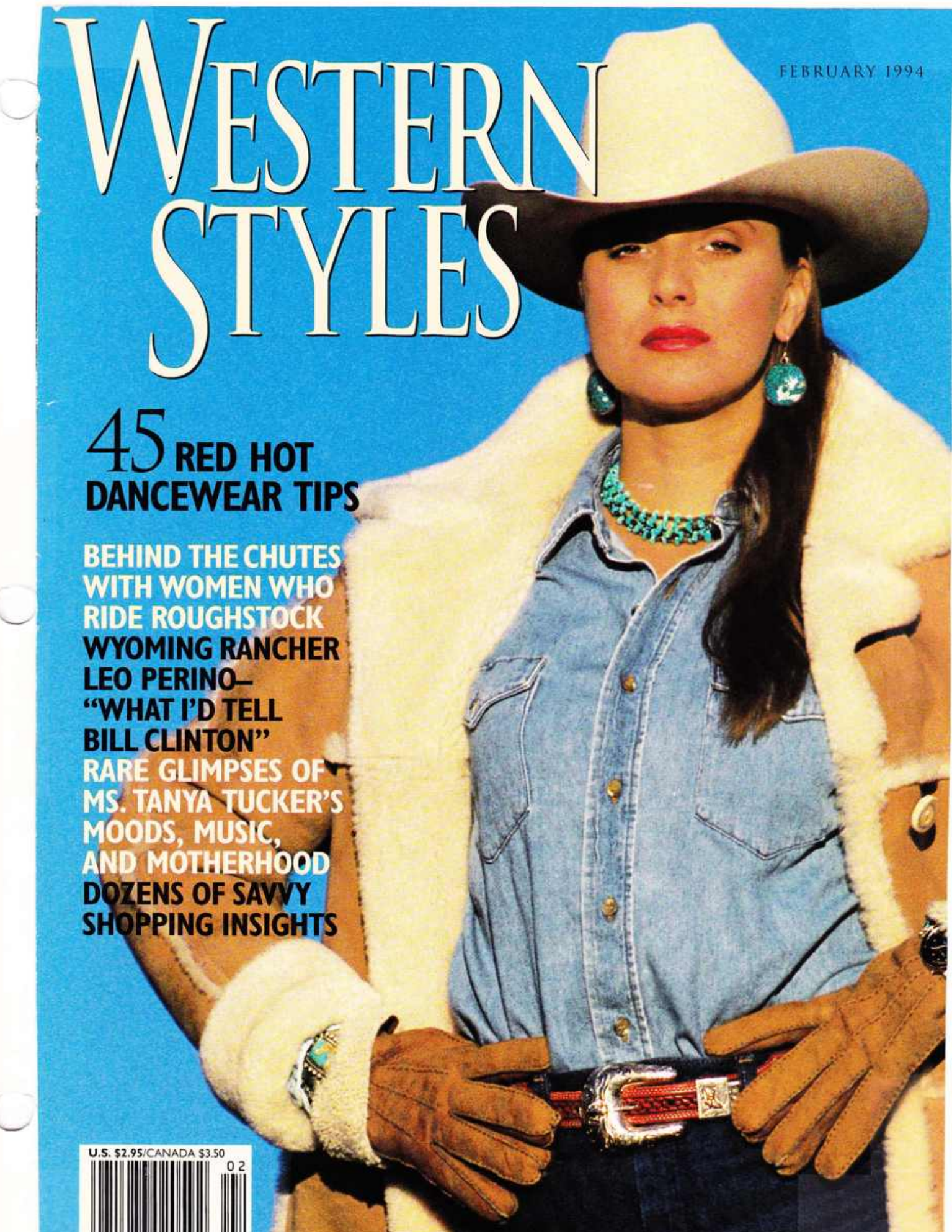


WESTERN STYLES

A woman with long dark hair is wearing a light-colored cowboy hat, a blue denim shirt, a white fur-trimmed jacket, and brown leather gloves. She is also wearing large turquoise earrings, a turquoise necklace, and a watch on her left wrist. The background is a solid blue color.

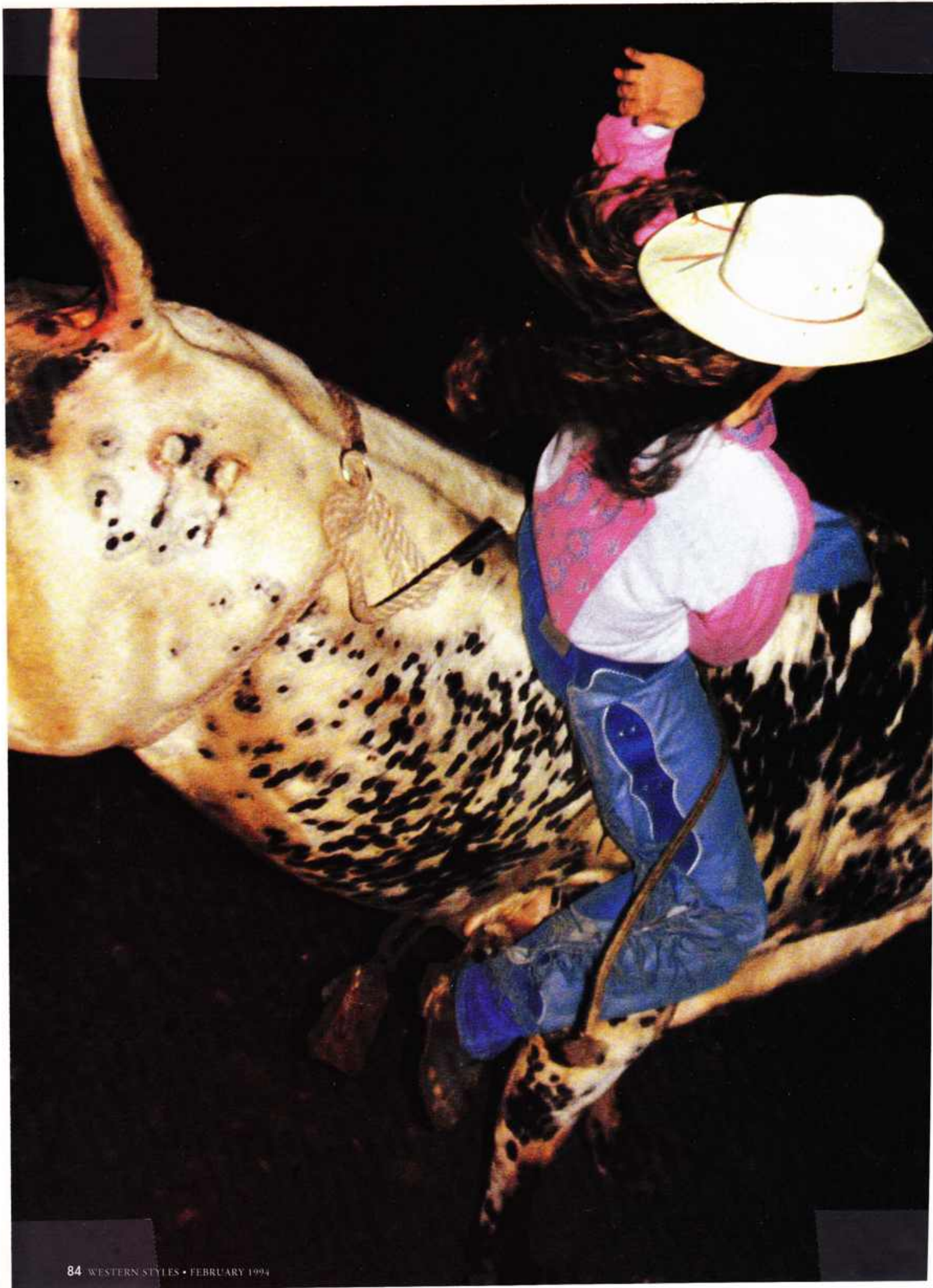
FEBRUARY 1994

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RARE GLIMPSES OF
MS. TANYA TUCKER’S
MOODS, MUSIC,
AND MOTHERHOOD
DOZENS OF SAVVY
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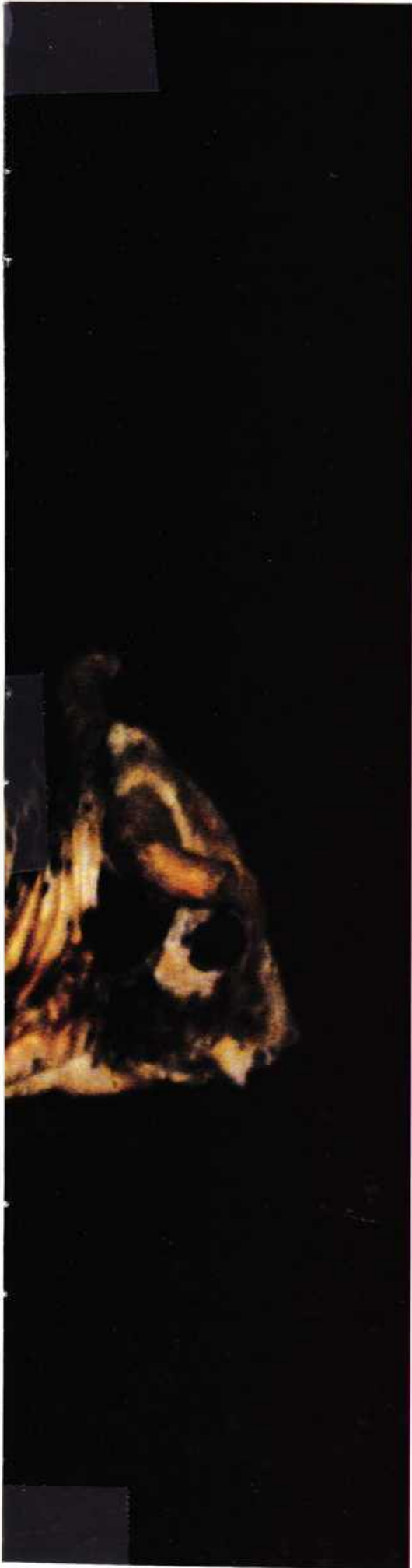
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TOUGH & TENDER

Women roughstock riders buck the odds



IMAGINE A KIND OF SORORITY THAT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH corsages or cotillions, designer clothes or dinner dates. A unique sisterhood where the trappings of membership include ropes and rowels, ibuprofen and ice packs. An informal clan where a member's acceptance depends on her ability to master 1,200 pounds of thrashing, whirling, furious beast in a matter of seconds; her capacity to jump up with a grin and a wave when she lands face-first in the mud; and her willingness to climb aboard again when the memory of a bad wreck still aches vividly in her mind and in her muscles.

They meet on sporadic weekends, congregating behind the rodeo chutes in rural hamlets and large cities all across America's western half. They come alone or with fellow contestants, friends, boyfriends, husbands, and children—often driving hundreds of miles for two six-second rides that could send them home with a few more dollars, or to the hospital with a few broken bones.

Their ordinary weekday jobs enable them to enjoy an extraordinary weekend hobby. They're bonded by the sweat, the tension, the triumphs, and the pain they share both in and out of the arena. In constant pursuit of the next bull, the next bronc, the next event, these are the roughstock riders of the Women's Professional Rodeo Association.

Eminence, Missouri, a picturesque town of 500 residents, nestles in the Ozarks at the state's southern base. A popular tourist spot for river activities, on this particular August weekend it hosts its first-ever all-woman rodeo.

More than an hour before Friday evening's events, curious locals and a scattering of tourists already file into the stands of an outdoor arena. An elderly gentleman in overalls tells concession-stand workers: "I just had to come out and see for myself if these ladies can really ride the bulls."

This is, after all, the Show Me State.

BY ANNE LANG

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NORM E. CLASEN



TONYA BUTTS HAS ARRIVED IN EMINENCE DETERMINED TO MAINTAIN HER lead in the 1993 WPRA bull-riding standings. This rodeo and one more are all that remain before the September finals in Oklahoma. She's encouraged that only four bull riders are competing this weekend, instead of the usual dozen or so. Most of the regulars, Tonya explains, are absent due to injuries.

"Everybody's been getting hurt lately," she says, shaking her head. "I mean breaking stuff. You can usually tape yourself up enough to ride for six seconds, but you can't hardly ride in a cast."

Tonya speaks from experience. When she broke her ankle playing softball, she eventually cut off the plaster because she couldn't fit her spur around it. The bone was far from mended, but—dang it!—there were rodeos to ride.

Tall and model-slim, with long, wavy, dark hair and Brooke Shields eyebrows, Tonya has lived all of her 21 years in Neosho, Missouri, where she runs a one-

woman landscaping business and breaks horses between chasing rodeos with her roughstock-rider boyfriend, Chad. As she describes what it's like to ride a bull, Tonya restlessly taps one knee with long fingers adorned by multiple rings and slightly chewed hot-pink nails.

"It's the longest six seconds of your life," she declares. "It seems like you're in slow motion and the bull's in fast-forward. If you're not in rhythm, you're chasing him the whole time. And when you're on the ground, you feel like you just can't get up quick enough."

That was sure the case when Tonya got stomped after a ride in Louisiana. The memory of lying helpless under those potentially fatal hooves shook her nerve, affecting her rides for the next few rodeos.

"After that, I had a hard time for awhile, because bull riding is 95 percent mental," she explains. "There's a lot of physical demand, but if you're not there mentally, you just can't do it. I try to focus on my ride. I'm thinking mostly about my feet, 'cause if you lose your feet, you're gone. Toes out, spurs in. If you blow one foot, you're gonna come off on the next jump. If you blow both feet, it'll put you in front of the bull, up near the horns. And believe me, you don't want that to happen."

Outside the arena, the women draw for their mounts. These bulls are cross-breds, no more than one-quarter Brahma, smaller and less rank than those used for men's rodeo. Stock contractor Larry Gross knows if he brings a bull with horns to a WPRA rodeo, it can't be a head-fighter or one inclined to go after the rider when she comes off.

Tonya is on Little Wrangler, and despite Chad yelling "Feet, Tonya, feet!" from the sidelines, she's thrown before the whistle. She lands perilously close to the fence, trapping her leg between the rails of the arena gate. The bullfighter helps her shakily to her feet, and she limps away.

Peeling back her chaps and jeans behind the chutes, Tonya reveals an ugly bruise already forming around a bleeding scrape on her shin. Still trembling uncontrollably, she shrugs with attempted nonchalance. "I'm okay," she mutters through gritted teeth. As she ducks her head to rummage through her rigging bag, a flash of arena light bounces off her tiny gold hat pin: praying hands.



JAN YOU'REN'S NOT RIDING TONIGHT. THE TWO-TIME WORLD CHAMPION bareback-bronc rider and National Cowgirl Hall of Fame inductee dislocated her shoulder when a pickup man's horse shied away from her the previous weekend. She's mildly frustrated, because although she's number one right now, her friend and protégé Anne Stevens is a close second. But true to character, Jan has driven to Eminence to give Anne support.

Currently the owner of a ranch in her native town of Garden Valley, Idaho, 49-year-old Jan has competed in nearly every rodeo event since the age of 12. She concentrated on the roughstock until a few years back, when she dropped bull riding to limit herself to bareback broncs. "It got to where the bulls were on top of me as much as I was on top of them, so it wasn't much fun," she says, eyes twinkling in a tanned, fine-lined face framed by stray wisps of blond hair.

It's no wonder Jan is affectionately referred to as the "mom" of women's rodeo.

From four marriages, she has eight children ranging in age from 8 to 32, and 18 grandkids ranging from newborn to 12. She's also coached the majority of women roughstock competitors on the circuit. Women from all over the country flock to Idaho each year to learn the art of bull and bronc riding from this highly respected expert.

Although the WPRA gives contestants the option of a one-handed or two-handed ride in both events, Jan teaches one-handed bull riding and two-handed bronc riding. "Girls just aren't strong enough to take the snatch on a bronc," she explains. "You need the added support in order to spur the shoulders, and spurring's what makes you a bareback rider." One-handed bull riding, she adds, allows the rider to spur the flanks while keeping her away from the dangerous horns. "I've got a wire holding my cheekbone together from all the times I've smacked heads with bulls," Jan confesses.

She recalls a bronc wreck in Montana 12 years ago. "I was riding with a bad blood clot in my leg, and I came off early. The pickup horse landed right in the middle of me. Broke five ribs, my shoulder blade, and my collarbone. But I walked outta there and went dancing that night." When a bull stomped her in Washington, she wound up in intensive care with a collapsed lung, a bruised heart, and more broken ribs. The immobility didn't suit her, and she left without permission the next day.

Jan jokingly blames a short memory for propelling her back into the arena despite nearly four decades of bangs and bumps. "I guess I don't think much about it," she smiles. "I just do it. My dad says it's all guts and no brains. Maybe he's right."

Behind the chutes, Jan seems to be everywhere at once. As she hands a bronc rider's jacket to a shivering bull rider, she's also scolding her young grandson for not buttoning his collar properly. In the next instant, Jan is hanging over the top rail to fasten a cowbell rope around a bull named Double Crossed, instructing the rider to "get your toes down and crank on 'im." Her injured shoulder has got to be hurting. "Yeah, but she'd be the last one to tell ya!" chortles a bronc rider.



EASING CAUTIOUSLY ONTO DOUBLE CROSSED'S BACK IS TERESA Battles, 33, mother of two, impeccably turned out in turquoise chaps with matching shirt and hatband. The tension that once caused her to bite an official NFL mouthpiece in half is now evident on her normally serene face. She gives her gloved hand one more wrap with her rigging rope and throws the tail (extra rope) in front of her, where it can be yanked for a quick release. Teresa's husband, Chuck, leans toward her. "All business, Baby, all business. I love ya, Baby." Fixing her eyes on the bull's powerful hump, she crouches motionless for three heartbeats, then nods curtly to the gate man.

Double Crossed gives her a good ride, with plenty of the spinning and bucking required to improve the score. Teresa stays with him for the required six seconds, called a "cover," and lands clear. From a possible perfect score of 100, half of which is determined by the animal's actions and half by the rider's aggressiveness, Teresa's 84 is respectable. In fact, hers will end up the only cover among bull riders for both nights, meaning she'll take home \$279. After deducting \$35 for the entry and ground fee, plus round-trip gasoline from Huntsville, Texas, two nights' lodging, and three days of meals for her family of four, she just might come out a little bit ahead.



It's somewhat ironic that Teresa, a paramedic by profession, risks her own life and limbs on a regular basis. And it's not as if the purse money makes it worth the gamble. Competing in WPRA rodeos, where added money is usually under \$500 per event, 1992 world champion bull rider Tammy George won \$2,262. Compare that to \$149,814 earned by the top male, Cody Custer, and it's obvious the women aren't in this sport to get rich. So why do they do it?

"It's definitely a thrill," Teresa says in her soft Texas drawl. "And it's a challenge.



Teresa Battles (far left, below right), a paramedic and mother of two, has the weekend's best bull ride; hers is the only cover. This winning performance earns her \$279.

After you get thrown, you want to say, 'run him back in here. I wanna try again.'

"You can get hurt real bad," she acknowledges. "But in the work I do, I see the stupid ways people hurt themselves doing everyday things, too. So you might as well do what you want to do and take a chance at it. Everybody knows you'll get hurt in bull riding, eventually. You're gonna have a little bit of fear, but you need that for adrenaline."

Watching Teresa ride causes the stomach of her 12-year-old daughter, Monica, to do "flip-flops," and evokes hollers of



excitement from 5-year-old Melissa. Husband Chuck, a seasoned rodeo veteran, is Teresa's calm and faithful advisor. The girls weren't there when their mother had a bad wreck in Utah: She'd gotten hung up in her rigging after coming off, and as the big bovine relentlessly dragged Teresa through the mud, he knocked down both bullfighters who were trying to rescue her.

"He was trampling the clown while I was still attached," Teresa says, wincing with the memory. "You want to try to stay on your feet, but he got me in the chin and the chest with his horn, and by the time they got me loose, I just collapsed. I was lucky I didn't get hurt worse in that one. I ended up with a broken rib, concussion, torn elbow ligament, and torn rotator cuff in my shoulder.

"It was tough for me to get on the next bull," she admits. "But I just told myself, well, I've spent money on these entry fees, and I've got to win something, because I'm taking money away from the family if I don't."

Teresa has mixed feelings about letting her daughters ride bulls when they reach the WPRA minimum age of 16. "When they're 18, they can do what they want to," she states. "But until then, I think I'd blame myself a lot if they got hurt." She strongly feels that her avocation makes her a better mother and wife. "Working and running a house, you can get pulled into a rut if you don't have an activity that's special to you. This is something that's all mine, and it helps my attitude a lot. I've had doctors warn me that I'll be arthritic and crippled when I'm old. But at least I can sit there in my rocking chair and say I did what I wanted to do—even if I have to hobble around on a cane."

As the roughstock riders warm up for their events, the scene resembles a cross between a Western-attired ballet class and a gathering of transcendental meditators. One contestant gracefully stretches her arms over a chaps-clad leg hoisted onto the horizontal bar of a stock pen. Another stands off to one side, eyes closed, hands on her hips, breathing deeply. Some pantomime their rides or hop from foot to foot like prizefighters; others tug repeatedly on rigging ropes coated with glycerine soap and rosin, trying to maximize their grip.



Bareback-bronc champ Anne Stevens got her start with Jan Youren. Anne's recipe for a good ride: "You can't let your nerves get the better of you. You can't let the broncs know you're scared."

GETTING LAST-MINUTE INSTRUCTIONS FROM JAN IS 27-YEAR-OLD Australian Anne Stevens, 1992 WPRA bareback-bronc champion. With naturally red hair, an ever-present lopsided grin, and a mischievous gleam in the eyes of her freckled face, Anne's physical resemblance to Britain's Sarah Ferguson is reinforced by her similar devil-may-care personality. If she's nervous tonight, it doesn't show.

"When he gets weak, you get tougher," Jan tells Anne as she lowers herself onto a bronc named White Cloud. Anne nods at Jan, then at the gate man, and she's off to a hat-flinging, crowd-pleasing ride that nets her a score of 83. (Combined with a 72 on the following night, she'll wind up on top for the weekend, collecting \$206 for her efforts.) As she hops down from the railing, a blushing 10-year-old named John shyly requests her autograph.



Still breathless and laughing with exhilaration, Anne tousles the boy's hair and signs his program with a flourish.

"I couldn't have been luckier, I'll tell you that," Anne says of 1989, when she journeyed to Idaho to learn from Jan Youren. "She took me into her house and made me part of the family. I got on practice broncs my second day and went to rodeoing, had way too much fun, and had to come back to do it again."

Anne has since settled into an enviable pattern of following the sun. She works on a cattle ranch Down Under

for six months, earning money to rodeo in the United States during the remaining half of the year. Each half of her life hones her skills for the other half.

"Some of the horses we ride at the cattle station are pretty wild," she says. "If you can ride a rough horse, there's a certain element of respect you get from your workmates and your buddies."

As for the broncs, she explains, "It takes a long time to be able to think about what you're doing while you're up there, and to think quick enough to make things happen for a controlled ride.

Every horse is different. On some, you've just gotta gas 'em and charge 'em because they're real aggressive. On others you go out there and pick up the rhythm for a nice spurring ride. You can't let your nerves get the better of you. You can't let the broncs know you're scared."

Initially, Anne's mother wasn't too keen on the idea of a bronc-riding daughter. "She hates it that I get tore up every so often, but she knows I'm going to do it anyway. Actually, she's real proud of me. She might come over next year."

Anne's father won't be coming. He succumbed to a lengthy illness just a few months ago, and the still-fresh grief brings sudden tears to the eyes of the outwardly tough Aussie. She smiles fondly, though, as she self-consciously swipes at her face with the sleeve of her pressed shirt and tells of her last trip home, when she showed her dad the handsome championship saddle and a videotape of her rides.

"I don't know how much he was able to grasp at that point, but at least I got a chance to show him before he died," she says quietly. "And that made every bit of all this worthwhile."

THE FRIDAY PERFORMANCE IS OVER, and the crowd is dispersing. Word of the amazing all-girls rodeo will spread, and Saturday night's attendance will triple.

Intent on finding the local dance hall, Jan and Anne wander off, their merry hoots of laughter echoing on the cool night air. Teresa heads toward the family truck, where her two sleepy girls are perched on the tailgate in the darkness. Chuck tosses his wife's rigging bag in back, and the family drives off to a motel.

Tonya is out of luck. Local lodging has been sold out for weeks, and she didn't plan far enough ahead. No matter. Chad pulls his pickup around and parks it near the restrooms. The couple shake out their sleeping bags on the truck bed. And the world-champion lady bull rider drifts off to sleep illuminated by a nearby utility light, where a thousand flying insects cavort madly in the glare. 🐞

For information on WPRA rodeos in 1994, call (405) 485-2277. Or write to the Women's Professional Rodeo Association, Rt. 5, Box 698, Blanchard, OK 73010.