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BRONX BRONCO BROAD

40 Years of Riding and Roping With the Best Cowgirl This Side of the Spuyten Duyvil

By Karen Kramer

"I'm a rodeo cowgirl," says trick rider Helen Panzella, "which is totally different from the movie-version cowboy and cowgirl. The things we do are an art form. You hone skills. You do your roping, your riding. The rodeo woman of the '30s was a tough individual. They rode broncs. They rode bulls. Plus, they trick rode."

Born and raised in the Bronx, Panzella is one of only a dozen or so women to perform rodeo trick riding in the U.S. She has spent

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much of her life on the rodeo circuit and is the only woman in New York City to be a member of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association. Panzella, tall and athletic with a gray-blond braid that dangles to her waist, says that her love of trick riding dates from her days as a Bronx teenager.

"I went to Madison Square Garden and saw the rodeo," she says, "and when I saw the trick riders they just swept me off my feet. I'd never ridden a horse, but I said that's for me."

Cowgirl trick riding goes back to the early Buffalo Bill Wild West Show of the late 1800s. Women made up 10 per cent of the show, and they performed such feats as bronc riding, steer riding, fancy roping, and their specialty—diving horses. Since trick riding was a competition where a large purse could be earned, fancier

and more dangerous tricks were added to win the judges' high scores. By World War II, the women's competitions were dropped (because, according to one theory, the cowboys wanted a larger share of the purse). Trick riding—no longer a competition, but a performance—was kept on to please the crowds, but with the prize money gone, the number of women able to earn a living dwindled. "Today women do mostly barrel racing," says Panzella. "You have fewer trick riders because now you're being hired by the rodeo, and they use only three or four or five over the whole country."

Part gymnastics, part sport, and part pure art, trick riding is a skill performed on horseback while the animal is at a full gallop. There are both traditional and invented forms; the "hippodrome stand," for example, involves standing upright while the horse gallops in a tight circle. One of the most difficult feats (rarely done now) is called "under the belly," which entails dropping from the saddle to swing underneath the galloping horse and coming up the other side without touching the ground. Also popular are headstands, hanging upside down, and Panzella's specialty, "vaulting."

"Vaulting is where you jump off the horse, touch the ground, and come back on again. It's actually more men's trick work because it takes more strength than the average girl has. I could do it so it raised me a bit above the average."

Although Panzella never took riding lessons ("we were too poor"), she bought books and studied pictures of famous trick riders. Then, after graduating from Christopher Columbus High School in Williams Bridge—and

having been on a horse only a few times—she bought her first horse and began to teach herself. "I learned to ride a horse as I was learning to trick ride," she says. "I could just do it immediately. I don't know why, but I could."

At first she taught herself simple tricks, gradually working her way up to more complicated feats. "I'd seen the 'fender drag,' where you hang by the side of the horse with your leg underneath. I could do that. The single vault I'd seen in movies. I tried that and did it right away. You try a position and it feels awkward; you do it at a walk and then pretty soon you feel comfortable with it. When you first stand up on a horse it feels so high that you're scared and think you'll never do it. But three or four tries and there you are, loping down the road."

While Helen was teaching herself to ride at local stables, she met another Bronx born-and-bred cowboy, Nick Panzella, a rodeo steer wrestler. Married in the early '50s, for 20 years they made a living rodeoing together up and down the East Coast from Florida to Canada. The apex of their careers came in 1969 and '70, when they rode at Madison Square Garden.

Panzella retired from the circuit in '71 to earn a nursing degree by putting herself through Bronx Community College, but she kept trick riding, "even if it was fairs or benefits." Still, she recognizes the physical price the sport exacts, which in her case includes a broken knee. "The years that you trick ride, they add up," she says. "They take their toll. You put the liniment on just so long, and then say you just can't."

So, along with the riding, Helen Panzella has developed another

skill. With her cowgirl's heart always in the rodeo, she has channeled her passion for western lore into the art of trick roping. It's being part of cowgirl history that's important to her, and the same determination she put into the trick riding she now puts into the trick roping act she does with Angelo Iodice, a 23-year-old Bronx native she taught how to trick ride 10 years ago and has worked with ever since.

"It's a challenge," she says, "because it's an art. It's so intricate. People think you just spin a rope, but you don't. There's balance. Rhythm. Anybody that you see spin a rope, you know they've put in their dues. You might try a trick and about the 3000th time get it right."

Like trick riding, trick roping goes from simple to highly complex. The most basic is the flat spin, where the rope is let go and held only by the spoke while it keeps spinning. After that, the performer learns to spin a circle around the body, and then to step in and out of it in what is called the Rabbit Hop. The more difficult spins, called "body lifts," involve spinning beautifully formed circles in the air. "There are combinations of body lifts," she says. "They're called ocean waves, where you spin vertical loops around you and in back of you."

And so Helen Panzella goes on, immersed in her own rare skills. "I love the rodeo," she says in her straightforward fashion. "I love the people. I love everything about it. It's certainly made my life richer in every way." ■

Helen Panzella and Angelo Iodice will perform at the Belmont Horse Fair on Sunday, May 31.