

Gaiting Under Fire:

Gaited Cowboy Mounted Shooting

On the rise in the equestrian world is a sport that harkens back to a centuries-old tradition, combining utility, speed, agility, and just plain fun, into a fast-paced competition that would excite even Buffalo Bill Cody. Black powder, breakneck speeds, and a battalion of camaraderie rarely found in equine competition defines Cowboy Mounted Shooting. People who seek the thrill of firearms and the skillfully harnessed power of good horsemanship, are beginning to flock to Cowboy Mounted Shooting and are embracing the opportunity to be cowboys and cowgirls in a modern age.

Mounted shooting has no definite historical origin. Ever since the invention of firearms, riders have recognized the usefulness and, at times, amusement of making things explode from atop their stalwart steeds. Soldiers and cowboys, along with the shooting exhibitions displayed in the Wild West Shows of the 1800s, built the framework for the wildly increasing popular sport. Today, pairing skill and speed with Wild West reenactment, Cowboy Mounted Shooting embraces the spirit of rowdy doggedness and dusty adventure of which Western culture has always been enamored.

Present day mounted shooting as a recognized competition was born in the early 1990s, facilitated by Wild Bunch (SASS precursor group named after the movie of the same name) member Jim Rodgers. The early competitions began in Arizona and the sport is now regulated by several associations including CMSA (Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association), SASS (Single Action Shooting Society), and MSA (Mounted Shooters of America). Growing from the first mounted shooting competition held at Winter Range in Arizona, with a participant count of three, to the hundreds of mounted shooters today and divisions of competitions that spread across the nation from California to Tennessee, enthusiasts continue to promote their favorite sport. One such promoter and avid competitor, who just happens to also be a Tennessee Walking Horse addict, is Lisa Dicamillo.

Lisa was living the cowgirl dream as a young girl on her family's Colorado cattle ranch. However, in high school, her family had to sell the ranch and it wasn't until 16 years later that she was reunited with horses. At that time, a friend of hers brought a Tennessee Walking Horse out for her to try, and she was hooked. By 1994, she was seriously riding again and in 1995, she and her friend who introduced her to the "Glide Ride," decided to partner up for the business of breeding and promoting the versatile, gentle breed. The duo had researched various gaited breeds, settling on the TWH for its people-pleasing, willing personality. After touring the nation for breeding stock and establishing their full-service breeding facility, Lisa discovered mounted shooting in 2003. By 2006 she began riding her TWH mare, Sashay, in competitions. Although she knew Sashay had potential, she had no idea the horizons to which Sashay would carry her, and what that would mean for the future of gaited Cowboy Mounted Shooting.

To take a closer look at this sport, there are technical details, rules, and various levels that change slightly depending on the regulating association. Cowboy mounted shooting is a timed event, with a maximum course of time of 60 seconds. A typical event includes ten balloons in an arena, involving different patterns with degrees of challenging courses. Five balloons are one color, and the remaining five are another. Two pistols, generally single-action, are carried on a holster. With a single-action pistol, every time a rider shoots a balloon, the hammer must be pulled back to cock the gun. One pistol is used to shoot the first five balloons, then holstered, and the second pistol is used to shoot the remaining targets. Each pistol is filled with theatrical “blank” black powder with a shooting range of twenty feet, bursting the balloon upon impact. The rider must direct the horse where to go. Other firearms used are lever action rifles and side-by-side double barrel shotguns. Most of the firearms used are replicas of firearms used in the pre-1900 American West and Military periods.

According to Decamillo, 80% of the mounted shooting courses have a run-down, like in a barrel race. The first five balloons are shot as the pattern configuration determines, and the horse and rider speed down the arena, shooting the remaining five in a line. Most courses are completed in 20 seconds or less, and this time is known as the “raw time.” Added to the “raw time” are penalty points for a missed balloon, course deviation, or a knocked down obstacle. Some courses have a gate, with two balloons 15 feet apart, that require the rider to shoot both balloons as she passes through the gate. Sometimes barrels are involved as part of the pattern, including an actual barrel racing pattern as part of the shooting configuration. As an added handicap, a rider cannot hold onto the horn while shooting and riding around the barrels. To sum up the skills necessary to be a successful mounted shooter, it’s all about balance and communication with the horse.

About rider training, Lisa says, “You have to learn how to ride all over again because of the speed involved.” Relearning a skill she had for most of her life took her about two years. “You have to really coordinate, cock your gun, holster the gun, and then guide your horse.” In addition to the simultaneous skills, some courses require a very short gun exchange between the two holstered pistols. For example, after the fifth shot on the first gun, a competitor might only have 20-30 feet to holster and grab the second gun, all at top speed. A match can be won based on gun exchange. The fine technical differences between one rider’s performance and another’s is a great contribution to the necessity of relearning to ride for this complicated competition. Decamillo says, “That’s what I like about this sport -- all kinds of horses can participate, and technical ability is important. Sashay is best at technical courses because she’s good at them but not as fast.” All competitors are only running against the clock, and not each other. Unlike a class in a horse show, the judge only focuses on obvious penalties, like missing a balloon, and each ride is based on beating a personal best. That said, the sport is very community and family-oriented. Entire families compete and participants are always at the ready to help fellow shooters.

Concerning the development of the four-legged member of the team, gradual and careful training go into the making of a solid mounted shooting horse. Decamillo starts the process by exposing the very young horses, trotting along at their mother’s sides, to sights and

sounds on the trail. The whole experience is very casual, but at a young age, the babies begin to learn to manage their feet and their minds. She never begins to saddle a train a horse until they are three, but by the time she swings up into the saddle, the young horse is prepared for practically anything that a competitive shooting event day could throw at him. After the horse turns three, trail riding continues to be a key component of effective conditioning for mounted shooting.

Training for the actual event involves work encouraging accuracy in maneuverability, and, as one could probably guess, “bomb-proofing”. At the beginning of a course, a range master will ask the rider to “engage the course,” which involves a circle or two at the canter in the lead that will be used in the beginning of the pattern. At this point, competitors prefer to have a calm, relaxed mount making this circle, so as to uncoil easily into speeds necessary to win the run. A horse should not wear himself out before he has even started, and having a horse that can be relaxed and then turn on the power is commendable. To begin a horse in actual mounted shooting, Decamillo allows the horses to become accustomed to the balloons, by placing the balloons on the course while on horseback. She has people run by the horses, or fire guns behind and in front of them while in the arena. Gradually, layering upon the foundation of trust and balance, they proceed to shooting from the horse.

Lisa also says the trick for training for this sport is eliminating anticipation. For instance, when beginning shooting practice atop the horse, if balloons are shot in succession, the horse will anticipate the gun shot too warily and may quickly decide to not be a willing participant. However, if every other target is shot to begin with, maintaining a level of surprise, the horse is less likely to create a brace, or a resistance, about the gun shots in the initial training. As with all training, as soon as the horse refrains from anticipating his reaction, practice should stop for the day. Having impulsion in a nice forward, relaxed canter is always important at this stage, as the horse becomes accustomed to the new sights and sounds. The same “anticipation control” technique is also important for teaching a horse to relax in the initial canter circle before the run begins. If the horse is not relaxed and is getting too excited, Lisa will keep the horse on a slow, soft circle until he has forgotten what he was so anxious about. She really works on rating her horse, as she would always rather have to push a horse than have an out of control beast on the course. Gradual and slow is the key, as in any speed event.

All components involved in training a horse for mounted shooting lead to the value of versatility. A mounted shooting horse must have speed, but technical grace. He must have courage and power, but a tractable willingness. Versatility is part of why Lisa Decamillo adores this sport, and also why she has chosen to ride Tennessee Walkers in the events. Never a fan of going “around and around” in a show ring, she recognized the benefits of open air and real-world exposure early on, in those roving days of ranch life. As a result, she channels those lessons today in her work to promote the Walking Horse breed and her beloved sport. Sashay has helped her achieve this dream of opening the competitive equine doors to mounted shooting and the versatile gaited breeds that are proving their worth in this arena. Because of Sashay, Decamillo has been able to illuminate the promise of the gaited horse in mounted shooting.

Since 2006, Lisa and Sashay have qualified for the World Championships every year. Sashay is one of the only Tennessee Walkers to have reached a Level 5 Mounted Shooting Horse, out of the five levels sanctioned by MSA. After all their winnings, buckles, saddles, and a big win in Murfreesboro in 2008, the most important thing to Lisa remains that she show the world what gaited horses can do. As a result of her progress in Mounted Shooting with her Walker, she gave mounted shooting demonstrations in 2008 and 2009 at The Celebration, the world famous TWH show. Hardly anyone there had even heard of mounted shooting but Lisa and Sashay heightened their awareness.

Gaited horses, although not typically thought of as vying competitors in mounted shooting, are very well-suited to the sport. In general, gaited horses are willing to please and are adaptable to many situations -- two qualities that really count in mounted shooting. The generic outlook on gaited horses is that they are too hot and excitable for many sports, but anyone that owns one knows that the myth is refutable. Sashay brought Lisa to high levels of mounted shooting skill, including the title of Colorado's first pro woman shooter, showing that gaited horses can be on a par with any other breed.

The duo continues to inspire mounted shooters, gaited horse owners or not, showing that exploring versatility and letting the horse's abilities shine is a great way to fully enjoying these athletic, amazingly willing companions. However, Lisa Decamillo's main goal is tell gaited horse owners to get their horses out there and show people what they can do. Whether their forte is mounted shooting or barrel racing or jumping, gaited horses can do much more than they have been given credit for in the past. No time like the present to prove the future.