

COVER STORY - Jousting - a Medieval pastime takes on a Midwestern twist

Spanning over 500 years, the history of jousting is varied and complicated. As the sport went through many changes, it progressed from a practice for war to entertainment, similar to today's professional wrestling.

As jousting began, knights used the same weapons which they employed during battle, with an unfortunate side effect of severe injury and death. Later, the weapons were blunted, rules of engagement were established and casualties became far less frequent. The first regulated form of jousting was called a "tournament," which may have consisted of a "melee" – hundreds of men battling in an open field. The object of this engagement was to capture opponents and hold them for ransom. Many knights made a great living this way.

These gatherings, however, became problematic due to nearby small towns becoming targets not only for mischief, but outright capture. Eventually the practice was outlawed due to the threat of rebellion springing up under the guise of a tournament.

The later form of jousting is the one with which we are most familiar today. In this, knights have equal opportunity for victory in a one-on-one contest. Most everyone knows the story of a romantic knight jousting for his honor as well as the love and adoration of a beautiful lady. It is this scenario that has captured the imagination of the public and has remained an icon of the time period.

So how does one joust in the 21st century? Two forms have been established in the United States. The most common is theater jousting. It is a show through and through, as it is much safer to have the action completely choreographed. Actual contact is minimal as is the amount of armor worn by the performers. The storyline is in-depth and the pomp will be heavy. Endings are often bloody (fake, of course) to the extent that the final joust is to the death. The first and best team of theater jousting for almost 30 years is the Hanlon-Lee's Action Theatre lead by Kent Shelton.

The second form is full-contact, and yes, it is what it sounds like. The two men jousting really are jousting. In a show setting, these jousters take lance in hand and hit an opponent as hard as possible in order to knock him off a galloping horse. With a mixture of excitement, fear and lack of good sense, these jousts may be the closest thing we have to the original. The first and also still the best in full-contact is The New Riders of the Golden Age, led by Kelly Bailey out of Sarasota, Florida. Full contact does have show elements and has pre-determined aspects; however, the www.applesnoats.com



violence is very real. Additional armor does help with protection, but it can't prevent all injuries. Due in large to the training and preparation of the jousters, injuries are usually minimal.

The JoustEvolution Stunt Team is the brain-child of Kevin Coble who is the only person to this point, who has worked for both companies. Taking the best of both styles, his shows have great storylines with the force of full-contact, thus bringing to life a new form of jousting.

After touring the country for the last 10 years, Coble settled down in Iowa and formed this new team. Consisting of members from the Des Moines area, JoustEvolution has taken a life of its own. Though a young company, it has performed throughout the Midwest in places such as Des Moines, IA; Wichita, KS; Omaha, NE; and Decatur, IL.

When asked what his favorite thing about jousting is, Mr. Coble responds, "Two things come to mind. First is the chance we have to live out the dream that we all have as a child...of putting on armor, riding a mighty steed, saving the damsel and the day. I watch the children in the crowd and see their imaginations come to life. Parents also turn from adults watching a performance into participants who can't help but cheer for the white knight in order that they may somehow help him in his quest to defeat the evil black knight.

Second, the union you share with your team members and the partnership with an animal that trusts you enough to go out there and endure so much that is contrary to his nature. That doesn't have much of a comparison."

It goes without saying that one of the greatest components of the joust is the mighty steed. The horses selected for the performances of JoustEvolution are a diverse group of eight. Many sizes and colors are seen between the two Percherons, Shire, Belgian-cross, Spotted Draft, Quarter Horse, Appaloosa and the "We think he might be a Quarter Horse."

Although quite different on the outside, the JoustEvolution horses share a similar temperament. To be able to function under the circumstances of a joust, the horse must remain calm and coachable. As a prey

animal, it just doesn't make sense to run toward a very large and very loud creature whose face is hidden. And to make matters worse, this monster is extremely aggressive and hungry because it is racing toward you holding a skewer large enough to barbeque an elephant!

Thankfully, the joust is not the starting point for the horses. Once a horse

is chosen for its calm demeanor, it begins the training program by schooling the basics in hand and under saddle. The German training scale is followed throughout with a large emphasis on relaxation. This is imperative as the jousting horses are the drafts and as such, are much bigger and stronger than their handlers, several of whom are women. Even the strongest man on the team is outweighed by nearly 2000 pounds.

After the basics have been established, desensitization begins. Armor, swords, shields, lances, flags and many other "diabolical" devices are introduced one at a time until each is calmly accepted. As the horse passes his tests of acceptance and rideability, he is introduced to the list – the corridor of the joust. Beginning slowly, the horse walks, trots and canters down the list following protocol for each pass. Progressing, lances are added, followed by armor, and then an opponent, until a jousting horse is created.

The horses cannot be forced to perform; they do it willingly. Though they must pass through rigorous training, each animal retains his individual personality. Maverick, the black Percheron, is the steadfast leader of the group and also holds the status of class clown. One of his favorite past times is bobbing for apples. Maverick will dip his head all the way up to his eyeballs in pursuit of the perfect fruit. Backbone of the team, Maverick is also the star as he allows a knight in full armor to stand and leap off his back in order to attack an opponent upon the ground (*see facing page*).

Jousting horses are amazing animals and are treasured by the team. They help create the show and keep the performers safe. Maverick and several other members of the equine performance team will be at the Des Moines Renaissance Festival at Sleepy Hollow August 30 – September 14. The public is invited to see them in action and meet them following the performance. For those interested in even more fun and mayhem, JoustEvolution is currently accepting applications for performers, including jousters and squires. Visit members of JoustEvolution at www.joustevolution.net.



BOTTOM LEFT: Amy Dvorack and Dj, Quarter Horse
 RIGHT: Kevin Coble leaping upon his opponent
 TOP LEFT: Arthur Smith rides his spotted draft, Whisper

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