with carnival games, fast food and opportunities to purchase merchandise. This qualitative data provided a foundation to gain understanding of the sport and why it could be difficult for women enter and succeed in the sport.

To explore these ideas, I conducted qualitative interviews with female bull riders. I reached out to over 15 female bull riders who ride competitively around the United States to interview them over Zoom. Only four responded to me, and I talked to four riders throughout the country about training, community involvement, and how it feels to be a female bull rider in a male-dominated sport. Each athlete gave an individual perspective on being a female bull rider. There were specific questions given for each athlete, along with generic questions. I based these questions in the information I gathered from my literature review, which suggested important themes to investigate through additional research. I used the skills that I learned through my time at the School of Journalism and Communications (SOJC) to establish a relationship with the athletes to build a repour and ask good questions. Along with SOJC journalism classes and

“Interviewing: The Oregon Method”, I established a strong interview protocol that I used during interviews.

Interview protocol:

1. How long have you been bull riding?
2. What is your favorite part about bull riding?
3. What is the biggest challenge you face as a bull rider?
4. Do you feel your gender has a role in bull riding?
5. Have you experienced inequality because of your gender as a bull rider?
6. Do you feel you have to “prove yourself” as a female in this sport?
7. How do you feel about being in a male-dominated sport?

After the interviews, I evaluated my data for common themes that emerged from the athletes’ narratives, particularly how that manifested through their gender identity. I present each athlete’s story in a separate chapter, which details their unique experiences as female athletes bull riding’s male-dominated community. Those chapters describe their background in the sport, rigorous training and the biggest challenges they encounter. I conclude my research by presenting those themes from the four athletes to see if they face similar inequalities as athletes.

Rodeo History and Culture

In the early days of the rodeo, women fought for equality. The roots of the sport are complicated and lean more conservatively; they have followed more traditional gender roles in the past, and the community leans more republican. The sport, which dates to the 1600s, started to grow popular in the 1850s. Professional Bull Riding (PBR) was founded in 1992. There are strong ties to conservative values, emphasizing the “cowboy” value by transforming ranch skills into a high-stake sport. Sponsors for PBR include Walmart, Boot Barn and Border Patrol, all conservative-aligned corporations. PBR also states that they stand in opposition to “woke” or liberal political trends. Cowboy roots, what rodeos are founded on, are intertwined with modern American conservatism.

Rodeo culture is a tight-knit community with 16th-century traditions of Spanish and Mexican cowboys with 19th-century American cowboy working practices. The sport celebrates hard work, traditions and community and is often generational. Riders will train and learn through older family members. Bull riding season primarily runs from the spring through the fall, with most of the events running from June through September. The all-day event brings the community together with food and shopping. People pack the stands to watch athletes compete around the arena. Each winner can win a few thousand dollars, with the bigger competitions like PBR winning over a million.

Women’s roles

Women’s roles in rodeos go back to the 19th century. Women rode horses to round up cattle and horses but did not do much past that. In 1918, women competed in the first indoor rodeo in Fort Worth, Texas. In the 1920s, women participated in relay racing, rough stock riding and trick riding. One of the first women to ride was Fox Hastings, who created an inclusive

space in the rodeo area. In 1925, 14-year-old Hastings decided that she wanted to rope and ride. She became a female pioneer and created a feminine space in rodeos (Whitehead). From there, the sport started to grow for women.

With the sport creating more access for women, they continued to face challenges competing in the male-dominated field. Until the early 1940s, there were no professional competitions for women in rodeos. Finally, in 1948, rules for women in rodeos were established through the Female Rodeo Cowboys Association. Before Title IX and the women's liberation movement, the first professional sports association was created for women by women, the Girls Rodeo Association (GRA) in San Angelo, Texas. GRA was founded by 38 cowgirls to create a professional, female-governed organization and it's the oldest women's sports organization in the United States. They wanted to protect women from unfair practices in the sport to establish official rules and give women prize money in a male-dominated sport. That organization later changed to Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA).

Now, over 75 years later, women participate in many different rodeo roles with a range of skills. Women perform as rodeo clowns, a rodeo performer who has multiple purposes, including their comedic antics and distracting the bull so riders can exit safely. A big role for women is rodeo queens, who represent and promote rodeo events, they participate in various public appearances and rodeo performances, embodying the spirit of the American West and its traditions. Before women could participate in rodeo events, they could only be rodeo queens, a public ambassador of the rodeo.

Eight official events for women to participate in at rodeos:

- Barrel racing: a popular event for women, where a horse and a rider run a cloverleaf pattern around three barrels as quickly as possible.

- Breakaway roping: a timed event where the rider is roping a calf.
- Saddle bronc riding: the “classic” event of the rodeo to some, where the rider holds on with one hand to the saddle to a perfectly measured “bronc rein” (a thick strap on the horse's head).
- Bareback riding: a similar event to the saddle bronc, but riders have no saddle on the horse while riding.
- Steer wrestling: a timed event where a rider wrestles to keep an animal running in a straight line to grab the animal and steer by the horns.
- Tie-down roping: roping down a calf in tie-down roping.
- Team roping: two cowboys roping down a steer.
- Bull riding: known as the most dangerous eight seconds in sports. In bull riding, a rider is required to remain on the bull for at least eight seconds while only having one hand to hold on to the saddle.

Injuries

All these events come with challenges, a big part being injuries. While there are only one to two deaths annually, severe injury risk is much higher. A study by Western Sports Foundation⁷ found that bull riding has a far higher injury risk than professional football; with an estimated 32 injuries per 1,000 rides and football injuries averaging at 5.8 per 1,000 players. Common injuries include concussions, as well as neck, shoulder and spinal injuries. Athletes can often get trampled or kicked by the bull or hit the ground wrong during a dismount.

⁷ Western Sports Foundation is a non-profit commitment to provide an essential support system for Western sports athletes with career, health, and wellness resources.

Along with physical injuries, athletes also face mental challenges as well. Keeping a tough persona aka “cowboy culture” often discourages mental health, vulnerability and encourages the athletes to mask pain and avoid showing emotion. Women feel this pressure as well; some feel that they cannot show emotion because they must be equal to the men, both physically and mentally. A 2025 study by the University of Nevada Reno found that “bull riders who continue to ride after consistent injury with limited to no healing time could experience serious and long-term effects, including mood and behavioral changes” (University of Nevada Reno). The study also discusses that bull riders face a constant pressure of fight-or-flight with a heightened stress due to competing. As athletes get repeated head injuries, those lead to more problems with memory and attention decline, or an increased risk of depression, irritability, and anxiety.

Western Sports Foundation also found that up to 50% of athletes in the sport face post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. Many athletes have chronic pain and injury-induced trauma which gets brushed off quickly to continue riding. By brushing the injuries under the rug, athletes can have long-term mood and behavioral changes. Some athletes struggle with alcohol and substance abuse because of their physical and emotional pain and not getting help. Unlike other pro-sports, rodeos do not have teams of trainers, sports psychologists and dietitians, meaning athletes often have trouble getting the help that they need. More companies like the Western Sports Foundation are providing support for those athletes to help them seek help and partner with WPRA and PBR to help athletes get help.

Female athlete challenges

It’s not only bull riding that women are not getting the same treatment in media coverage and pay. Soccer, basketball, rugby and combat sports are sports that are not getting as much media attention, no matter how high the engagement is. According a 2013 study on “The Gender

Gap in Sport Performance: Equity Influences Equality”,⁷ it is difficult to separate biological and social aspects contributing to differences between women and men in sports performance. The study also found that women’s performances are also influenced by reduced opportunity and sociopolitical factors.

Organizations have limited coverage of bull riding for women. WPRA used to sanction bull riding as one of their rodeo events, however they stopped after they decided it was too dangerous for women and there were not enough women signing up. According to their records, the organization even had a bull riding director on their found members officers, but as of 2026 they do not have a bull riding director. Now, one of the largest rodeo sanctioning bodies in the world only covers four rodeo events.

There are many factors that contribute to a female bull rider’s performance, including environmental forces that shape the culture, meaning that the people around them can contribute to how well that they do. Female bull riders not only face danger riding the bulls but also gender bias and limited competitive opportunities. Professional opportunities for women are difficult and some leagues like PBR do not let women compete unless they are in their own league. Halvorsen will later explain how she was denied from competing because she is a woman. Halvorsen, Lafforthun and the Eilert twins are women who have experienced mistreatment before in their sport, but they are changing the narrative to make sure that the sport becomes more inclusive for female riders.

⁷ The study was done in England after the 2012 Summer Olympic Games. It was done to provide a forum to discuss issues underlying gender differences in sport performance from a global perspective.

Jorden Halvorsen

It's not often that one just starts riding bulls as a fluke. But for athlete Jorden Halvorsen, she started by man asking her if she wanted to ride a bull to mark it off her bucket list.

“And so, I went and tried it, fell off very, very fast for the first time, and realized I could stay on longer than that,” Halvorsen said.

After that first ride, she went again to ride a bull and went again the next weekend and continued going. Halvorsen is now the four-time female bull riding champion at 29-years-old. When she first started, Halvorsen didn't even know that other women rode bulls. While there was social media at the time, other female bull riders weren't in the media. “I rode for three years before I knew that there were other girls around the country,” Halvorsen said.

She found a post on Instagram that was looking for girls to ride in the 2016 Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo for women's steer riding, and Halvorsen decided to join. She drove out there and competed. During her competition, she met other women who rode before they got rid of the PWRA's rough stock competition in 2008. “It was kind of dwindling out, you know in the early 2000s,” Halvorsen said. “It was kind of starting to be obsolete.”

In the early days, Halvorsen used to compete mainly against guys, but now that's been flip-flopped. “Probably more 80% I'm competing with just girls and then you know 20% to 30% with the guys,” Halvorsen said. “It just depends on the rodeos and where they're at, if there's any added money.”

Some competitions are entered because there is added money, other times the competitions are added because they're close by. However, no matter who one is competing against, the real challenge is competing against the stock that's drawn to ride. “And for the men's

bull riding, a lot of times the stock is just going to be a bit bigger than what I feel like women should get on consistently,” Halvorsen said.

Mental and physical strength

Injuries are very common in bull riding, but the most dangerous part isn't riding the bull itself but getting off them. According to Halvorsen, getting off the bull is where she sees the most injuries. Halvorsen has experienced multiple injuries, including a broken leg, a broken jaw and 15 surgeries. While trying to avoid injury she will also do physical drills to keep her strength up. Some of the physical drills include riding a horse bareback and jumping over fences without a saddle, relying only on core strength and leg grip.

While physical strength is important, Halvorsen makes sure to be in tip-top shape as well mentally. “A lot of times with bull riding, they say it's 90% mental and the rest is in your head,” Halvorsen said. A study done by Dr. Alan Goldberg⁸ found that bull riding is 90-95% mental because riders must stay calm under intense pressure and focus on riding even if riders are scared. Riders like Halvorsen must control her mind and her adrenaline to maintain her focus.

To be strong, Halvorsen visualizes the ride to train her brain. When she is riding during competition she will physically stay in the middle of the bull. The eight seconds to her feel either extremely slow or quick. When it's going slow, she feels the movement of the bull intensely. When it goes quick, the movement is quicker. Either speed, she has visualized what she needs to do to get to the eight seconds.

⁸ Dr. Alan Goldberg is an internationally Sports Performance Consultant who works with rodeo athletes to help them overcome fear and develop mental toughness.
<https://www.competitivedge.com/mental-toughness-tips-rodeo>

Riding with men

No matter how hard she trains, she will not be at the same level as a male competitor. "We are physically different," she says. "We are physically not going to have as much upper body strength as a man." The bulls that the men use tend to be a bit bigger than the ones that the women use, however, Halvorsen thinks that it's okay. Although, it is a big thing that she gets bashed for. "It's like 'all right dude, you're not even getting on what we're getting on, so you don't have the room to talk,'" Halvorsen said.

For Halvorsen, she thinks that there's more people rooting for female bull riders than ones doubting them. "I had a couple run-ins with some guys that didn't really support it," she said. "And it's like so minuscule compared to how many people have been so positive that I don't want to give those people the time of day because there's just been so many more people that have been so supportive of me riding bulls and wanting to do this thing."

Halvorsen's 155,000 Instagram followers leave mainly positive comments. However, the negativity sometimes speaks louder. She has been denied riding bulls twice as a girl. One of the times they didn't realize that she was trying to enter. The other time was at a rodeo in North Carolina, where she drove in from Texas. The workers kept Halvorsen as an alternate and she could not check in because the judges told her that she could not ride. "He [the judge] was like, 'I'm sorry, but we can't let you ride because you're a girl,'" Halvorsen said. No matter the discrimination she gets, Halvorsen does not let it bother her because she just wants to ride.

Elite Lady Bull Riders

Halvorsen also founded Elite Lady Bull Riders. After seeing other female organizations start and fail, Halvorsen decided to give it a try. "I'm just going to take the reins on some of this and try to do it because you don't want it to die out," Halvorsen said. Elite Lady Bull Riders is a

women's bull riding association that gives women an opportunity to ride in women's only rodeos. The company has been around since 2023, and they have multiple rodeos per year. There are two divisions: novice and pro. This league has earned national attention along with a six-part series on Hulu called *Not Her First Rodeo*, a show that went through a season of competing with Jorden Halvorsen, Renata Nunes, Alexia Huffman, Athena Rivera and Catalina Langlitz who were all given a shot for a championship buckle.

Halvorsen credits social media for the rise of attention for female bull riding. While the numbers of competitors might be the same, Halvorsen thinks that social media has changed the game of the sport for women, as more women are posting on social media. "It's just more visible," Halvorsen said. "There are just more eyes on it... They [female riders] might have been riding all those years that we were doing this and just never knew that we were out there, kinda like I was."

By getting attention on social media, more women know that there are others like them, creating a community of female riders who can help grow the sport. Halvorsen's biggest advice for girls starting off in the sport is to work harder. "The one thing about us being females is that we need to work out stronger and harder and faster and better because the bulls don't discriminate," she said.

Breana Lafforthun

The Steamboat Pro Rodeo in Steamboat Springs, Colorado started over 100 years ago and happens every summer. The barrel racing was the only event that women could participate in during the 1940s. Now, women can participate in every event.

Breana (Bre) Lafforthun stepped out into the arena to see the crowd sitting above her. She was prepared to get on her bull to hold on for eight seconds. She saw people surrounding her as the announcer was hyping them all up.

“That’s when I realized,” Lafforthun said. “...you don’t do it for the fame or anything but just knowing you have the crowd behind you and they’re hyped up.” Being surrounded by a crowd watching her do what she’s love is a moment that Lafforthun will never forget and something that will live in her head forever.

Background

Lafforthun has been riding bulls since she was 14 years old as something she found fun. She knew she was not good at first, but she liked to just ride.

“I didn’t take it seriously,” Lafforthun said. “I was like, ‘Oh this is fun.’ It was a good community because you know at 14, I didn’t have many friends.” She only did it for fun for six years until she decided to take it seriously at 20. She started traveling and entering in competitions with the WPBR organization. Now, at 24, she is with the Pro Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) and her home state of Arizona’s Grand Canyon Pro Rodeo Association (GCPRA). Lafforthun wanted more in the sport, so she continued to practice, curious to see what she could accomplish.

Lafforthun will compete multiple times a year, taking her all over the country. After a big injury took her out in 2025, she is slowly getting back into the sport. “I want to travel. I want to

compete,” Lafforthun said. However, each competition comes at a cost. The expensive cost to sign up for a rodeo event along with the risk of injury, Lafforthun knows she must prepare to bring her best self to the rodeo.

Training

This is not Lafforthun’s first rodeo and not her first time training. After many injuries and many years in the sport, she has a well-oiled training routine avoiding days off.

Lafforthun will regularly ride her horse bareback to train her core. She will feel the animal’s movement and strengthen the inner thighs and groin, all crucial muscles when riding a bull which she does not feel when using the saddle. She bought her horse specifically for bareback to train bull riding on. After riding her horse, she will train her muscles with a stationary bull. Her stationary bull is barrel that doesn’t move, but it uses all the same muscles to keep a good form. The barrel gives the ability to slowly practice and gain muscle memory. After all that practice, Lafforthun will then practice on a bucking barrel. The bucking barrel is a regular barrel with a big vertical spring on the bottom that moves to help coordinate timing. She will normally practice one or two times a day on the bull for an extended period.

However, the biggest part of her training is going to the gym, where she will lift weights four or five times a week to make herself stronger, a new step to her routine after she started getting on bigger bulls. “When they [men] ride, they have testosterone, which actually helps you a lot,” Lafforthun said. “I don’t have that, so I have to kind of implement more muscle and more aggression when I ride.” Lafforthun knows that she must be aggressive when she rides because the animals are mean and aggressive. The bulls in the rodeo are a result of selective breeding with crowd noise and pressure of the rider on their back. The animals also get “fight-or-flight” when they are put in the arena with the athletes.

Another major part of training is the mental side of the sport. A strong mental game is what wins the sport. “I struggle a lot with my mental game. If I can psych myself out, I doubt myself,” Lafforthun said. “... if you have a strong mental game, you can do it.” She will mentally push herself to grow even if she’s scared or anxious. Even an eight-year bull rider like herself will get intimidated by the bull, but she still pushes herself to compete. She will use fear and nerves to get on the bull and try to push out the mental barriers to compete. Without a strong mental game, she will get in her head and fear approaching the bull and not compete as well.

Bull riding from her perspective

Lafforthun’s favorite part of bull riding is thinking about the ride. After she pays her entrance fee and walks into the competition, she has no thoughts except for the thought of the bull. According to Lafforthun the competitors are not as closed minded to women competitors as people think. “They’re there to ride their bull,” Lafforthun said. “They don’t care what you’re doing. They don’t care who’s back there. It’s a lot more open minded than people think.” She faces more negativity from the smaller rodeos she participates in and people who never ride. However, no comment can stop her from what she loves doing so she ignores them and goes on her way to compete for longest eight seconds of her life.

Those possible eight seconds feel like long hours for Lafforthun. For the first four to six seconds, the adrenaline is starting to go through her body. She has a mantra that stays in her mind when she rides. “‘Oh, tight legs, oh big chest,’ or ‘hustle’” Lafforthun said.

All thoughts exist her brain, but at some point, her brain starts to wake up. She reminds herself to keep going. “The bull’s doing so much that it’s all about muscle memory and reaction,” Lafforthun said. “You shouldn’t be thinking too much. You should only be thinking like little things... it’s like your brain takes over until it doesn’t.”

When the eight seconds hit, it's an unstoppable feeling that Lafforthun rides on until her next rodeo. Her biggest advice for anyone starting in the career is to enjoy the little moments and not get caught up in winning. "I think everyone gets so caught up in competition and wanting to win," Lafforthun said.

Dayna and Mady Eilert

The sun was shining over the Kansas arena, and the dirt was muddy as 12-year-old twins Dayna and Madison (Mady) Eilert entered the grounds to compete in steer riding. At the age of 12, the twins entered their first competition after convincing their parents. No one showed them techniques on how to hold on, so the twins learned by themselves and held on with two hands.

Dayna went first with a brown-headed steer and a white body. She lasted 4 ½ seconds. “It was the best feeling I had ever felt,” Dayna said. Her identical sister, Mady went next. She got a brown painted steer and went longer than Dayna. Both twins got out of the arena with muddy smiles and a passion to ride more.

Their careers in bull riding started through their childhood ponies, named Sunny and Sugarfoot. Both liked Sugarfoot better because he would dump everyone off his back who tried to ride him. “It was a game to us,” Dayna said. “If you did get dumped, you always kept a hold of the reins. Otherwise, you would have to walk back home on foot.”

That game to the kids, although they didn’t think of it at the time, gave them an ability to hold on balance which has helped their career in bull riding. Now, the 21-year-old twins compete competitively in bull riding. They have made history being the first women to qualify for bull riding at the American Cowboys Rodeo Association Finals in 2026 and are known to the community as the “no nuts just guts” twins in the male-dominated sport of bull riding. After riding horses for a couple of years, the twins could only start riding bulls because horses were only available for kids to ride. “It didn’t scare us,” Dayna said.

Working with an instructor, the twins were put on novice bulls. Those are bulls that are younger and less experienced that are used for amateur riders, creating a safer, skill-building environment. After many competitions, the twins grew their passion for the sport. After a while,

both left their home state of Kansas to travel to Arkansas for Novice Junior Events, because their home state Kansas did not allow females to ride in their youth bull riding events.

The twins met good friends who invited them to practice in Locust Grove, Oklahoma and later got a job at the ranch. In 2024, the twins turned 18 and aged out of novice bull riding. They wanted to ride with the “real cowboys” of the rodeo. They asked their coach what was next for them. They bought an American Cowboys Rodeo Association (ACRA) Membership as well as a Cowboys Regional Rodeo Association (CRRA) Card. With those memberships, the twins have started to compete in more competitions with hopes to win. After competing for three years, the twins are competing in the ACRA finals, and they are the first female athletes to qualify for the championships at that level in that organization.

Training

Every morning is filled with training, starting with dry drills. Dry drills are practice sessions that are performed without livestock to focus on fundamental movements and muscle memory. They also practice balance and jumping to challenge themselves to stay on. It’s common for them to ride horses to practice their jumps and balance as well. Each season brings a slightly different practice schedule. “It just depends on the weather, how busy we are,” Dayna said.

Bull riding competitions run normally from the spring through the fall, where each month brings more competition. The twins normally compete every weekend, normally on Fridays and Saturdays. However, when July hits, their month is filled with daily competitions. “They call July ‘Cowboy Christmas’, because there’s so many rodeos you can go to,” Dayna said. “I love competing, I want to do it as much as I can.”

Bull Riding from their perspectives

“It’s got to be really fun, like a dance,” Dayna said. “Or it can be like the longest eight seconds of your life. And I love both of those feelings.” The eight seconds is both the longest and shortest amount of time for these athletes. Only focus on the bull flies through the mind. Once they get on the bull, the twins match their movements with the bull, so it comes naturally. Once those seconds are up, if they stayed on, the feeling of stepping off the bull is even greater. “Being able to step off your bull, get right off,” Mady said. “That right there is amazing, I don’t know how else to describe that.”

Neither Dayna nor Mady feel like they must prove themselves as a female bull rider. They feel the pro-judges don’t discriminate against them, and they are focused on growing their skills and winning big competitions. While people have made comments to them, both ignore them and focus on themselves. They don’t to focus on women-only competitions but competing against everyone. They think it’s important to break barriers, but they find riding together is what matters most to them.

Both twins are eager to keep going on their career of bull riding. Neither one knows what’s in store for them, but they are prepared to keep going. They are paving the way for other women to know that it is possible. “Right now, someone has to carve the way, someone has to be different,” the twins said. “I decided I guess it’ll be us. We’re going to let people know that it’s not impossible.”

Conclusion

After interviewing Jorden Halvorsen, Bre Lafforthun and twins Dayna and Mady Eilert, I found that these women are not only incredible athletes but also strong women who have helped establish more female narratives in the sport. There has been lots of progress made in this sport due to athletes like them and still there is more progress to be made. Each interviewee had a different story, and their different ages show how the sport is changing. Halverson did not think anyone else rode when she started riding. When Lafforthun started riding, she started to see more women and the Eilert twins who know even more female bull riders since they are younger. This shows that social media has created opportunities to share narratives but there is more to do to get more voices heard.

Limitations

This thesis offers a brief insight into the world of rodeo culture, bull riding and female narratives in bull riding, and provide opportunities for further research. I had a limited timeline for my work, but there is much more that could be researched further in bull riding. I was only able to interview four athletes; however, I think more interviews would be beneficial to get more perspectives for this research and help gain a better understanding of what these women go through.

There is a lot of research on bull riding mental health studies that I used throughout my thesis, like through the Western Sports Foundation, however there was not a lot of “females only” studies done. More female only research in rodeo and bull riding on subjects like mental and physical health would also be beneficial to gain greater understanding of what these female athletes go through.

While the female perspectives are important show that there needs to be more female narratives in under-represented sports, future research would benefit by contrasting those perspectives by talking to male athletes and other organizations, such as PBR, to hear their perspective on the matter. I reached out to PBR a couple of times and did not get an interview with them. I got a brief interview with WPRA; however, they could not help me with my research onto why they do not offer bull riding in their group. I think that it would also be beneficial to look at other events in rodeos to get their perspectives. Is this narrative “normal” for all rodeo athletes or just bull riders? Those other rodeo events would gain greater insight into what women face overall in rodeo culture and how the sport is changing due to more narratives starting to grow. There is also a big bull riding community in Australia and some of the research from

Overall themes

Halvorsen, Lafforthun and the Eilert twins are trailblazers who have made the sport known through social media posts and a television series. Before these interviews, I expected to hear that there is a lot of discrimination by other athletes in the sport, however, that was not the case. They shared that they experience more “no’s” from people running the rodeos and spectators than people who compete against them. Halvorsen shared in her interview that she got denied twice, both by people who run the event, not by the athletes themselves. The Eilert twins shared that they traveled out of their home state of Kansas to ride because the state does not allow girls to ride bulls in their youth events. Rodeos throughout the whole country limit women from competing with their bulls. There are limited women in the sport, yet they are denied from competing a sport that they love because of other people telling them no.

A repeated theme that each woman has said during interviews was around community and the importance of finding a community in the sport. Lafforthun mentioned that community was the reason why she started riding and why she continues to ride. Halvorsen even founded Elite Lady Bull Riders to grow female community within the sport and to make sure that women don't feel alone. The twins have community with each other and cheer each other on during competitions. Lafforthun's biggest advice for anyone wanting to start in the sport is to find a good community to surround one with.

Even though they are women, they still go through the same severe, high-impact risks as men – possible broken bones, concussions and risk of mental illnesses. These athletes emphasized the importance of training and each one of them mentioned that they're just built differently and it's harder to ride, yet they still do it. All women who were interviewed share their desires to go to the gym and lift weights to get stronger. Both Halvorsen and Lafforthun shared that they do train their brains to get on the bull because they have faced mental barriers to get on and ride, things that men suffer with as well.

Every athlete in this sport all ride the same animal and face the possibility of getting stepped on. This career is a high-stakes and short athletic career, yet all women interviewed love the opportunity to showcase their skills and do something that they love, regardless of their gender. All four women were grateful for the opportunity to share their perspectives and their stories because they wanted to let more women know that it is possible to ride bulls competitively.

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