

# A colorful

# heritage

*A favorite mount for charreadas, bring good looks and versatility to*

*American Paint Horses these traditional Mexican rodeos.*



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The large round sombrero hats with their conical centers and slightly folded brims are unmistakable. Men and women, charros and charras, alike wear them, and a sea of the festive halos dot the arena and grandstands. They alone are enough to signify this rodeo as charrería Mexicana.

The scene, however, is rich with the flavor of timeless Mexican equestrian culture. Charros wearing tight-fitting leather shotgun chaps, long-sleeved shirts, and pluming butterfly-style ties at their collars straddle the fence by the bucking chutes. Others are mounted on colorful horses, riding in ornate saddles with huge wooden horns. A handful of mustached men wearing short, somewhat military-looking jackets with ornately stitched patterns along the sleeves and lapels hover about tables in a judges' stand. An almost continual flow of a Spanish-speaking man's voice emits from the loud speakers across the round arena and commingles with a Mexican tune being played somewhere close by on brass horns, sounding like a marching band in a nearby parade.

White chalk marks on the ground delineate various areas in the arena. One charro rides around continually swinging a large loop around himself and his horse with one arm and managing a huge number of rope coils with the other. A fancy trick is thrown in for good measure once in awhile. Children, perfectly dressed miniatures of their elders—boys in the same hats, ties, jackets and chaps, and girls in beautiful flowing skirts, long-sleeved matching blouses and hats whose colors easily identify them with their family's escaramuza team—dart here and there.

Several charros on horses begin to mill about the arena, as one on foot begins to flip a loop

around himself. The lasso spins horizontally to his side, and he jumps through it once ... twice ... three times. Suddenly, the mounted charros move a mare around the curved edge of the round arena past the pedestrian, who makes a forth hop through the loop just as the mare passes. Seemingly effortless, he then casually flips the loop around her neck.

This is charreada.

## A family tradition

Charrería is the traditional Mexican rodeo. Aside from being a very popular sport, charrería maintains great historical significance for people of Mexican heritage. The charro, in olden times, was first a cowboy by trade whose talents with a rope and horse were practical necessities of ranching and working with cattle. In times of conflict, however, the charro became a fighter. He was a very important citizen soldier to the Mexican people, particularly during the Mexican revolutions (both the War for Independence, fought from 1810–1821, and the Revolution of 1910), and is of notable significance to the cultural identity of Mexicans.

The charro of modern charrería harkens back to these great heroes of the nation and celebrates them, even as contemporary rodeo champions demonstrate their personal roping, reining and rough stock talents. Jorge Torres, a trainer since the 1970s from Riverside County in Southern California, is a renowned charro and often competes with his children Sandy, Gabi, Christi and Jaivo.

By TOM MOATES



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*Charrerías embody Mexican culture and are comprised of many skill-based, crowd-pleasing events.*

*Facing: Yesenia Garcia takes a break from practice with "Bonbon."*



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Above and far right: Performed by up to 12 charros, the escaramuza is an intricate drill team performance.

Right: Other charreada events include the rough-stock competition jinete de yegua.



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Torres is consistently at the top of the sport, and especially enjoys the registered American Paint Horses he and his family use in charrería. This time-honored event is more than a simple equestrian competition—it's an entire equestrian folk tradition whose intricate details and stringent standards preserve and perpetuate the charro style and culture of horsemanship and roping.

"Everybody related to Jorge is involved in charrería in one way or another," said Toby de la Torre, president of the Charros Federation, USA, and southern California representative for Federacion Mexicana de Charrería. "Charrería is in his family's blood and his walls are covered with accomplishments he and his family have earned. Jorge has been a long time recognized as a top reining trainer [for charro events] in the U.S. Besides winning more than 15 state champion reining titles himself, his teams and horses he has trained have won many state championships. His teams have participated in eight national championships, and I have participated in three with him."

Torres' children have also participated at the sports' top levels.

"His daughters ride in the top U.S. escaramuza [drill] teams," said de la Torre. "His only son, Jaivo, became one of the youngest top charros in the U.S. to ever qualify for the world national finals in Mexico. Jorge has also skipped important opportunities and competitions to personally assist and make sure his daughters' and son's competitions go safely—he and his wife, Romelia, gleam with pride when it comes to family accomplishments."

Men and women, boys and girls, and even elders compete in charrería. Strong, ongoing family participation across generations, as the Torres family demonstrates, is typical in this horse-based pastime. In addition to the enthusiastic participants, many other family members and local people behind the scenes help make these rodeos possible and enjoy watching the grand gatherings as well. Charrería Mexicana is truly a major celebration of a strong community identity, wherever they are held.

Naturally, Mexico is home to many rodeo teams and charrería events, but they have enjoyed strong popularity in the United States for many decades as well. In the U.S., many local, regional and state competitions are held annually, and the best teams are eligible to compete in the world finals held in Mexico.

Until recently, titles and trophies were the sole winnings of charros and charras, and there were no cash prizes as in mainstream North American-style rodeo events. De la Torre explains recently changes somewhat, and monetary prizes have started filtering into charrería, although it's no substitute for the personal pride earned by winning an event.

"To this day," de la Torre said, "the most cherished prize is the applause and appreciation of the audience and loved ones. That is what we keep and take to heart and home."

### Painted partners

The very underpinnings of charrería, however, are the athletic horses that make the incredible feats of mounted charros and charras possible. Paint Horses are a favorite of many charrería contestants on both sides of the border.

"I like the Paint Horse—it's such a good horse," said Torres. "To begin with, I like color in horses. Color and conformation and mind—if I can get all that together, that'll be my horse!"

"I am excited about the influx of top reining and cutting bloodlines in the APHA [American Paint Horse Association] horses of today," de la Torre said. "The unique beauty and versatility of the American Paint Horse adds to the glamour of our traditional sport."

A tremendous amount of personal time and energy are lavished on these horses, and it



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Far left: Paints' color, conformation and temperament make them a popular choice as mounts.

Left: Charreadas are truly social events, with family and friends coming together for the competitions.

Below: Traditional attire, like the escaramuza outfit worn by Yesenia, is an important part of the event, as well.



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