

Larson's wallet suffers a rough ride as competitive spirit proves costly

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"I was nervous, but you get nervous every time you do it," she said. "It's harder when you don't get support from the cowboys."

The school, run by a woman, taught Larson the finer points of getting on and off the horse, about spurring and safety. And it gave her the confidence to go competitive.

Last summer, she used up weekends and vacation time to travel to eight rodeos throughout the U.S. to prove she had the right stuff.

Women are only required to stay on the horses for six seconds, while men must last for eight, but it still means you need a lot of arm and leg strength, and you run the same risks of getting hurt, Larson said.

Women use two-handed rigging, while men have one hand free.

"It's six seconds, but it feels like a lot longer," she said. "I don't think anything; just to stay on the horse."

And the rewards of the risky sport are few, she admits, especially for a woman. On the U.S. circuit of 25 all-women rodeos, prize money is \$2,000 or less, she said. By comparison, cowboys at the Calgary Stampede compete for \$50,000 in prizes.

And for Larson, money is important just to get to the competitions. This year saw her fly to California, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas for the finals — relying on the kindness of new-found friends for a place to eat and sleep.

"Let's just say I live paycheque to paycheque," she said. "The prize money — well, I didn't get much, that's all I'm going to say."

Larson's body has already paid a price too. Wearing no protective gear, she suffered a sprained back at the beginning of the 1995 season and a broken baby finger when she was thrown once, but that's nothing compared to other riders, she said.

Larson says her first season was one to be proud of. She was invited to the finals in Texas, where she competed against some of the world's top female bareback bronc riders.

And now she's champing at the bit for her next chance to compete in the spring. She keeps her strength up by riding horses at the camp.

In fact, she's hoping she'll be able to travel the circuit full time next summer, if she can secure a Manitoba sponsor to help with costs.

She's hoping her trailblazing into this man's world will encourage other Canadian women to join her.

"It is amazing how the cowgirls and cowboys all help each other, even when we're competing. I've got friends all over the U.S. now. But now I want to get something going in Canada so I can get all my U.S. friends up here and do something for them the way they did for me."