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The Wild West returns with cowboy mounted shooting

BY TAYLOR VORTHERMS Nov 6, 2012



Katie Smith runs a cowboy mounted shooting pattern during practice July 6 at her home in Harrisburg.

Caitlin Jones

HARRISBURG — Clouds of gunpowder and dust tint the air, transforming vibrant colors into dull sepia tones. Through the haze emerges Katie Smith atop her main mare, Lulu, a white horse splashed in shades of brown. She clutches the reins with one hand while extending her free arm to fire a .45 caliber pistol.

The Wild West has returned in the form of a new equestrian sport — cowboy mounted shooting.

"I always like to find things that set me apart from people," Smith said. "I've found that shooting a gun on a horse is as good as it gets."

Cowboy mounted shooting has evolved into a competitive sport that tests shooting ability as well as the relationship between shooters and their horses. Smith grew up watching her parents participate in the sport and became involved at age 12. Now, at 16, she has decided she would like to compete at the national level within the next few years.

The Smiths are members of a Central Missouri-based cowboy mounted shooting club called Show Me Mounted Shooters. They practice together three to four times a week on their farm known as The Flying 45 Ranch.

Smith surveys the array of blue and white balloons that serve as targets. Placed in a pattern ahead of her, they festively embellish the corral — until the timer clicks on. A volley of gunfire erupts, slicing through the thick humidity and piercing the silence that once inhabited the farm.

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Page 1 of 3

Balloons explode in rapid order. Smith demonstrates mastery of her first gun, a Ruger Montado, a revolver modeled to look like the types of guns Jesse James carried back in the late 1800s.

"I will probably use that Ruger Montado for as long as I shoot," Smith said. "It's like whenever you find your favorite brand of clothes, you stick with it."

She empties one pistol, then the next. The gun is loaded with black powder and shoots blanks rather than live ammo. Burning embers expelled from the gun's barrel pop the balloons.

Ten shots are fired, and 10 targets are eliminated. About 15 seconds have passed. It's a competition against the clock. Seconds for missed targets and penalties are added to the amount of time used to finish the course. The fastest adjusted time wins.

"To be honest, I was intimidated by it at first," Smith said. "And if something is intimidating to me, I'm going to try it."

Her father's horse lopes to the center of the 250-foot by 150-foot shooting area, with her father carrying a fresh batch of inflated balloons to set up a new pattern.

Katie Smith settles her boots into the stirrups and joins her mom, Laura Smith, on the outskirts of the arena to wait for her next turn. A film of dirt reflects the sun off her black cowboy hat. Only during this lull when the dust begins to settle does she unbutton the cuffs of her long-sleeved shirt seeking relief from the heat.

Mounted shooting became a competitive sport in 1994 with the founding of the Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association. The organization strives to preserve Western tradition and maintain the sport's professional reputation through a strict dress code.

Shooters are required to dress in traditional western style or in the old-time style of the late 1800s. Short sleeves are prohibited during competitions, and Katie Smith said even practicing with them rolled feels wrong.

Along with her blue jeans and chaps, she wears a tarnished gold belt buckle with the engraved words "Huzzah Valley Shootout 2011, Overall Cowgirl, Katie Smith."

It's her favorite of the five buckles she has won. She attributes her success to the connection she has with Lulu, who she calls her best friend.

"They put me on her and we just sort of clicked. She started running faster for me," Katie Smith said. "We're always reaching new levels together."

At a competition in April in Des Moines, Iowa, Lulu's rein snapped during a pattern, leaving Katie Smith unable to steer her horse. With 62 different patterns in mounted shooting, the horses step into the arena unaware of the upcoming course.

"They are so in tune that when Katie ran that pattern, everybody watching got chills," Laura Smith said. "She ran it with only one rein, which is virtually impossible."

Laura Smith said that after the shoot, she asked her daughter why she didn't stop out of concern for her own safety, and Katie Smith replied that she could tell Lulu was with her.

"When it happened, it wasn't a sudden scared feeling," Katie Smith said, "I just had confidence in my horse and I knew we could do it."

Katie Smith set the fastest time that day and won the Reserve Ladies Overall Championship.

The Smiths train their horses to not spook at the sound of gunfire through exposing them to gunshots while in the presence of already trained horses. The herd mentality calms new horses until they are comfortable enough with the noise for the Smiths to ride while shooting.

Although Lulu is trained, she is a sensitive horse that requires special treatment to cooperate. Laura Smith said that during practices and competitions, she will see her daughter talking to Lulu, who visibly relaxes in response.

"That horse was a blessing," Laura Smith said. "She was always meant to be Katie's."

Encased in a set of wings, the No. 45 is branded above Lulu's back leg. The numbers stand for the type of bullets used, and the wings represent the speed in which the Smiths complete their patterns.

When dusk falls on The Flying 45 Ranch, Katie Smith removes her cowboy hat for the night. But her bold demeanor is not confined to the wooden fences that circle the corral.

"I worry about different stuff than other girls do. I worry about my animals, my farm and my sport while they worry about school sports and boys," Katie Smith said. "I'm very goal orientated, and I put all my time towards mounted shooting."

She keeps a written list of what she wishes to accomplish within the next 5 years. While currently ranked fifth overall for women in Missouri, a CMSA National Championship title remains her ultimate goal.

Taylor Vortherms