

# Inside the Arena

*Behind the Scenes at Top Rodeos and Stock Horse Competitions*

WPRA

## Another Turn

Jimmie Munroe finds herself in a familiar role as Women's Professional Rodeo Association president, taking the helm as the organization bounces back from several years of change and controversy. >

By SUSAN MORRISON



Jimmie Munroe has returned to the job she held 15 years previously, that of Women's Professional Rodeo Association president.



Jimmie Munroe (then Gibbs) won her first world title in 1975 with Robin Flit Bar, better known as Billy. She and the horse forged a successful partnership for almost 10 years.

**A** PROFESSIONAL BARREL RACER since the 1970s, Jimmie Munroe qualified for the National Finals Rodeo 11 times and is a five-time Women's Professional Rodeo Association world champion. She served as president of WPRA (initially called the Girls Rodeo Association) from 1978 to 1993, and is back in that position after being elected in April.

That take-charge cowgirl spirit is in her blood. Her grandfather, Colonel Zack Miller, established the famous 101 Ranch & Wild West Show in Oklahoma. For a time, her mother traveled with the show. Munroe has never shied away from a challenge, and her accomplishments have been recognized with induction into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame, Texas Rodeo Cowboy Hall of Fame and Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame.

Under her previous WPRA leadership, women achieved prize-money parity with men, and the use of electronic timers became standard. This time, she's taking the helm of the WPRA as the association continues to recover from several years of controversy. A lawsuit against the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association over its development of Professional Women's Barrel Racing, a league that would have effectively eliminated WPRA, resulted in a \$6.8 million settlement in favor of WPRA. Today, the two associations are mending fences.

Munroe, of Valley Mills, Texas, says WPRA is poised to become stronger and more effective for members and the industry. We talked with her about her outlook for the association, current issues within women's rodeo, and her lifelong involvement with the sport.

## What made you decide to get involved at this level again?

I had not considered it until a month or so before the election, and I would not have run had [previous president] Kathi Myers run again. When she decided not to run, I had a number of ladies call me and ask if I would consider it.

I've always had a vested interest in the sport of barrel racing and professional rodeo. I served as president the number of years that I did because I felt a need to give something back to the association and the sport. You don't really decide or choose to serve as a director or officer in an associa-

tion unless you think that you can make a difference. It's my hope that I'll be able to contribute in some way again.

## What is it about barrel racing that's made you stay so active?

I really never considered myself a barrel racer until I was in college. Billy [Robin Flit Bar, the gelding Munroe rode to her first world championship] gave me my passion for barrel racing. I always loved roping in high school and college. After I had Billy and started to run him, he had so much talent and so much ability.

I never really thought that I'd be a pro-

fessional barrel racer and that's the way I'd make my living, but it turned out that way. Barrel racing and WPRA and professional rodeo were really good to me. That's the reason I felt the need to give something back to the sport.

## What changes have you seen in the sport, and what is the outlook for its future?

When I first became involved in 1974, there was not equal money. In 1975, when I won the world, I set an earnings record that it took several years to break. It was \$25,000. Now there is so much more money that's available for a barrel racer to win in a single season. You can win \$25,000 at a larger rodeo.

In barrel racing as a whole, the numbers are growing. I give a lot of the credit to the 4D system. It hasn't been around that long, but it's really made a difference. When I had young horses, we had the novice classes, and after that you just competed in the open. When they first came out with [4D barrel races], I thought it would never catch on. But my goodness, it's made such a difference. People that hadn't run barrels for a long time are running again because they think they might be able to place in one of the D's. People who are just getting started enter. They key is that more people have an opportunity to win money.

## How do you see your new role?

The president does not have a vote on the board, so I really see the responsibility as being able to assimilate the information that each board member provides, because it's their job to know the thoughts and views of the members in their circuit, and to help lead them in the right direction for the benefit of the entire membership. I think it's important for the president to create an environment that is respectful of all the views of the different directors. When it's all said and done, we're a team. We should be able to move forward with the same goal.

**Your predecessor, Kathi Myers, made strides in getting WPRA back in good financial standing after several years of the organization running in the red. How does WPRA plan to keep operating successfully?**

I think the board made a great effort to

decrease spending. By doing this, they were able to get the association back on sound financial footing. This board is dedicated to continue that policy. Running WPRA, or any association, is about dollars and cents. You can't spend money that you don't have without eventually paying the consequences. Trimming back and cutting expenses is not always popular. But it's just like with a school system or local government; there are things you could once afford but you can no longer afford. Things have to be done in a different way.

**What are the biggest challenges facing WPRA, and how do you plan to work with the board and members to address those?**

One goal is increasing our membership. We have a little over 2,300 members. That includes permits, cards and roping. We need to look at more ways to try and grow the membership, because it is pretty stagnant. When I was president before, in the 1980s and early '90s, we

had between 1,500 and 2,000 members. The more opportunities we can provide for our members, the better opportunity we have to grow our membership.

We started our own futurity and derby program to help develop quality barrel horses. The association has created the Pro Elite Sire Incentive program to promote the breeding of quality horses. We have the junior association [for members 18 and under], and that's a fledgling program that we're attempting to grow. Our World Finals in Lincoln, Nebraska, were successful this past year, both in number of contestants and financially. Another area that we are going to try to grow is the all-women's events. They're important to the heritage and history of the association. We as a board know we must take care of our core purpose, which is approving WPRA barrel races at PRCA rodeos. But if we can service our membership through these other venues outside of rodeo, we need to do that.

We have the circuit system and the Dodge National Circuit Finals, which is a

goal for people who just travel to rodeos in their circuit. Now we have the All-American Finals, where people who just go to the smaller rodeos have a chance to go to a finals with quite a bit of added money.

Another challenge, and one of the biggest, is seeking sponsors for our rodeos and the World Finals.

**How will you work with members?**

We're determined to try to improve communication with members. No association can satisfy all of the members all of the time, but if you have open communication, that goes a long way toward making people happy. The membership needs to know the decisions that are made. Agendas are going to be published on the web site so members are able to contact their directors with their thoughts on items that we're going to discuss. Once the minutes are approved, we're going to post those. We're also going to try to have more membership meetings in different parts of the country and do more membership surveys.

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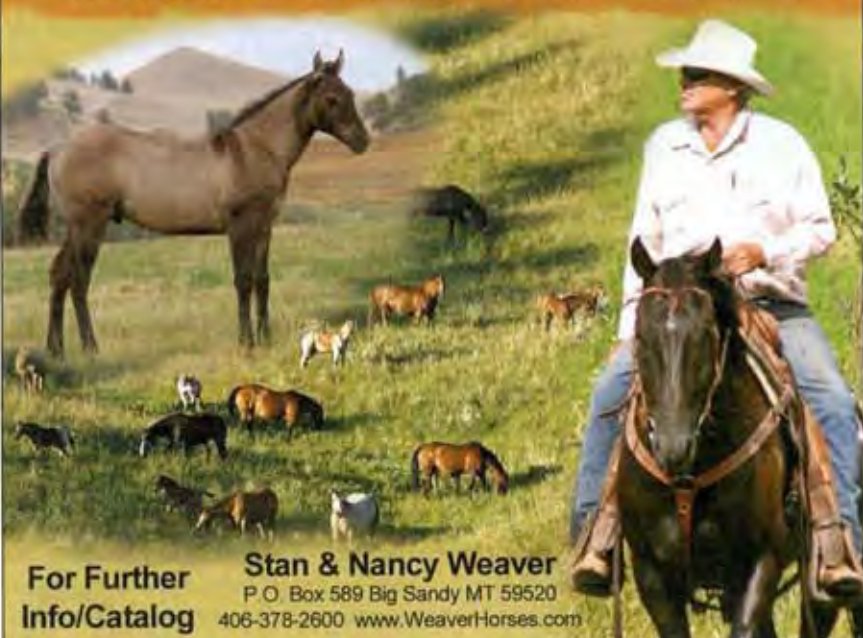
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## Inside the Arena

In the past, about the only way that we had to communicate was through our publication. Now we have the Internet and social media. Hopefully, in the near future we are going to be able to provide better services to members with better technology.

### Who is the typical WPRA member today, and what benefits does she get from the association?

We just did a survey, and the average member has been a member for 11 years. The average age is 45. The average number of rodeos they enter is 11. We have some that entered 100 and some that may not enter very many. Members average 10 of our co-approved jackpots yearly.

The survey asked about goals, and they varied. Some were to go to the circuit finals, some were to compete at the Dodge National Circuit Finals, some were to go to the National Finals Rodeo. Some just wanted to go out and compete against the best.

This information lets us know where we need to reach out. We need to get younger members, and hopefully we can do that by providing more opportunities for them. We approve close to 500 barrel races at professional rodeos, but we also co-approve 900 jackpots, and 390 of those are roping events.

### You teach a number of clinics. What are the goals of typical participants, and do you see these barrel racers as future WPRA members?

I get a few WPRA members in my clinics, but all the participants have goals or they wouldn't be there. Some are just starting, so they want to start correctly before they develop bad habits. Some have a problem and they're trying to correct it, whether they're running by the first barrel or shouldering the barrel. Some want to move to the next level of competition. Some are going to the professional rodeos. They may or may not be potential WPRA members.

I think that most people, particularly younger people, that's always in the back of their mind—could I make it to the NFR someday, if I had the right horse? It may not be an immediate goal, but nearly every young barrel racer's dream is to someday run down the alleyway at the Thomas & Mack Arena at the National Finals Rodeo. 🐾