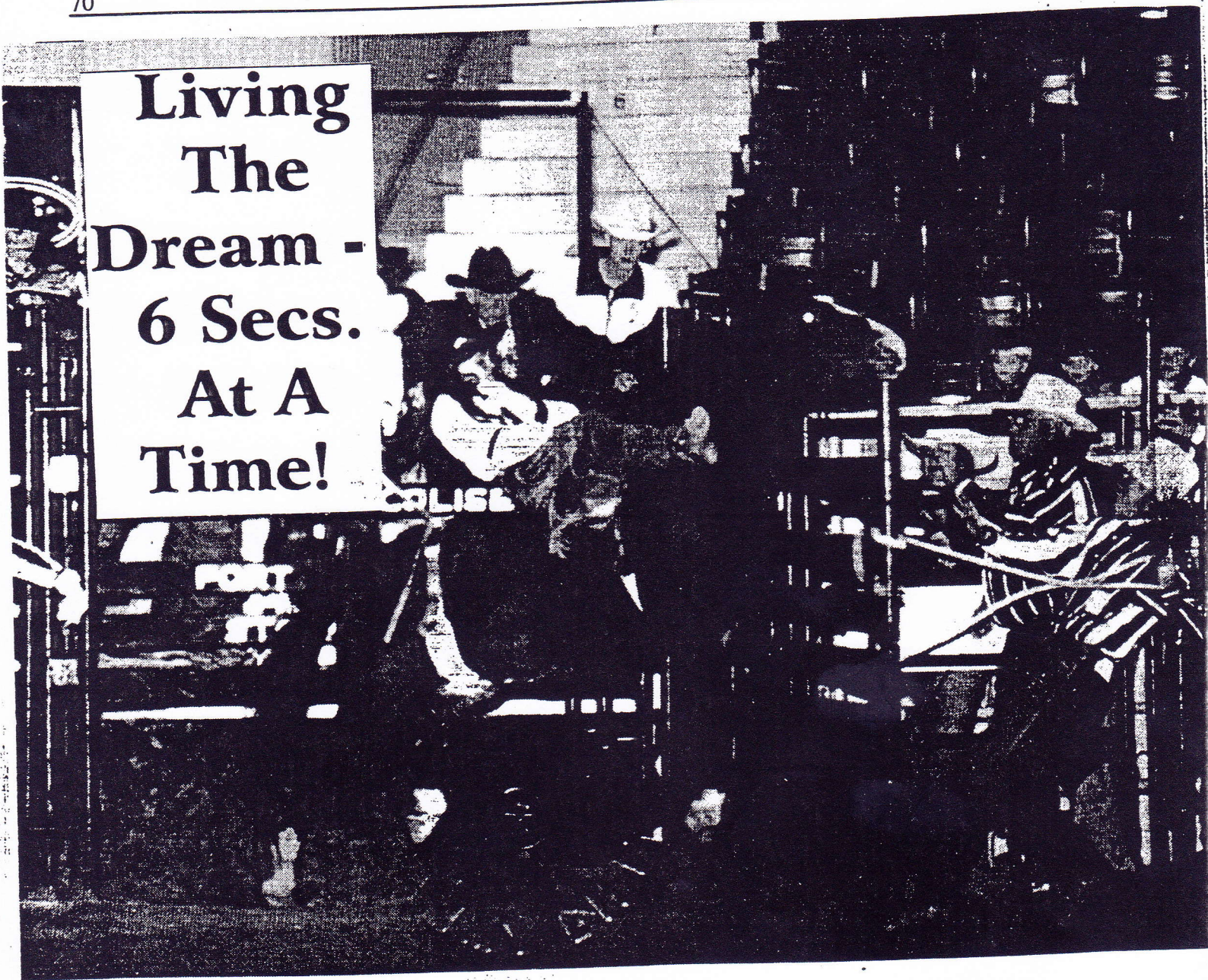


Living The Dream - 6 Secs. At A Time!



by G. Campbell

The horse in the chute rolled his eyes as the gate flew open. Leaning back the rider marks the horse out, spurring in rhythm to the horse's bucks. The whistle blows and the ride is over. Triumphant the rider pulls off her hat and as her hair cascades down her shoulders, Canada's only female bareback rider heads out of the arena.

Twenty six year old Heather Larsen can't put to words what drew her to bareback broncs but it's something she has worked hard for despite many obstacles. "No one wanted me to ride," says Heather, "They said I was too little, that girls couldn't ride bareback horses." At less than five feet tall this young woman makes up for in determination what she lacks in stature.

Born and raised in eastern Ontario, horses have always been an integral part of her life. Her parents breed Canadian Horses and Heather has shown and competed in gymkhana events all her life as well as working at boarding stables, dude ranches and Riding for the Disabled.. An ad for a horse wrangler at Camp Assiniboia near Headingley, Manitoba brought her out west and closer to the realization of a dream to ride bucking horses.

Her first year in Manitoba left little time for much more than working, eating and sleeping. The full time care of the ranch's twenty-four horses combined with lessons, sleigh and trail rides year round is demanding and tough but Heather enjoys the work.

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BAREBACK RIDER

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Heather began to hang around at MRCA rodeos trying to find out how she could fulfil her ambition to go for the whistle. Women's rights may have come a long way, baby, but in rodeo circles the "cowboy way", doesn't appear to include women who want to ride rough stock. Although the ridicule and discouragement hurt and bewildered her, it did nothing to deter her. "I do what I want to do," she says with conviction.

She tried the conventional events that included women like barrel racing but the sport didn't satisfy her. She tried roping but didn't like it enough to do the work to become good. There were a few cowboys who did offer advice and when Rick White of Oak Lake, Manitoba invited her out to his Steer Riding School she jumped at the chance.

At the school she was able to climb on her first steer. Although she admits to being scared...."you have to be, it's not very normal not to be" she loved it. Steer riding is a sanctioned junior event at rodeos but she was able to put in a few exhibition rides in 1994. Still, she wasn't satisfied. Finally she heard of a bareback riding school for women hosted by a woman in the U.S. By now she knew that women rode rough stock in an all-girl rodeo circuit under the auspices of the Professional Women's Rodeo Association (PWRA). These rodeos offer bareback, bull riding, barrel racing, team roping, breakaway roping and tie down calf roping and the association boasts 200 members.

In May of 1995 she attended the school run by Jan Youren and was surprised to find that she was the only participant. This meant she was able to ride several horses over the two days. It was difficult because she had no one else to rely on; to commiserate over the low spots and share in the high. Her first horse bucked hard and the minute she hit the ground she thought, "I want to ride that horse again." That response didn't change all summer even after she sprained her back and broke a finger during a ride. She travelled to seven rodeos throughout the season booking time off and flying to rodeos as far away as Texas just to get a chance to ride a bronc for six seconds. With no opportunity to practise in between she learned the



Heather Larsen

ropes one ride, one rodeo at a time. She seldom made the whistle and when she finally did she didn't even hear it. "It was really cool!" she enthused. She was equally thrilled when she was invited to compete at the Finals held in Ft. Worth, Texas last fall. Prize money on the circuit is minimal and Heather says that even if she won every event, it still wouldn't cover her expenses.

What makes a hard working girl spend her hard earned money to risk life and limb for six seconds of glory? Heather says she can't explain it, but it's like an addiction for her. "I'm not a thrill seeker as a rule, I'm generally a very dependable, predictable person," she says.

Attitudes about her riding have changed slightly; now that she has actually carried through with her desire she is gaining the grudging respect of her masculine peers in the sport. "I don't think they give people a chance until they earn it," says Heather with a shrug.

Her first year in the sport behind her, Heather is looking forward to the 1996 season. She is taking a leave of absence from her job and plans to travel the PWRA circuit from May to mid-November. Having made up her mind that this what she wants to do, she is now determined to be the best she can be, and she's doing it alone.

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