

AS SEEN IN THE NOV/DEC 2011 ISSUE OF


COWGIRL™

SHOOTING STARS

WHY MOUNTED SHOOTING IS SKYROCKETING!

BY SARAH SAYLES





Blue smoke drifts into the rafters and the concussion of each shot pounds with your heart. The excitement of the people around you is more than palpable. It's loud, raw, vibrant. If you're like me, you will have your earplugs in and your nose might crinkle at the acrid smell of the black powder, but you can't deny it: you can't look away.

It's cowboy mounted shooting, the fastest, loudest, heart-thumpingest sport in the equine world, and it's becoming a magnet for competitive and adventuresome Western women everywhere!

So what is this wild-eyed, edge-of-your-seat mounted shooting all about? I spoke with five iconic women to discover the answer to this and other questions about the sport.

"The whole sport has evolved around the colt 45 and the days of the Old West," says Jana Morris, a Senior Ladies 5 (more about that shortly) who lives in Cave Creek, Arizona. Morris, who has been competing in mounted shooting since 2003, describes the sport from the perspective of fun, family, and the sense of empowerment it has given her. A long time horse woman, Jana found that the sport allowed she and her husband, an avid shooter, to blend their passions.

In those early days, cowboy mounted shooting was an offshoot of the Single Action Shooters Society (SASS). While the initial members were all men, it wasn't long before wives and daughters began showing up with guns, ready to compete. The dress code was period costume and, according to the women I spoke with, it wasn't very flattering. I wondered what inspired these women to continue in the sport, to fight for a better dress code, to work up to the levels where they could beat the men at their own game. Was it just an "anything you can do I can do better" attitude?

The answer is more complicated than that, and encompassed a personal journey for each woman involved in the sport. To get a sense of what these women have achieved, I must start at the beginning—the sport itself.

Left: Amanda Cook was only 10 years old when she won her first mounted shooting match.

MOUNTED * SHOOTING

At its most basic, cowboy mounted shooting is a speed event. A match is made up of anywhere from two to six stages, and each stage requires a different course to be set up for the shooters. The largest shooting organization, Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association (CMSA), has more than 60 riding/shooting patterns to choose from—compare this to ten reining patterns or eight Western riding patterns. Most competition producers use a draw system of some sort to choose which stages, or riding patterns, will be used, such as numbers written on poker chips which are drawn from a bag.

Once the stages are drawn, contestants begin shooting in order from the lowest level (1) to the most accomplished (6). Men and women shoot in their own divisions, as do senior men and women, and awards are given in each class and to the Champion Cowboy and Champion Cowgirl at each event. Their times are also compared against each other for Overall awards. There is even a category called Wranglers for young shooters under 12.

A stage consists of ten balloons affixed to stands (poles) that hold them upright at a certain height, determined by the particular course that has been chosen. A shooter carries two pistols, each with five black powder blanks loaded. They get one shot per balloon. Following the pattern laid down by the official course, they shoot the first five balloons, holster their first pistol, round a barrel, draw their second pistol, and shoot the remaining five balloons in what is commonly known as the “rundown”.

As with all timed events, the shooter rides through a time barrier at the beginning and end of the course. Each missed balloon or knocked barrel counts as a five second penalty. In major matches where first and second might be hundredths of a second apart, one missed balloon over the course of six stages might put you right out of the money.

Annie Bianco, a Ladies Level 6 (L6), says, “When you’re mounted shooting, you’re multi-tasking. You’re riding a horse, you’re maneuvering a horse, you have a gun, you’re looking at targets. There’s so much going on.” Bianco, who has been shooting in the sport since its days as an offshoot of SASS, and has won multiple SASS and CMSA World Championships. Like the other cowgirls I spoke with, she came to mounted shooting from the horse world, although at the time she was employed by Colt Firearms.

“Because I worked for Colt,” she says, “everyone expected me to be better than I was.” At her very first

event, the producers decided she would begin as a Level 3 and the pressure was on. An accomplished horsewoman, Bianco said that first experience trying to combine shooting with riding, on a horse who was not very sure about gunfire, was “very humbling.” She went home determined to improve, and spent an entire summer “living, eating and breathing mounted shooting.” She came back ready to compete, and was the first woman to win an overall SASS World Championship—a feat she accomplished three years in a row.



Above: Annie Bianco with her beloved horse, Costas Peppy Maverick (2003-2011).



Photo: Quigley Photography

Above: Annie Bianco takes a shot during a competition.

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Photo by Scoop Pictures

“I EMPHASIZE WITH NEW SHOOTERS TO PRACTICE POSITIVE THINKING IN EVERYTHING THEY DO. WE ARE OUR OWN WORST ENEMIES AND THERE’S THAT THING IN EVERY ONE OF US THAT SAYS ‘HOPE YOU DON’T MISS’”

Kenda Lenseigne, the first woman to win an overall CMSA World Championship, had a similar experience. By the time she began competing, women had two divisions: limited, which represented levels 1 and 2, and open, which represented levels 3 through 5. In those days, there were no level 6 women and no rules in place to allow for it.

The first time she shot competitively was in October and the Worlds were in November. In three matches, she was able to qualify for that first World Championship, and she not only won the Limited class, but was Reserve Champion Cowgirl. “If you won a National or a World, you were automatically bounced up to a [Level] 5,” she says, “which was kind of awkward for me because World was maybe my fourth shoot.”

As more women like Bianco and Lenseigne got involved it became clear that women were entering the sport for their own reasons. Andra Olson (L6), a horse enthusiast from Minnesota, first saw the event with her husband while visiting friends in Montana, but she is the only family member who has pursued the sport. She started a few years after Bianco and Lenseigne, so by then six levels had been created as well as a point system that would allow all beginners to start at Level 1 and move upwards one level at a time. What Olson found lacking in those days was a good system of education.

After losing her first shooting horse, her husband bought two horses for her from Jim Hanson, a horse industry friend who came to Minnesota to work with her. “The whole time Jim was here, we were talking about how there wasn’t anybody to help beginners get started, learn what type of holsters to use, what type of guns. Everyone just sort of stumbled upon the information,” she says. She and Hanson soon began a training program, AJ Horses, aimed specifically at preparing new shooters and horses for the sport.

Horses have been the entry point for most women who begin mounted shooting: Lenseigne trained cutting horses, Bianco roped and showed Quarter Horses. And that was certainly the case with Amanda Cook of Summerfield, Florida, who had grown up on horseback. Family friends Eric Anderson and Dane Covey saw her at a barrel race and convinced her to try shooting.

“I told them, ‘Who wants to shoot guns off horses? That doesn’t even look fun,’” she says. But Cook gave it a try and—a ten-year-old at the time—won her first match as a Wrangler. It just happened to be the Florida State Championships. She and her older brother both began competing heavily, and soon the whole family was invested in the sport.

“I’ve never actually been good with guns—I’m actually a little bit scared of guns,” Cook admits. She didn’t let that fear stop her when she realized that the sport offered everything she wanted in one complete package: horses, fun, friendship, a family atmosphere, a challenge. “I hear other girls say it looks hard. Try it before you say it’s too hard,” she recommends.

Left: Kenda Lenseigne was the first women to win an overall CMSA World Championship.

In the summer of 2011, Amanda Cook, 16, was one of several cowgirls who broke world record times, often competing against the men who set them.



Photo by James Cook

Annie Bianco says the most important advice she can give new shooters is to work on horsemanship skills, as the highest levels of competition require extremely good balance. She and Amanda Cook both recommend finding a finished shooting horse to start on, but they know it is not always an option to buy a new horse. Bianco says that “if you are starting your own horse, be patient, take your time with it, don’t rush it.” She goes on to say that mounted shooting trainers often have experienced lesson horses who can give the beginner a chance to try the sport without the stress of riding an unprepared horse.

Andra Olson, National Spokesperson for Colt Firearms, agrees that working with a professional is a good entry point. She says trainers can give you a chance to try not only the horses, but the equipment you need as well. But she feels the advice one woman can give another goes deeper than simply mastering the skills.

“Don’t take the pressure of your peers to heart,” she says. She has found through her years in the sport—and in training other shooters—that too many people are overly concerned with how they look or whether they’ll be good enough to compete. “Truly, all of us in the sport have had our humbling experiences and we understand the things that can go wrong!”

Kenda Lenseigne says that when she won Overall World Champion at the 2009 CMSA World Championships, she was prepared “physically, mentally, and mechanically.” When I asked her about those three factors, she explained the skill, work and exercise that went in to preparing for that event, then said that nothing could be more important than learning to stay focused.

“I emphasize with new shooters to practice positive thinking in everything they do,” she says. “We are our own worst enemies and there’s that thing in every one of us that says ‘Hope you don’t miss’ or ‘You don’t know how to ride very well’ or ‘Your thumb’s not going to work’. Basically we end up talking ourselves out of winning.”

This summer, Cook was one of several women who broke world record times, in many cases competing against the men who had set those records. Amanda Cook is just 16. Today she competes as an L5 and expects to reach Level 6 before the end of the year.



Above: Jana Morris

What About the Costumes?

The CMSA, being the oldest and largest of the mounted shooting organizations, has a strict dress code. Because of its roots in the Single Action Shooters Society, an organization which requires period costume to be worn at all events, period costume is still acceptable at CMSA matches. However, a few years after they began, Annie Bianco helped the founders realize they had a wider audience with what they called “the Wrangler crowd.”

Over the years, the dress code has evolved to allow for modern Western jeans and shirts, but all contestants must wear a cowboy hat (unless period costume is worn), cowboy boots, holsters, and chinks or chaps (again, unless period costume dictates otherwise). Those of us who watch the sport see a distinct style emerging—a hybrid of old and new that allows for individual style and self expression.

Led by some truly original characters, chinks are getting wilder, more colorful and even blinged out. Women are embracing the trend of the fancy back pockets made popular by the Miss Me brand, colorful “rodeo style” arena shirts, and modern hats with embroidery or tooled leather on them. At the same time, many women are choosing to add “wild rags,” an Old West-inspired hat shape, a 1940s-style Western shirt, or a more traditional kind of boot to their look. That combination of historical and contemporary elements has created a unique fashion trend within the western industry.

One shooter might wear a Charlie 1 Horse hat, a Rockmount shirt, Cruel Girl jeans, and Macie Bean square toed boots with her fancy matching chinks and customized holster. Another might have a simple Wrangler shirt and jeans, but she has added a Gus hat from Jaxonbilt and a high top Twisted X boot with her pants tucked in. Yet another has her hair in pigtails, but her outfit is all modern, from her Stetson hat to her Cowgirl Tuff Jeans to her Corral Boots...

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Jana Morris will tell you, “Age is not an excuse. I started this sport when I was 50. Not knowing how to ride a horse is not an excuse. If it’s something you want to do, there’s people out there to help you.” As these competitive women who are defining the sport for all of explain, they’ve each faced challenges. They will also tell you there is nothing more fun or more intellectually or physically challenging to do on horseback. Every one of them has valuable advice for women who want to try mounted shooting for themselves.

One thing I heard from each of these women: there is a level of competition for every level of rider. The culture of the sport is such that newcomers are welcomed warmly, and surrounded by people who want to help them, who will loan equipment, who will help with gun selection and handling, who will give advice on acclimating a horse to gun fire. Lenseigne says there are two things she has trained herself to do, which she also shares with her students: believe you can, and know you will before you even enter the arena. Whether you believe you can hit a target and know you will make the barrel turn efficiently, or you are planning on winning a World Championship, that visualization of the positive outcome can filter through to affect everything you do in life, Lenseigne says.

Jana Morris encourages beginners to get involved with a local club. Whether you can afford a professional trainer or not, the clubs provide opportunities to practice and plenty of people to talk to when you first get involved.

“You get so much value in it,” she says. “First of all, you get friendship. You get mentors. You get the practice that you need. You get to compete. You get information. And the support group is just phenomenal in this sport.”

These women continue to have a profound impact on the sport, as they break world record times, win major competitions, push the fashion envelope, and join the “boys club” on their own terms. They win, not because they take chances but because they work hard. And they make a difference in the lives of new women entering the sport because they love what they do.

As we watch the sport grow, I expect we will see many new faces—young girls, senior women, accomplished horsewomen like Stacey Westfall—attracted to cowboy mounted shooting. And as they come, I know Jana, Annie, Kenda, Andra and Amanda, and hundreds like them, will welcome them gladly, and encourage them to saddle up, load their guns, and ride. ✨

Left: Jana Morris ridin’ hard and shootin’ straight—and looking darn good doing it!

Runnin’ and Gunnin’
Do you have what it takes?

Cowgirl Up!
CMSA STYLE



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