A BRAVE MATADORA EXPLAINS THE BULLFIGHT

The intense young woman opposite, caparisoned in the severe uniform and the exotic implements of her unusual profession, may well be the greatest woman bullfighter who has ever lived. Not everyone thinks so, of course (in 1956 SPORTS ILLUSTRATED didn't). In Mexico and South America, where she has killed 300 bulls, Patricia McCormick of Big Spring, Texas has been criticized on several grounds: she is a woman; she is a Yankee; she is both; she fights on foot (Peru's celebrated Conchita Cintrón fought on horseback, dismounting only to kill); and, finally, she's too good.

All of these charges are true, including the last one. "Had she not been born a woman," one of Mexico's great matadors has said, "she might have been better than any of us." The distinguished critic, Rafael Solana, calls Miss McCormick "the most courageous woman I have ever seen," and adds, significantly, "she is better with the bulls than Conchita Cintrón." Unlike other American girls who have had a fling at bullfighting, Miss McCormick has been unswervingly dedicated ever since the moment in 1951 when she abandoned her art and music courses at Texas Western College in El Paso to cross the Rio Grande. In the years since she first fought in Ciudad Juárez in 1952, Patricia has taken grave risks and suffered grave wounds for her passionate *afición*. She has been gored six times, once so savagely that a Mexican doctor abandoned hope. "Take her into her own country to die," he said. "There is nothing more to be done."

Although Miss McCormick's business cards identify her as a "Matadora de Novillos-Toros," she is not and can never be a matador. No woman ever has taken the *alternativa*, the ceremony in which apprentices are advanced to the senior rank. The reason: a sponsor is required in the ritual, and no male matador will sponsor a woman, regardless of her capabilities. Carlos Arruza, the greatest Mexican matador of our generation, has said of Miss McCormick: "Yes, she fights larger bulls than any other woman, and I understand she kills well. . . . Her defect is that she is a woman."

Miss McCormick has not resisted this discrimination, but has compensated in other ways. She has become a formidable student of her profession. She has read most of the Spanish literature on the subject and has formulated theories on its various aspects. One of the latter suggests that Americans can be helped to understand the bullfight through geometric forms. To develop this view, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED sent Miss McCormick and Artist Robert Riger to Spain. The result of their collaboration is on the following pages.

THE ART OF THE CORRIDA IS RULED BY GEOMETRY

by Patricia McCormick

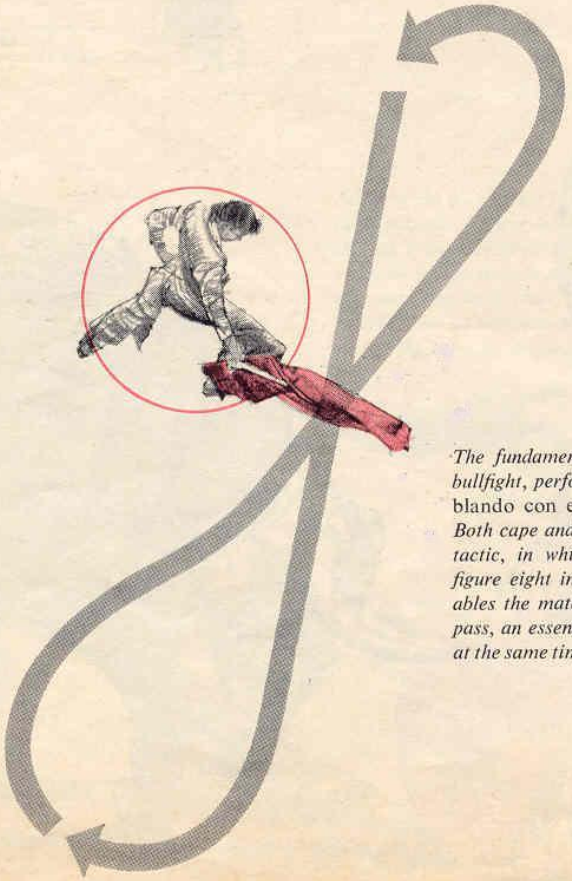
Drawings by Robert Riger

In the permanent, international argument over bullfighting (is it a sport or an art?) one element remains largely unrecognized: to the professional, bullfighting is most of all a logical science, an exercise in geometry, with laws as rigid as those customarily applying to mathematics.

The breathtaking, balletlike movements are the show of the *corrida*, but they are not the substance. Beneath the swirling cape and behind the red muleta is a collection of precisely timed and calculated maneuvers designed to enable the matador to dominate and destroy the bull while protecting himself from injury or death. These maneuvers comprise the celebrated passes—the *verónica*, the *gaonera*, the *derechazo* and the *natural*, to name only a few—but even the aficionado often sees only the flourish and does not fully understand the tactical moves that make it possible.

Of course, the success of a bullfight—and, consequently, the effectiveness of the geometric laws that govern it—depends entirely on the combative instinct of the fighting bull (*opposite*), a wild animal bred to charge anything in sight that moves.

A ferocious bull must have his attention fixed (and kept) on the muleta or cape. The maneuver shown below not only accomplishes this but makes it possible for the matador to test the bull's intentions and to gain ground himself between charges. That is the only time the matador may move. During the charge itself, both art and geometry demand that he remain virtually immobile from the hips down, as *Número Uno* Antonio Ordóñez demonstrates on the following pages.



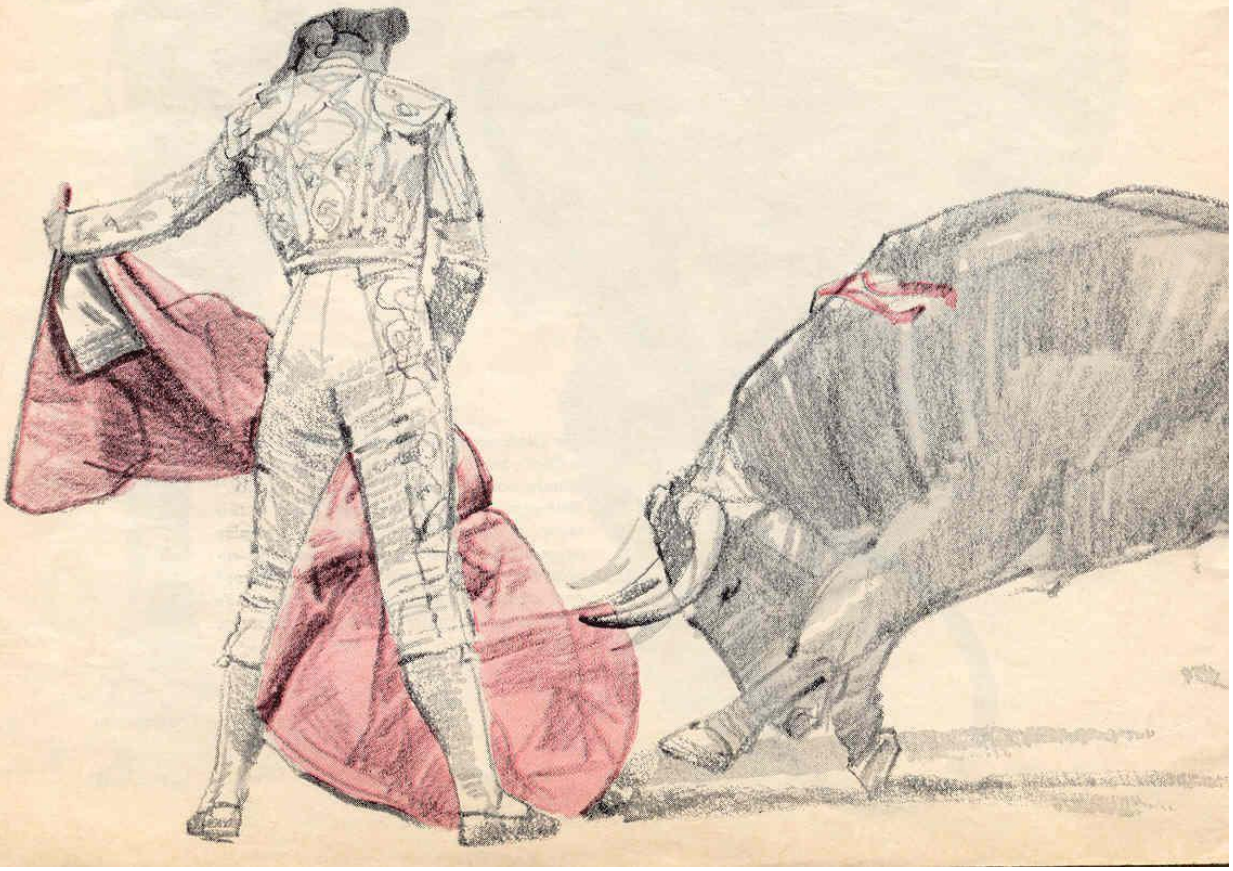
The fundamental geometric maneuver of the bullfight, performed here by the author, is doblando con el toro, *or "doubling the bull." Both cape and muleta passes are based on this tactic, in which the bull travels a sweeping figure eight in reversing his charges. This enables the matador to move forward with each pass, an essential in dominating the bull, while at the same time conserving the animal's energy.*

The invisible rectangles of the verónica

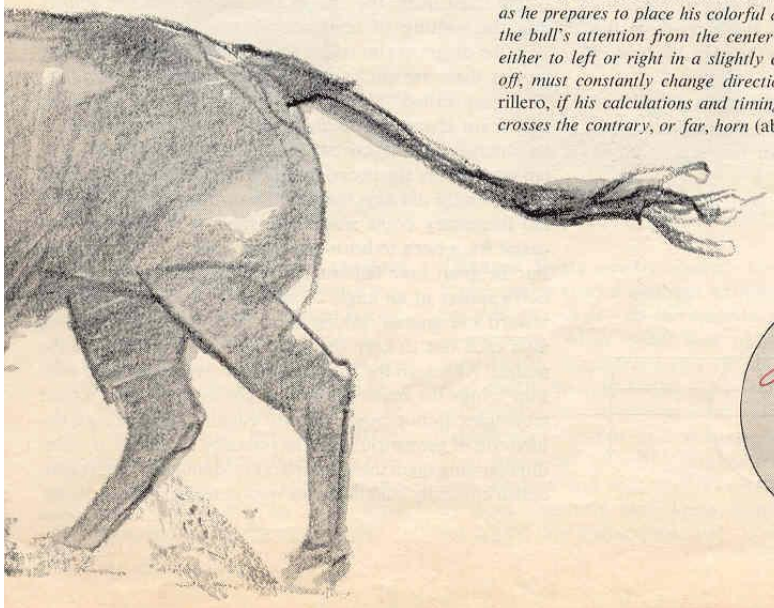
The bullfight is a drama in three acts, each different from the others but all sharing certain geometric patterns. In Act I the newly arrived bull is first induced to pursue zigzagging assistants, then is put under control by the matador with the beautiful, flowing cape passes and finally is persuaded to charge the picadors. In Act II the *banderilleros* make their high-flying contribution to the drama (*right*)—a final preparation for Act III, in which the matador uses the muleta to complete his domination of the bull and then kills him.

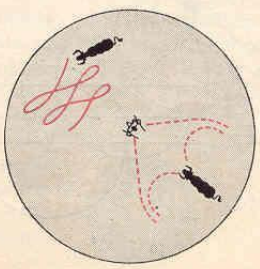
The running and picing need not concern us here; both are essential, but their patterns are first-year geometry at best. Not so the cape passes. There are several, but the most simple, the most beautiful—and the most difficult—is the *verónica*. As Antonio Ordóñez does it, the *verónica* seems so fluid as to have no bones ("plastic beauty" is a phrase sometimes used to describe this effect). Actually, the pass is based on the figure eight shown on the preceding page. It consists of three exquisitely timed cape movements by the bullfighter, all designed to deflect the charging animal from an imaginary rectangle in which the matador stands (his "terrain") to a parallel rectangle a hairbreadth away (the bull's "terrain"). Thus the matador opens the cape as the bull drops its head to charge, lowers the cape after the charge is deflected in order to pass the bull as close as possible and then slowly lifts it again to send the bull away. In a clean pass, the bull's horns encounter only air.

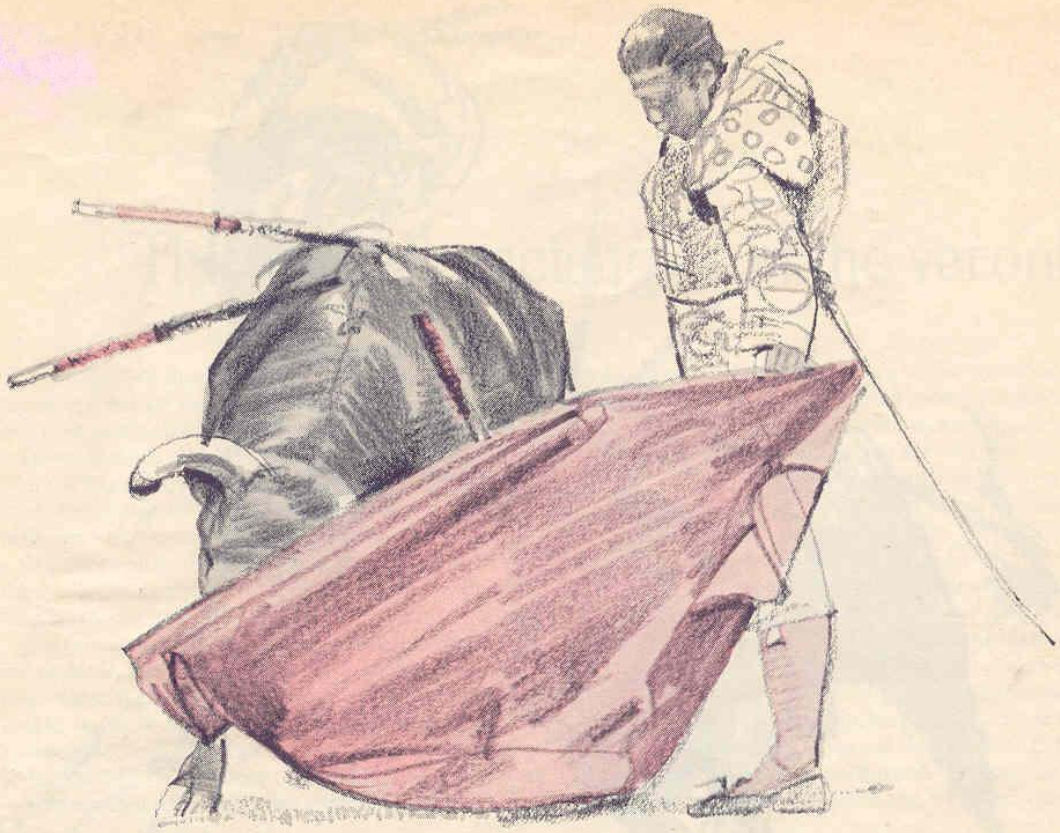
As the bull turns to renew the attack, the matador steps forward and to one side, into the terrain just abandoned by the animal, and does the whole thing all over again. To make geometry work for him, the bullfighter must advance as he links his passes (*diagram, lower right*). If he steps back and lets the bull move through his rectangle he is in trouble—the crowd will know it and, worse, so will the bull.



Secret of the banderillas *is the semicollision course followed by the* banderillero *as he prepares to place his colorful darts. Unprotected by cape or cloth, he gets the bull's attention from the center of the ring* (diagram below) *and then runs either to left or right in a slightly curved line. The bull, moving to head him off, must constantly change direction to keep his target in view; the* banderillero, *if his calculations and timing are correct, places the sticks just as he crosses the contrary, or far, horn* (above) *and gracefully spins away, unscathed.*



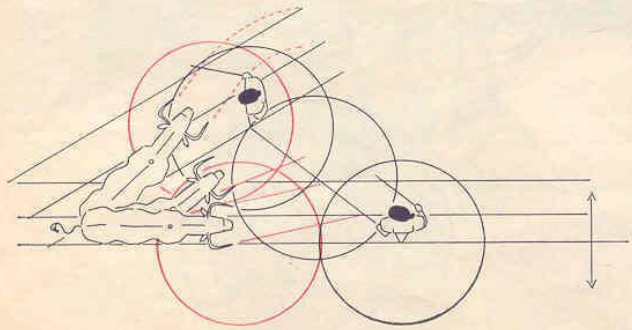




The faena and the new spheres of action

The third and final act of the drama of the bullfight is the *faena*, in which the matador uses the muleta to link a succession of passes that lead directly to the death of the bull. Perhaps the most famous muleta pass is the *natural*. Antonio Ordóñez demonstrates it here, his feet planted, his left hand sweeping the muleta across his body from the right and taking the bull with it, while the sword is held in his right hand.

Is the skeleton of action beneath the rush of bull and flow of fabric here the same as it was in the *verónica*, or is it different? It is both. As the matador prepares to begin a series, he lines up with the bull's inside horn, establishing the rectangle of his own terrain. This time, instead of the cerise-and-yellow expanse of the cape, it is the red muleta —extended forward toward the bull's far, or contrary, horn —that must incite the charge and then deflect the animal into the waiting (if imaginary) rectangle of its terrain.



In the diagram you will note that in addition to the rectangles there are circles around both bull and bullfighter. These are called "the spheres of action," and the most significant change in bullfighting in this century concerns the discovery that these two circles could be made to overlap when citing the occasional bull that makes only a half charge. In the old days the matador rarely advanced beyond the imaginary point where the spheres touch except to dance from horn to horn—never to attempt a classic pass. But the great Juan Belmonte found that he could enter the bull's sphere at an angle of about 45°, keeping his profile toward the animal, taking short, firm steps and pausing after each one to keep the bull's attention centered on the muleta. Although the spheres thus are overlapped and each step brings the muleta nearer to the bull, the two terrain rectangles do not cross, but shift equally. This daring combination of geometric forms has enabled hundreds of matadors (among them the incomparable Manolete) to pass difficult or cowardly bulls that once were considered unworkable.

The rectangle the bull and matador share

The *faena* is of no certain length, but continues to a point that might be called an intersection of intangibles—the point where the bull's (diminishing) physical strength crosses the line of his increasing knowledge. The matador must determine when this moment has arrived, and then kill cleanly and quickly. Here, as in the earlier maneuvers, success or even survival depends on precision as well as courage. For here the various geometric forms merge; instead of two rectangles, one for the bull and one for the man, the adversaries must share a single path of sand; and the "moment of truth" sees the two spheres of action become one.

The most widely used method of killing is *volapié*, a term that means "flying foot" and refers to the way the right, or trailing, foot swings past the horns a split second after the thrust. To kill *volapié*, the matador lines up a few feet from the bull and slightly inside its inner horn. With his left profile toward the bull, he brings the sword to shoulder level and sights along the blade. He moves forward, sweeping the muleta toward the bull's contrary horn (as Ordóñez is doing below) and lunges directly over the horns, driving the sword straight down between the bull's shoulder blades. Thus, with one swift thrust, the matador unites the last of the imaginary circles. **END**