

A TRUE FAMILY SPORT

Cowboy mounted shooting events pit families against each other in friendly competition



Right: Mike Addochio assists his seven-year-old daughter, Nicole, as she fires a .45-caliber pistol. Kids under 12 must first learn proper gun safety before riding the course with live ammunition.



Above: A shell flies out of the chamber as Benjumen Denny reloads for his next shot during a rifle class round of the I-70 Shootout in Ashland. **Below:** Brian Retze fires his rifle as his painted mare, Cheyenne, guides him through the "rundown," the last five shots of the 10-target rifle course.



Dust swirls around in the hot afternoon sky. The smell of leather fills the air. Two sets of pistols rest in their holsters securely strapped to the chest. One horse takes off in a dash as the rider whips out her pistol. Five shots fire repeatedly. Then five more, this time more rapidly. The horse comes to a halt, exhausted, gasping for air as the smoke from the spent rounds lingers.

The shooter smiles back at her husband, with slight exuberance, realizing her time might have beaten his.

Laura and Travis Smith, of Harrisburg, were among the many riders, and couples, taking part in a friendly cowboy mounted shooting competition at the Cedar Valley Riders Club Arena in Ashland during Memorial Day weekend.

The sport pushes the limits of riders and horses in a fast action, timed event using two .45-caliber single-action revolvers and rifles. Each gun is loaded with five rounds of specially prepared blank ammunition to burst 10 balloon targets. The rider must follow a specific pattern and hit the targets in a sequential order.

After firing the first five rounds, and hopefully hitting the targets, the mounted cowboy or cowgirl then holsters the pistol and proceeds to the "rundown." The rundown refers to the last five targets usually placed in a line and the competitor pushes his horse to a sprint to the finish line.

by Kyle Spradley

Cowboy mounted shooting is one of the fastest growing equine sports in the nation. Last year, the Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association (CMSA) averaged three new members to the national organization every day, with nearly 100 clubs in 40 states and one in Canada. Missouri is home to four clubs that are picking up more riders all the time.

Boone Electric Cooperative members Laura and Travis helped start their club, Show-Me Mounted Shooters, in 2003 with several other equine enthusiasts around the central Missouri area.

"We have always lived a life around horses, but we were all looking for a new sport," says Laura. "We went to a practice with some others who were already involved and they let us use their horses and try it once. Once was enough to get us hooked."

Show-Me Mounted Shooters has more than 40 members now. Almost every weekend, families join together to challenge each other in a game of speed and accuracy. The club regularly competes across the state and against the three other clubs in Missouri: Missouri Rawhide Mounted Shooters, based in Oak Grove; Missouri Big Irons, based in Bonne Terre; and Missouri Mounted Shooters, based in Troy.

Vice President of Missouri Rawhide Mounted Shooters Benjumen Denny of Odessa stumbled upon this new style of contest just a few years ago, but he has been hooked ever since.

"In 2008, I went to check out the CMSA World Championship with a friend and watched them shoot and ride and decided that this was what I wanted to do," says Denny, a West Central Electric Cooperative member. "When I got home, I quickly got to working my horses to be ready to try this out. I think it's the most fun you can have on a horse."

What makes cowboy mounted shooting competitions different from other equine sports is that the rider must combine speed, mobility and control of a horse with gun accuracy to hit all the targets. If a competitor drops his gun, misses a target, knocks over a barrel, fails to follow the course or even twirls the gun, time penalties are added.

"There is so much to think about when shooting, riding and queuing in with your horse and getting them to be set up for the next set of balloons," says Denny. "It's really challenging for the rider, but once you get on the same page with your horse and bursting targets, there is nothing better than that."

Riders are placed in levels based on their age, gender and proficiency with the sport. There are male and female classes, each with six levels. As shooters collect wins and enter more events, their rank increases. Kids under 12 are placed in a wrangler class in which they first ride the same courses as the adults and learn the patterns without any guns, then move on to riding with cap guns or empty pistols. Before they can progress on to challenging the adults, they must learn proper gun safety by firing live, blank rounds from .45s.

For Laura, the best part about the sport isn't just the rush from competing — it is the family aspect on and off the course. Since CMSA has different levels, it allows for shooters of different ages and experience to compete. This allows Laura's 14-year-old daughter, Katie, to compete in the same rounds as her, which adds even more rivalry to the family.

"A unique part about the sport is that we are all involved," says Laura. "It creates a great family rivalry and has given Katie a lot of pride, because she can go out and compete with the adults. She has put the work into it as much as the adults and you can see it is really exciting for her."

CMSA also regulates what clothing the rider can wear. The riders are required to wear clothing reminiscent of 19th-century garb with cowboy style hats, boots and jeans. Women also can opt to wear dresses or skirts consistent with the same time period. Modern Western-style outfits are allowed, provided their jeans are covered by chaps.

"It is really great to see the old clothes and know that this is the closest we will get to what cowboys used to do in the 1800s," says Denny. "To watch these women ride in their dresses, with it flowing over the side of horse, is just a sight to see."

For those interested in getting started, Laura suggests coming out to check out one of the four club's competitions.

"Call, e-mail or come to one of our practices," she says. "Jump in with both feet because you are going to meet some amazing people that will help get you started on a sport you are going to get addicted to."

Catch these cowboys and cowgirls in action at the Missouri State Fair in Sedalia on Aug. 15-16. Want to join the fun? Visit www.cowboymountedshooting.com to find a club near you.



Top: Skip Wandersee bursts the last target balloon of one round at the I-70 Shootout held at Cedar Valley Riders Club Arena in Ashland during Memorial Day weekend. **Above:** Dressed in 19th-century clothing, Curt Baum washes off his quarter horse, Pi, after a long day of competing. **Left:** The pistols of Travis Smith shine in the daylight as he surveys the course before beginning his round. Travis's wife, Laura, and 14-year-old daughter, Katie, also shoot, turning their weekends into family rivalries.