



Before every competition, judges from the Mexican Federation of Charrería check to see that every element of tack and costume matches and conforms to the rules.

Choreographing CULTURE

Synchronized escaramuza competitions – and the traditions behind them – are the subject of an upcoming PBS documentary.

By Holly Clanahan

FOR MARIBEL GUTIÉRREZ, A FIRST-GENERATION MEXICAN-AMERICAN horsewoman who lives in Perris, California, escaramuzas are much more than just a display of riding abilities. The competitions embody so much for Maribel – her love of family, of Mexican traditions and of the uniquely American spin put on them by Maribel and her peers.

Escaramuzas are high-speed, choreographed routines performed by eight female sidesaddle riders who must stay perfectly in time with each other as they do sliding stops, spins and drill-team-style “crosses.” The competitions are part of charreadas, or Mexican-style rodeos, and the women dress in traditionally elegant charra suits or ruffled dresses.

Often, they’re mounted on American Quarter Horses, who are well-suited to the catty-quick moves required, and Maribel is no different. Her partner is Charlie Zan Tivio, a 6-year-old red dun who traces to Zan Parr Bar and Poco Tivio. Before him, she rode an elegant Quarter Horse she called “Grey Fritz.”

In an upcoming PBS documentary, you’ll get to meet Maribel and Grey Fritz and other members of Las Azaleas, her escaramuza team, as they are on a quest to represent the United States at the National Charro Championships in Mexico.

“Escaramuza: Riding From the Heart” premieres on PBS October 5 as part of Latino Public Broadcasting’s arts and culture series, *Voces* on PBS. It is scheduled to air at 10 p.m. Eastern, but check local listings to be sure.

Filmmakers Robin Rosenthal and Bill Yahraus began following the members of Las Azaleas as they worked to qualify for the 2008 championships, which were to be in Zacatecas, Mexico. The women qualified but then were heartbroken to realize that escalating drug violence in Mexico meant it was not safe to go.

Maribel says that didn’t give the film a satisfying conclusion, “so (the filmmakers) said, ‘Well, we’ve decided to do another year of filming.’”

Ultimately, Robin and Bill developed a full understanding of the charreadas, and “now they’re part of our family,” Maribel says. It’s quite an extended family, too. Maribel’s siblings compete in charreadas, as does her husband, Oscar, and their older children (they have four, ages 3 to 14).

The highly competitive Las Azaleas team of southern California – which schedules two practices a week – has qualified for the National Charro Championships every year since its formation in 2005. The group has been able to attend every year except for 2008, and the women are planning a trip to the 2012 event, set for October in Zacatecas.

Although Maribel says it was a little surreal, especially at first, to let a film crew into her life, she is happy with the result.

“I think people need to know that we’re out there, too, and we love what we do, and there are a lot of kids who love this hobby of ours. They’re out there trying to do what their dads and their grandpas did.”

Other American Quarter Horses who make an appearance in the documentary are Tejons Wants A Nic and Lenas Enterprise. ■

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