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All hail the rodeo queen: Spokane's Katherine Merck takes aim at national crown

Erica Curless

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Miss Rodeo Washington Katherine Merck pets her horse Jax on Friday, Sep 11, 2015, before the start of the Spokane Interstate Fair.

Washington rodeo fans can see the custom wardrobe Miss Rodeo Washington 2015 Katherine Merck will wear during the Miss Rodeo America Pageant in Las Vegas during an Oct. 31 Trunk Show in Ellensburg. The fundraiser includes a visiting royalty fashion show and kid's Halloween costume parade. Tickets are \$15. To order online, go to www.missrodeowashingtoninc.com. (<http://www.missrodeowashingtoninc.com.%C2%A0>)

For more information on Miss Rodeo America, the contestants and a pageant schedule, go to www.missrodeoamerica.com. (<http://www.missrodeoamerica.com>.)

Miss Rodeo Washington Katherine Merck is likely the only rodeo queen to practice her pageant speech before the state Supreme Court justices. After all it was a well-researched oral argument on the superior attributes of Washington state.

The Spokane native who grew up on the South Hill with ballet lessons – not riding and roping – is also likely the only Gonzaga University law student to delay graduation to compete to be Miss Rodeo America. If she wins the 2016 title, she would be the first woman from Washington to earn the prestigious crown and the job representing the sport of rodeo and Western lifestyle that goes with it.

“Cowboys are not the best promoters of rodeo,” Merck, 25, said recently during coffee at Rockwood Bakery. “They are there to compete and leave early for the next rodeo. That’s one of the reasons queens are so important. We fill in that gap.”

It was a rare day that she wasn't at a rodeo or queen training. The previous week she was in Utah learning how to walk in stilettos and the other skills that will give her an edge during the eight-day pageant. The Las Vegas event is part fashion show and speeches and part horsemanship skills, and 33 reigning state rodeo

queens will compete for the title, including Miss Rodeo Idaho Dusti Olson of Kuna.

Contestants must know rodeo history, equine science and current events – and be ready to answer any question at any time, a fun challenge for a trivia-minded, history-buff law student who is used to pressure and lightning-fast, well-articulated responses.

If she wins during the Dec. 6 coronation, Merck would sign a contract and go straight to a photo shoot. That night she would start work representing rodeo at the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo – the Super Bowl for rodeo athletes – that runs in conjunction with the pageant Dec. 3-12 in Las Vegas.

If she loses, she returns to Spokane and resumes law school.

Merck has spent the past year on the road, traveling to rodeos and other events across the U.S. and Canada, representing her state.

Like professional cowboys and cowgirls, she has to raise her own travel money, seeking sponsors and donations from friends and rodeo supporters.

Meanwhile her GU classmates are finishing their final year and doing internships in law offices. The school gave Merck a leave of absence and has been supportive of her rodeo dream. Law School Associate Dean of Students Heidi Holland attended her Miss Rodeo Washington coronation party this spring.

Merck, who is focusing on agricultural estate planning and water rights, views her pageant journey as equal training to a legal internship. She's representing the Western lifestyle, the same base of people she's likely to have as clients. The job is really about marketing and promotion, which shares many of the same skills needed in law.

Merck says she's getting real-life experience – and making connections – helping prepare her for nearly any situation, whether it's a confrontation with animal-rights activist or a business meeting with a sponsor. Mostly, she's giving back to the community and gaining lifelong friendships.

Supreme Court Justice Charles Wiggins doesn't remember Merck's speech last year while talking with students in the halls of the law school. Yet he remembers her bubbly personality from a visit to the Temple of Justice this spring while she was in Olympia thanking the Legislature for support in rebuilding the Omak Stampede arena.

"It's very out of the ordinary," he said. He likes Merck's spunk and said when hiring his law clerks he looks for something that stands out in addition to excellence in undergrad work and law school.

"It shows a little more maturity and experience in life," Wiggins said.

During the Kitsap County Stampede in August, Merck invited Wiggins to attend. He arrived late and missed her "queen run" – where she blasts into the arena on a fast horse waving to the crowd.

Instead he saw the working side of a queen's job, where she helps push cattle back to the pens after each roper or steer wrestler.

"This was not like a glamour queen sort of job," Wiggins said with surprise, adding he has no rodeo knowledge.

A year of work

Last week Merck picked up 2015 Miss Rodeo America Lauren Heaton of Oklahoma from the Spokane airport. The women spent the night at Merck's family home, a rare moment to relax, and then drove to Ellensburg where Merck handed the Miss Rodeo Washington title to Macy LaValley of Cheney.

Now Merck spends every moment preparing for the national pageant. She uses a color-coded Excel spreadsheet to organize her wardrobe – 14 custom designed outfits all with a style she describes as "classy and classic," like "Coco Channel meets Dale Evans."

Her father will drive Merck's horse trailer, this time filled racks of clothes and boxes of boots, chaps and hats, to Las Vegas because it's too complicated to fly the wardrobe.

A champagne-colored lambskin dress with delicate embroidery based on the dress Grace Kelly wore in "High Society" lays on her childhood bed. It's soft and elegant with just enough sparkle.

The fashions aren't cheap, even with queen discounts and sales. This semester of law school tuition would have been covered by scholarships so Merck plans to spend the same – an estimated \$18,000 – on her clothes. She has her undergraduate degree in finance from Notre Dame, so she views the expense as an investment in a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Yet there is more than just big hair, fancy dresses (with perfectly dyed to match cowboy boots) and lipstick. There are scholarships. If successful, Merck plans to use her scholarship money at the University of Washington for its Master of Laws in Taxation program.

She sees the glamour and fashion as the trappings that draw people in to hear the message of rodeo. Besides, Merck added, spokespeople must look presentable, especially since Miss Rodeo America models in national campaigns for sponsors such as Wrangler and Montana Silversmith.

"The horsemanship, the knowledge is what we do, we represent rodeo," she said in September while trying to curl her new blonde hair extensions before the Friday night performance of the Spokane County Interstate Fair Rodeo. To honor Sept. 11, she was carrying the American flag. In a rare instance, she got to ride her own horse, Jax.

Her strategy is to study and build her confidence by knowing every bit of rodeo history and trivia. While driving thousands of miles this summer, she listened to downloads of historic rodeo details and the media guide that gives details on every NFR contestant, animal and stock contractor.

"If I study enough and feel confident enough that's when my personality will come out," she said squinting into a lighted make up mirror while she applied brown eyeshadow.

A girlhood love of horses

Merck has been practicing her horsemanship skills since age 11, when she went to Camp Reed and caught the horse bug. She pestered her parents for a horse and had to work at their family business Old World Christmas – a wholesale figural glass ornament company the Mercks recently sold – to earn money for her first horse.

That's when she met the rodeo cowboy who ignited her dream of becoming a queen.

Eddie Biegler, a Spokane horse trainer who won the novice saddle bronc riding at the Calgary Stampede in 1968, is Merck's idol and best friend. After years of hearing his rodeo stories, she wanted to become part of rodeo.

"Horses and Eddie have told me so much about life," she said while grooming Jax before the performance. Biegler used a black Sharpie to darken the hair around the horse's eyes, yet another beauty trick for horse and rider.

Freya Ford, the 2009 Miss Rodeo Idaho and 2010 Miss Rodeo America first runner up, also adopted the rodeo lifestyle. Growing up in Sandpoint, she borrowed a horse for 4-H and could hardly speak in public when she first ran for Bonner County Rodeo Queen, which she finally got after three attempts.

Today, Ford – who lives in Coeur d'Alene – covers the coronation for Pro Rodeo Live, the Internet home of professional rodeo. She also interviews go-around winners during the NFR.

“It’s intense, just to be riding and competing in Vegas,” Ford said, admitting she still gets nervous during the coronation. “It’s really a historical thing. There are only a certain amount of girls who ever get to do it. It’s a big deal to represent your state on a national level.”

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