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Reporter

SHEEP GAL LEARNS TO LOVE RODEO

I love Wallowa County rodeo, especially the ranch rodeos. But I came to it late.

My family bred dairy goats and sheep, and although we made a record number of fairs in Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Montana, we weren't what we called "midway people" — the sort that went on carnival rides or went to "big arena" musical events or went to rodeo.

I may have been raised in dairy, but I was always attracted to horses, broke my shoulder flying off a bucking pony at 12 or so, and spent hours in the indoor arena at state fairs watching everything from Shetland Roadsters to jumpers and observing what made a champion.

My fascination with horses and what they would do for their rider accounted for my very first paid story, which I sold to the Colville, Wash., Statesman Journal.

I covered the a Colville Indian Reservation event. The famous Omak Suicide Race was inspired by the endurance races developed in Colville. I had mixed feelings about the race, because I knew the incidence of injury for horse (with no choice) and young man (with judgment based on the youthful belief that he is indestructible) was very high.

It cost me around \$26 to cover that race, and I got paid by the column inch. I think I made \$16. But I didn't get edited, which was a feather in my cap.

But I couldn't go back to the Suicide Race. I knew I couldn't stomach a bad wreck.



I knew enough about training horses by my early 20s to hate barrel racing. Back then, most of those gals never stopped spurring the whole race, and I knew that wasn't how you trained a willing horse to give his everything.

Then I saw Charmayne James on Scamper, riding with no spurs, rarely kicking. And it was a revelation. I thought "there's the pro; it can be done right."

I became a regular rodeo spectator when I began watching PBR on television. I was okay with a young guy who knew the dangers riding a bull he couldn't possibly hurt. It was dramatic, and when Ty Murray became a commentator, it was very educational. And damn, those boys were cute.

In my mid-twenties, I rode a

few quarter horse race horses on a dirt track in Rigby, Idaho, as an exercise jockey, enjoyed the mentorship of an experienced trainer and trained a horse of my own for race.

I kept improving my own training, managed to connect with some very good teachers, and eventually trained Civil War reenactor's horses, low level dressage and event horses, jumper ponies, very brave trail horses and several driving ponies.

I liked difficult horses because they demanded respect and wouldn't accept anything less than a real partnership. They required tact, negotiation and a little bit of magic. But what they would do for you if they felt like a real partner was something that still chokes me up.

And then I moved to Wallowa County and saw ranch rodeo. I loved it. I adored rock jack competition. Here was the sort of work that I could admire as a "producer" of livestock.

Here were riders in partnership with their horses. And the competition was both intense and the sort of silly fun that rural folks, me included, enjoy.

In one of my first ranch rodeos in the county, I saw the Baremore brothers ride and I thought, "those boys are crazy." It was the same sort of crazy I'd grown up with catching weaned wild lambs. If you don't have all the equipment to run wild lambs down corridors into a tiny little spot where you can

grab them, the way you catch a 35- to 50-pound wild lamb is to corner them in a corral and throw yourself in their way.

You hold on and you don't let go. It's very, very messy, dragged through the sheep poo work. You will bleed. Guaranteed. You will have bruises. Sometimes that lamb will surprise you and try to jump over you and hit you right in the chest as you move forward. Catch him as you fall backward and hold on.

Those Baremore boys had the commitment. Horses fell on them and they rode them back up. A steer made a break for it in a penning competition and the Baremore on the ground by the gate threw himself bodily into the path of the steer.

Now that's a boy who could catch a wild lamb.