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RUNNING AT THE RINGS

A GENTLER CONTEST

Mikayla Miller

/ By Courtney Peter /

In a feat of fiery-footed precision, horse and rider move as one. Trusting the horse to navigate the track at a gallop, the rider hovers above the saddle, lance aimed and eyes focused. Thus, human and equine teammates compete in a contest just as likely to be found on the estate of a medieval European nobleman as in the present-day United States, where on weekends between April and October, grassy fields turn into proving grounds for 21st-century knights and maids.

The once bloodthirsty sport of jousting left human targets behind centuries ago. Instead, riders take aim at small metal rings dangling from arches spaced out along the track. By selecting camaraderie over combat, the sport emphasizes its bloodline of horsemanship, sportsmanship and skill—peaceful traits that have proven no less powerful for generations of jousters.

THE SPORT OF KINGS

Jousting tournaments originated in 11th-century France as military exercises among the nobility. The simulated attacks soon spread to other countries, bringing with them pageantry and bloodshed that only intensified over time. “Jousting tournaments consisted of mock battles with dozens or even hundreds

of men all riding horses and carrying lances,” writes Sarah Bryson in “Jousting,” an article for The Tudor Society website. “They would attack one another with their lances, swords and maces across a large area. Then from around the mid-1300s the more formalized style of jousting began where one man charged at another.”

By the end of the 13th century, guidelines emphasizing chivalry and fair play tamed tournaments to a degree, but violent elements remained. Armor and blunted lances notwithstanding, injuries were easily inflicted by the impact of a lance or a fall from a horse. In 1536, avid jousting King Henry VIII of England fell from his horse during a joust and was pinned under the animal’s weight while wearing full armor. The king recovered, but his jousting career did not.

COURTESY OF MIKAYLA MILLER

MARYLAND AGRICULTURE DEPARTMENT: MJTA

It took two major developments to steer the sport down a less violent path: the introduction of firearms, which rendered battlefield jousting obsolete, and the death of King Henry II of France in 1559, from injuries sustained in a joust.

“Running at the rings” emerged as one of the sport’s most enduring adaptations. Ring jousting, as it is commonly known, preserved the pomp and tradition of its predecessor while decreasing injuries and increasing difficulty by introducing a smaller target.

A NEW ARENA

“Colonial Americans, although only one or two generations removed from their European ancestors, did not seem as interested in sports reminiscent of medieval trappings,” according to the National Jousting Association (NJA). In the New World, jousting attracted a more regional than widespread following. Still, the sport found a foothold, particularly in the South, where chivalry and equestrian culture were deeply rooted. Tournaments began to pop up in Maryland, Virginia and Pennsylvania.

The Colony of Maryland, established by royal charter in 1632, received an early introduction to jousting. “Although an exact year cannot be determined for the first tournament conducted in America, most historians agree that the tradition of jousting made its way from England to Maryland in the 1600s under the influence of the second Lord Baltimore, and the Colony’s first governor, Cecil Calvert,” according to the Maryland Historical Society’s Underbelly blog.



Scarce records of Colonial-era tournaments leave much to the imagination. One notable exception was a mock medieval joust held as part of the Meschianza, an extravagant party hosted by British officers in occupied Philadelphia on May 18, 1778, to honor the departing commanders of the British Army and Navy, General Sir William Howe and Admiral Richard Howe. Master of ceremonies Major John Andre presided over the tournament,



In jousting tournaments, riders complete the same course, but the size of their targets, or rings, will vary and grow smaller throughout the competition. The jousting rings (displayed above) come in seven sizes.

in which knights wearing French medieval-style costumes were attended by squires, heralds and trumpeters, and the daughters of Philadelphia’s Loyalist elite dressed as turbaned maidens.

Redcoat revelry aside, jousting remained a peripheral pastime until the 19th century, when several tournaments now among the country’s longest-running equestrian events made their debut. For example, Natural Chimneys Park in Mount Solon, Va., home to the National Jousting Hall of Fame, hosts an annual tournament dating to 1821.

After the Civil War, jousting tournaments gained popularity as fundraising events to benefit recovery efforts and build memorial monuments. Later events such as the Christ Church Jousting Tournament and Church Fair in Port Republic, Md., set to mark its 154th year in 2020, often redirected the fundraising focus to church and civic associations.

CHARGE, SIR KNIGHT! CHARGE, FAIR MAID!

The rules of ring jousting are straightforward. Three arches stand at prescribed intervals along an 80-yard track. Irons hanging from the arches hold the rings the rider aims to catch. Regardless of gender and age, all jousters use the same course, though the rules vary slightly among the five classes of competition.

The starting point is the lead line class, in which the rider is seated and the horse walks led by a rope. The novice class sheds the rope and increases the pace to a trot. The amateur, semi-professional and professional classes all compete at a gallop, with the rider perched over the horse’s withers in a jockey-like stance. These final three classes are also timed. Time limits vary slightly by region; in Maryland it’s nine seconds.

With this verse, the Maryland Jousting Tournament Association invites everyone to experience the warmth and skill of the jousting community.

“Come Joust With Us”

**Welcome, lords and ladies all!
Heed our mock medieval call
Return with us to days of old
When it was said, the knights were bold
Enjoy with us the modern trend, where rings are
Speared instead of friends
Witness, too, the charm and grace
As well as friendship in this place
Welcome, lords and ladies all
Come joust with us, and have a ball!**



If multiple riders make time and catch the same number of rings, the next round uses rings one size smaller. Jousting rings come in seven sizes, ranging from 1 ¾ inches in diameter all the way down to ¼ inch—the size of the hole in a Life Savers candy.

Emily Trawick, who won the amateur division at the 2019 National Jousting Championship, was originally drawn in by the sport’s objectivity. “Many popular horse competitions are based on a judge’s opinion of how you and your horse look. With ring jousting, you either get the ring or you don’t,” she said.

Once introduced to jousting, participants discover the depths of the sport’s appeal. “What keeps me coming back is the sense of community and the connection between horse and rider,” Trawick said.

Less of a vehicle and more of a partner, the horse exerts a massive influence on a rider’s results. Training a horse to joust can be a multiyear process. “It takes time to get your horse to trust you to hold a sharp object over their head while traveling full speed through the arches,” said Mikayla Miller, who in 2018 at age 19 became just the third woman, and one of the youngest riders ever, to win the Maryland State Championship. After working

with her current horse, Tyke, for more than a decade, she said, “I’m able to completely forget about him and focus on the rings.”

That level of concentration is crucial to ring jousting success. “When you go down that track, you don’t see anything peripherally, you don’t hear anything. You’re not aware that you’re breathing,” said Ron Vogel, president of the Maryland Jousting Tournament Association (MJTA), who has competed for three decades. “Everything is in slow motion when you’re in sync with the horse, even though you’re traveling at 25 miles per hour. It’s a thing of beauty.”

Maryland’s 21st-Century Ambassadors

As devoted as today’s riders are, they would not be able to keep centuries-old jousting traditions alive by acting separately. It takes a group effort to do that. Established in 1950 and now one of four jousting clubs in Maryland, the Maryland Jousting Tournament Association (MJTA) promotes engagement, interest and participation in the sport and hosts the Maryland State Championship Jousting Tournament each fall.

The MJTA played a key role in securing recognition for jousting as the official state sport of Maryland. In 1962, Governor J. Millard Tawes signed into law House Bill No. 80, introduced months earlier by Rep. Henry J. Fowler Sr., then serving as MJTA president. In doing so, Maryland became the first to designate a state sport, and also formally recognized

jousting for providing a link to the state’s sporting heritage that would still resonate with modern audiences.

Even more important than that legislative milestone are the grassroots promotion efforts jousting club members carry out in their communities to help sustain the sport they love. Asking a rider how they got into jousting is likely to bring up either stories of generations-long family involvement in the sport or reminiscences of a mentor who encouraged their development as a jouster.

MJTA President Ron Vogel learned from a world-class teacher in the late Mary Lou Bartram, the unofficial mother of modern-day jousting, who was instrumental in breaking the sport’s gender barrier. Bartram’s accolades include MJTA co-founder, three-time

state champion, the only woman to win the National Jousting Championship’s professional class—which she did twice—charter member of the National Jousting Hall of Fame and the first jouster inducted into the Maryland State Athletic Hall of Fame.

When younger riders not only win tournaments but also become ambassadors for the sport, it signals the continuation of both the skill and the tradition of jousting. One next-generation torchbearer is 2018 Maryland State Champion jouster Mikayla Miller, who has demonstrated jousting at the Made in Maryland Festival held in Annapolis and, as overall champion of the 2017 International Tilting Tournament in Scotland, became the first American rider to win an international tournament.

“This friendly competition has pushed me to become a better rider and a better person,” Miller said.