

BY LISA SLOAN

AN ARIZONA COUPLE EXPERIENCES FUN, FELLOWSHIP, AND FAMILY TOGETHERNESS BY PARTICIPATING IN AN ACTION-PACKED SPORT THAT CELEBRATES THE SPIRIT OF THE WILD WEST.

BLAZING NEW TRAILS



A FEW WEEKENDS A MONTH, Patrick and Dawn Morris travel back in time to the days when the West was untamed frontier. For this Arizona couple, the second half of life doesn't involve quietly riding off into the sunset. As competitors in the sport of cowboy mounted shooting, the duo dons 1880s cowboy regalia and saddles up their horses for a shoot-'em-up good time with family and friends.

The Morrises have come to love the sport, which involves firing at balloon targets with blank ammunition while riding through a course on horseback, because of the exhilarating pace, family-friendly atmosphere, and fellowship they've found with other competitors. "It's fun, fast, and furious," says Dawn. "You're riding this incredibly athletic horse and relying on your own handling ability as you ride and shoot, plus the camaraderie is amazing."

Patrick, 59, and Dawn, 50, are both lifelong Westerners and say they grew up on horseback. "It's part of the Western lifestyle to ride a horse," explains Patrick. Married for 27 years, they raised their three children in the same tradition, participating in rodeo events as a family.

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The couple didn't begin to compete in cowboy mounted shooting until 1999 because many of the shooting events were scheduled on the same dates as the rodeos they attended with their children. As their nest emptied, however, they found time to indulge their new interest and joined the Arizona Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association. "The kids grew up and left home, and now it's our turn," explains Patrick.

Following their parents' lead, Patrick and Dawn's children, as well as their five grandchildren, who range in age from 1 to 11, have become involved. "It's a great family sport," says Dawn, who notes that even her preschool-age grandsons can join in the fun with the lead-line program, in which they are led on horseback through the course by an adult. "They have their little cap guns and cowboy hats—they just love it," she says.

The sport is accessible to multiple generations, from preschoolers to septuagenarians, and it appeals to anyone who has ever dreamed of being a cowboy or cowgirl. "It's a great sport for all ages," agrees Patrick. "I've seen kids get parents involved and parents get their kids involved."

Dawn says, "In cowboy mounted shooting, your horse is 70 percent of the partnership." (Left) Dawn competes riding her horse, Lacey, an Appaloosa. (Right) Patrick's horse, Canyon, is an American Quarter Horse.



He adds that family members who don't ride can get in on the action as well. "Often one spouse rides and the other doesn't," he says. "The non-riding spouse can work as an announcer or timer, or change balloons. There are lots of volunteer opportunities."

Dawn points out that cowboy mounted shooting has room for both serious competitors and occasional enthusiasts. "Some people never get past a certain level; that's where they want to be," she says. "Others want to move up to the top level."

Both Patrick and Dawn have advanced to Level 4 of the six ability levels. They say that, while they are competitive, having fun and enjoying time with each other and friends is equally important.

"It's a way to have fun together, keep the family in a sport together, and still be able to reach out and touch others," says Dawn. "It's something we're going to stick with for a long time."

Family is important to the Morrises, who feel that God brought them together. When they were introduced by mutual



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friends, both were single parents with one child. Though they have what Dawn says some might call a "yours, mine, and ours" family, Patrick notes that they eschewed the "step" labels in order to build a truly blended clan. How did they do it? "We dedicated our marriage and family to God," says Dawn. "He's the main focal point of our lives."

In addition to providing fun and family togetherness, the sport also fits into the couple's vision of what they believe life after 50 should entail—as Dawn explains, "living a full, active life and shar-

ing God's word, love, and blessings with those you come into contact with."

Many of those they have met through cowboy mounted shooting are Christian, but others are not. However, the weekend-long shooting events include "Cowboy Church," led by pastors and their wives who compete in the sport as well.

"A lot of people come to know Christ and more about who He is because they are exposed to the services," says Dawn, explaining that many who aren't regular churchgoers feel comfortable attending worship in their own element.

(Above) Though they compete against each other, Susan Turner, Jana Morris (no relation), and Dawn Morris are great friends. All are Level 4 shooters. They and their husbands travel together, share fellowship together, and cheer each other on.

The weekend events have also provided the Morrises with their own opportunity to step out in faith. As Patrick says, “It’s our little ministry, too.”

It might be as simple as reciting Scripture before entering the arena—“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13) is one of the couple’s favorites—or listening to someone’s troubles while gathered around the evening campfire.

“Christ shows through you,” says Dawn. “Sometimes people want to know what that is—and sometimes they don’t.

You love them anyway, just because.”

Patrick says his strength lies in extending a kind word, asking a thought-provoking question, or offering prayer. “My gift is the gift of hospitality—I am not a preacher-teacher,” he says. “I go around trying to be encouraging and supportive to others, sharing my experience and my relationship with Christ.”

Patrick and Dawn turn the weekend shooting events into mini-vacations and have enjoyed traveling throughout Arizona and other Western states. “It’s really good for our relationship to travel and

ride horses together,” says Patrick. “It allows us to support each other and spend quality time together.”

The couple not only prays and plays together; they also work together, running a general contracting business, Way Out West Development.

They even teamed up to build a Southwest Territory-style home on their five-acre Scottsdale-area ranch, called the “Rocking PM.” As Dawn explains, “Everything’s rockin’ around here all the time—kids, horses, friends, family.”

They have long been committed to helping young people, including volunteering at a homeless shelter and hosting groups of homeless children for visits to their previous ranch, where they had a menagerie of animals and an expansive garden.

Dawn, who home-schooled all three of her children, now mentors rodeo queen competitors, working with them on skills such as horsemanship, speech, interviewing, modeling, and promoting Western heritage.

“There is always something to do, somewhere to be, and service to do,” says Dawn. “It’s all about walking alongside other people—rejoicing with them or sharing in their struggles. Until the day the Lord comes and gets us, we are here to lift up and encourage others.”

(Opposite) Cowboy mounted shooting is a family affair for the Morris clan. At their Rocking PM Ranch, Patrick and Dawn are ready to load up and head off to the next shoot with their grandsons Noah, 3, and Graham, 2, son Josh, daughter, Brooke, and her husband Daniel.

WHAT IS COWBOY MOUNTED SHOOTING AND WHAT DOES IT HAVE TO DO WITH SIGNIFICANCE?

IN SIGNIFICANT LIVING’S BOOK, *GPS: God’s Plan for Significance*, Shirley and Jerry Rose remind readers that living a balanced life is an important ingredient for physical and emotional health. They write, “A balanced life includes work, giving to others, spiritual discipline, and rest. But it also includes leisure, hobbies, and enjoyable activities.”

Like the Morrises, TLN President, Jerry Rose, participates in cowboy mounted shooting. It is one of the ways he stays fit, has fun, and lives the adventure.

For those unfamiliar with cowboy mounted shooting, it is one of the fastest-growing equine sports in the country. It was started in 1992 by Jim Rodgers as he sought to combine horsemanship and shooting, and it was inspired by drills used to hone the skills of cavalymen and the Wild West exhibitions of yesteryear. Today there are clubs in all 50 states and Canada.

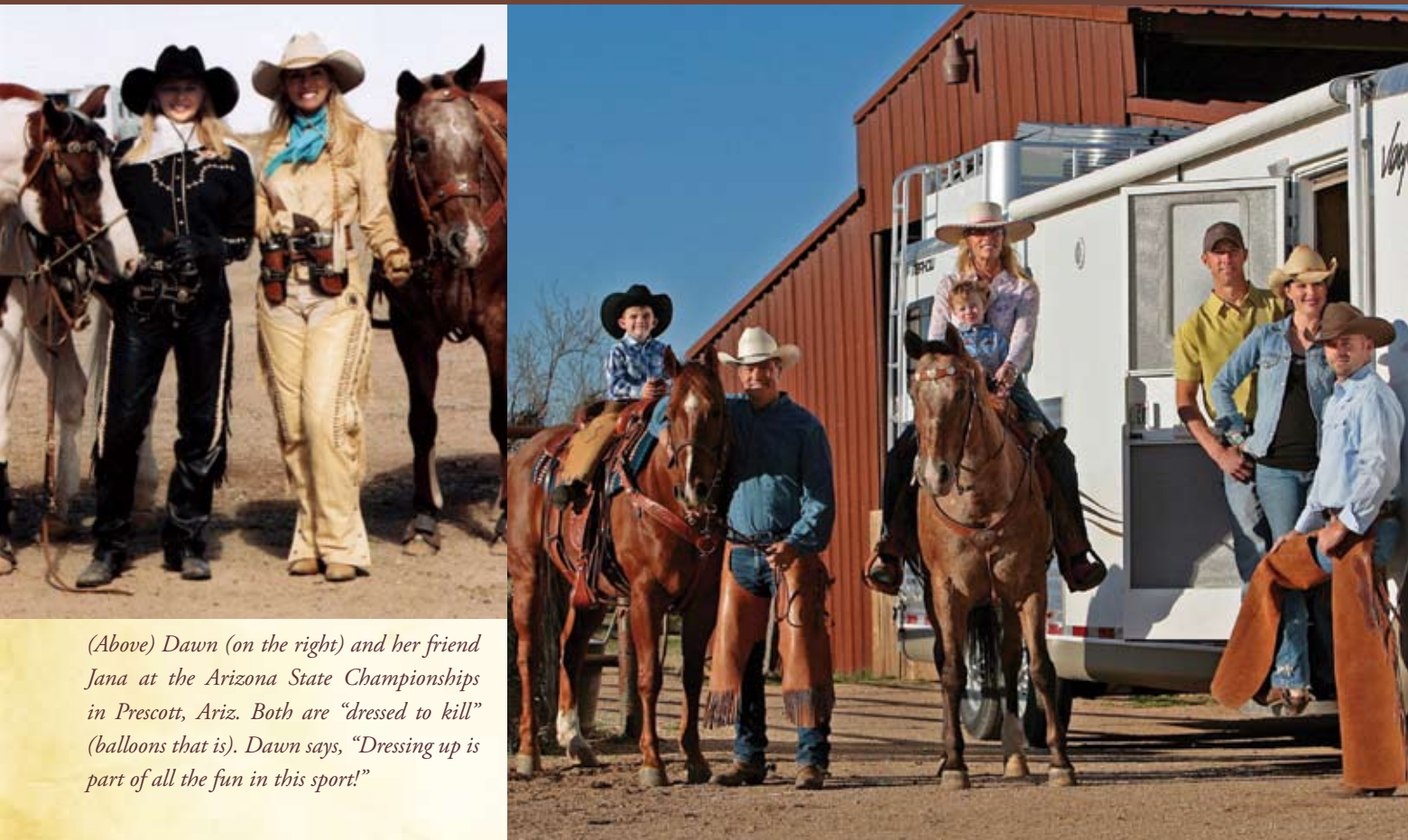
During a competition, which is generally held over one to two days, shooters compete in up to six timed courses of fire, known as stages. Competitors mounted on horseback use two single-action .45 revolvers, each loaded with five rounds of specially prepared blank ammunition. As they fire upon balloon targets from a distance of about seven to 15 feet, the burning embers of the black powder cause the balloons to burst.

Each stage consists of two parts containing five balloon targets each. The first part involves following one of more than 50 random patterns that

might require such horsemanship skills as quick acceleration, stops and turns, and rollbacks. The second part, called a rundown, involves rounding a barrel at top speed while changing guns and quickly and accurately firing upon the last five balloon targets, which are lined up in a row. The entire stage is completed in a matter of seconds. Accuracy is equally as important as speed—you can be penalized for such things as dropping a gun, knocking over a barrel, or missing a balloon, all of which will add time to your score. Sometimes the winning score is determined by hundredths of a second.

Another intriguing aspect of the sport is dressing the part. At the minimum, competitors are required to dress in traditional Western attire, but they are encouraged to wear 1880s-era Western clothing.

There are different competitive divisions, including Men, Women, Senior, Junior (ages 12-16), and Wrangler (ages 6-11). Within each division, there are multiple ability levels; shooters advance as they win competitions. Level 1 is considered entry level, and anyone with general horsemanship skills can learn to enjoy the sport. Many clubs offer clinics and other resources to help new shooters. For more information or to find a club in your area, call the Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association at 480-683-0485 or visit www.cowboymountedshooting.com.



(Above) Dawn (on the right) and her friend Jana at the Arizona State Championships in Prescott, Ariz. Both are “dressed to kill” (balloons that is). Dawn says, “Dressing up is part of all the fun in this sport!”