

IMAGE
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Inside The World Of **INDIGENOUS** Horse Girls



We horse girls are having a major moment right now. I know what you're thinking: It's long overdue. But let's just take a minute to relish in all the horse girl glory going on right now. Women made history—and, if we're being honest, totally stole the spotlight—at the Tokyo Olympics across all equestrian sports, from dressage to eventing to show jumping. This fall, magazines are plastered with equestrian homages, from cultural force Beyoncé on the cover of *Harper's Bazaar* to famed teen activist Greta Thunberg adorning the inaugural issue of *Vogue Scandinavia* to supermodel Cindy Crawford on the UK's *Tatler*. And then there are the die-hards who've owned it all along, like O.G. Queen Elizabeth, media maven Martha Stewart, and sister models Gigi and Bella Hadid.

Also cause for celebration these days? The fact that people of all identities and backgrounds are starting to see themselves better represented in media, pop culture and the like. And the horse world is no exception. As an Indigenous equestrian myself, I'm excited about the vast and varied Native Americans helping shape the horse world—from Olympians to activists to everyday equestrians like you and me.

Native Americans and horses have a long shared history. Some say it began in the 15th and 16th centuries when European settlers reintroduced horses to the continent after America's original horses died out during the Ice Age. Others argue that these Indigenous horses never went extinct and are still alive and well today in limited numbers (more on that later). One thing we can all agree on is how important horses have been to tribal communities, acting as literal workhorses for activities like hunting and traveling, and symbolizing freedom, power and prosperity.

But Indigenous equestrians aren't stuck in the past. Just as depictions of Native Americans in pop culture have finally stepped into the 21st century thanks to TV shows like *Reservation Dogs* and *Rutherford Falls*, so too has the definition of Native horse girls. Sure, cultural traditions have been carried down through the generations, but we Indigenous equestrians are as far from monolith as you can get—and we're a far cry from the stereotypical image of a Native woman dressed in tribal regalia traversing the American plains on horseback.

Take decorated American Olympic dressage rider Adrienne Lyle, for instance. The 36-year-old, who participated in the 2012 London games and again this summer in Tokyo, is a registered member of the Cherokee Nation. She grew up on Washington's Whidbey Island on a small cattle ranch and today splits her time between Denver and Wellington, Florida. Although it was important that she learn about her heritage, it wasn't an influential factor in her relationship with horses.

"My parents educated me about our culture, and we visited the site in Oklahoma where my family is from," she tells me. "When we traced our family back to Oklahoma, there were quite a few people who were involved in horses—so maybe it's in my genes."

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When she has represented the United States at the Olympics, Lyle has done so as both a proud American and a proud member of the Cherokee Nation. "It's such a huge honor to be able to represent your country at the games," Lyle explains. "It's so much more than just a horse show; it's really a place where the whole world can come together and you feel the incredible support from your country."

Her love of horses developed early in life, and she couldn't imagine it any other way. "Horses have been in my life from the time I was a little kid," she says. "Many times in my life, they've made a lot more sense to me than people. I can't imagine not having that partner, that relationship, that daily communication. I don't think I would be able to go without

them. Even someday when I'm no longer competing, they will always be part of my daily life."

Despite all her accomplishments as one of the United States' youngest Olympic dressage riders, Lyle's feet are firmly planted on the ground—no doubt thanks to the hard work she's put in along the way. "I definitely do not come from a wealthy horse show family," she explains. "I was able to get a job as a working student and put in the hard work and hours. Then when an opportunity came up to sit on a horse, I jumped at that and was able to work my way up to riding more, getting more recognition then getting sponsors. Where there's a will, there's a way. If something seems impossible or out of reach, there's a way to get there if you're willing to work for it."

Lyle's horse story starts back on Whidbey Island, where she was a Pony Club member. She rode extensively with her cousin, international three-day eventer Maya Black. "From the time we were little, we would hop on the ponies and literally ride until the sun went down," she recalls. "Even then, it often wasn't enough, and we would sneak out of the house at night and go galloping bareback across the field in the moonlight. We spent every waking moment on a horse—riding through the woods and fields, swimming them on the beaches."

She homed in on dressage at age 13 and started riding with Olympian and U.S. Dressage Technical Advisor Debbie McDonald as a working student in 2005. Since then, Lyle has claimed victory at the U.S. Dressage Festival of Champions

Adrienne Lyle

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Andrea Evans /US Equestrian





Pearl Running Deer

IMAGE
Pearl Running Deer

and represented the United States at two Olympic Games as well as two World Equestrian Games, among many other accomplishments. When she's not competing on an international stage, she's training her mounts and teaching the next generation of dressage stars, with an emphasis on putting the horse first.

"I'm very passionate about teaching the younger generation," she says. "I would like to leave a legacy of helping develop riders who are not just good riders but who are very good horse people, encompassing all the care of the horse. My entire program is really based around the welfare and the happiness of the horse. I really do believe that you can get to the top and be the best by doing it correctly, kindly and patiently."

Among her students is assistant trainer Quinn Iverson, herself a member of the Tsilhqot'in (Chilcotin) tribe. She and Lyle share even more similarities beyond their Native American backgrounds, natural riding talent and strong work ethic. Both grew up in the Pacific Northwest and were discovered by Debbie McDonald. Now, Iverson has Grand Prix aspirations.

And let's be real: It's easy to be inspired when your mentor is Adrienne Lyle. "It's amazing to have all these wonderful accomplishments and to be able to go around the world and do what I love, but I've always said that as long as I can work with horses, I'll be happy," Lyle notes.

What gets her most excited? Where U.S. dressage is headed. "In the past couple years, we've been hearing that Americans are now known for their very correct, very classical, very accurate riding," Lyle says. "We were one of the only teams at the Tokyo Olympics that had three rides without a single mistake, and that's something we're quite proud of. It's been wonderful to hear that we're not just riding like the Germans or riding like the Dutch, that there is now this style of American riding that's starting to be recognized." It's a style—and a legacy—that Lyle is no doubt helping create.

Pearl Running Deer's experience in the hunter/jumper world has been heavily influenced by her Indigenous background, particularly because she's mixed race—Choctaw and Black. She too grew up riding, encouraged by her father. It started as a horseback ride on the beach in her hometown of Atlantic City, New Jersey, before she could even walk and blossomed into a lifelong passion that took her to prestigious show grounds across the Northeast (think Devon, Coppergate and Middlesex).

She had the unique opportunity to train with Maurice Honig of the French equestrian team and helped open the door for others as one of the first Native American riders to compete on the A circuit. But it wasn't all button braids and blue ribbons. Running Deer recalls the discrimination she faced back in the '80s and '90s—and still faces to this day.

When she started doing small local shows, she was often the only person of color there, which was shocking for some. She remembers the time in her early 20s when she was accused of stealing a saddle. Thankfully, the barn owner witnessed the situation and came to Running Deer's defense. And she's encountered a unique form of discrimination because of her mixed race background, even being confronted with racial slurs.

But for all the bad, there's also been good. Running Deer says for all the racism she faced on a local level, she experienced quite the opposite when she hit the international stage. "The A circuit was more open-minded and kinder because everybody's trying to qualify for Devon and Harrisburg then go to the Olympics," she explains. "I remember at a show in the early '80s at Gladstone, everyone was there—George Morris, Bert de Némethy, all of them. They'd all heard of me by this time. Bert de Némethy came up to me and said, 'Welcome to the circuit.' I walked away with tears, because he didn't even care I was a Native American."

She experienced that kindness and acceptance from other notables like Olympians Frank Chapot, Chris Kappler and Greg Best (who famously rode Gem Twist), acclaimed judge Alex Forman, and the Leone brothers. They'd give her pointers in the warm-up ring, help her hang water buckets in stalls and just extend a kind of warmth she hadn't experienced at local shows.

Although she's encouraged by the progress made since George Floyd's death and the subsequent racial reckoning, Running Deer doesn't think a whole lot has changed since her early days in the horse world. But she's not letting that stand in her way.

In 2017, she established the nonprofit Turtle Island Equestrian, whose mission is to rescue healthy horses and ponies from kill pens and abandonment. These equines are then instrumental in her lesson program, which teaches children and adults from all backgrounds not only riding skills but also the art of horse care. The big picture goal? To make horses more accessible to a wider range of people.

Although the organization is still in its infancy, Running Deer hopes to one day establish an official Native American equestrian team. As she envisions it, there wouldn't be any specific tribal, political or religious affiliation. The only prerequisite? That you're an Indigenous rider. She wants to give Native Americans a unique opportunity to ride at an international level and hopes to someday see the team compete at the Olympics.

Indigenous horse girls are making an impact in the world of activism, too. Yvette Running Horse Collin is the cofounder of Alabama's Sacred Way Sanctuary, a research, education and preservation facility that's home to 100+ Native American horses. A member of the Oglala Sioux tribe, she has made it her life's work to educate the world about these equines.

"There were certain relatives that Creator sent that are specifically designed to help us in our journey spiritually, to help strengthen us," she notes. "One is the horse. Side by side, they are with us, and they've experienced everything we've been through."

So back to that Native American horse origin story. Although history books posit that they went extinct during the Ice Age, Indigenous oral histories and spiritual beliefs suggest otherwise. And archeological evidence, including petroglyphs and ancient clay and wooden figurines found across the Americas, supports this.

Running Horse Collin is determined not only to preserve and protect these prehistoric horses—with unique characteristics like short statures, striped legs and curly hair coats—but also to bring to light the truth about their history, bucking the colonialist-driven theory that they died out centuries ago. She even wrote her PhD dissertation on the topic after conducting more than a decade's worth of research. Today, she's working to analyze the DNA of the sanctuary's horses, confident it will show that the lineage of the original American horses has endured all this time. She thinks this is paramount, especially in today's day and age.

"It's many times hard to talk about [the Indigenous experience] directly because the world doesn't want to hear it—but you can talk about the horses," Running Horse Collin says. "We're still alive. Are we battered? Sure. Are the horses battered? Sure. But is it over? No."



Pearl Running Deer

IMAGE
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Allie Young

IMAGE
Sharon Chischilly

Allie Young, a member of the Diné (Navajo Nation), made headlines when she saddled up to get out the Native vote during last year's historic presidential election. Many in the Navajo Nation—the United States' largest Native American reservation at a whopping 27,000 square miles across the Southwest—feel discouraged to vote due to scarce polling stations and limited transportation. So Young organized the Ride to the Polls initiative, leading groups of voters on horseback along a 10-mile trail to polling places.

"We rode in honor of our ancestors who fought for our right to vote," explains Young, who donned traditional attire, like a Diné sash and beaded jewelry, for the rides. "We rode in honor of our ancestors who rode longer miles and hours just to exercise their right to vote for us, our people, our lands, Mother Earth and Father Sky, and future generations. We rode just like them and carried the horse spirit and horse medicine that reconnects us to Mother Earth, that balances us and brings us back to Hózhó—we carried that good medicine to the polls to fight for and protect the sacred."

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The driving force behind the initiative? Young's dad. "He told me he wasn't feeling motivated to participate in this election because of the disarray we're in as a nation and that he was feeling frustrated about the divisiveness that is plaguing our communities," she says. "But then, he had a vision of our people riding on horseback to heal our country, and that's when he mentioned doing a trail ride to get out the vote. I thought about it and reflected on the teachings from my parents about how the horse is used in many of our ceremonies to heal and regain strength. When I connected voting back to our culture and spirituality, it made sense to me that a trail ride is exactly what we needed to do to motivate our Diné people."

Tribal communities, which were not fully granted the right to vote across the United States until 1962, have historically

faced obstacles when it comes to voting. The Navajo Nation is particularly challenged due to its limited polling places and postal locations; plus postal service across the reservation was further impacted by the pandemic. But Young's headline-making efforts made a difference: The Navajo Nation was credited with helping flip Arizona — a red state for nearly 30 years — to blue in the 2020 presidential election.

It's a rewarding culmination of many months of work, which started in spring 2020 with the launch of Protect the Sacred, Young's grassroots organization aimed at supporting Native communities disproportionately affected by COVID-19. The Navajo Nation in particular has been hit hard, with per-capita infection and death rates skyrocketing higher than any state during the height of the pandemic. A year later, vaccination rates across the reservation have outpaced the national rate.

But Young's efforts don't stop there. She's determined to strengthen Indigenous sovereignty and protect tribal elders, languages and medicine ways through community building and

transformative storytelling. To that end, she's telling important Indigenous stories, like interviewing Deb Haaland for her *InStyle* cover story this summer after her historic confirmation as the first Native American interior secretary. It's a great reminder that representation matters — both in public office and in the saddle.

As these Native American horse girls and so many more like them (including yours truly) prove, Indigenous equestrians aren't stuck in the past. With representation across all disciplines and indeed all realms where horses and life intersect, we're both carrying on the traditions of our ancestors and forging legacies of our own. We're writing our own narratives for today and tomorrow, transforming the current horse girl moment into a full-blown horse girl movement.