



Tournament Jousting

The Noble Sport

Jousting is given a 21st Century roar of approval at the Arizona Renaissance Festival. Jousting now, as it was 500 years ago, is a merrie sport; a make-believe pageant of Sir Galahads and Sir Lancelots, of villainous Black Knights versus the virtuous Red Knights, mounted on thundering steeds, plumes waving, chain mail clanking and the festival crowd sarcastically screaming “Cheat to win!”

On Saturdays and Sundays in February and March, Knights gear up with their heavy suits of armor, settle astride snorting chargers, take up their lances and tilt with each other. These Knights (stunt riders and actors) will be battling three times a day at the festival 5,000-seat arena.

Words like “pomp, pageantry and chivalry” serve to evoke the romantic aspects of jousting. When you get close to see the dull glow of chain mail next to bright armor, you begin to grasp how tightly woven the joust is with its history. An understanding of today’s combats is impossible without the tracing of their ancient roots.

The origins of jousting are believed to be in classical Rome, but the “sport” rose to its greatest popularity in Europe by the 1400’s. It all evolved from mock battles in which knights on horseback, assisted by foot soldiers, formed teams, and charged at each other in a wide meadow. The result was a “melee” (the word hasn’t changed in a millennium) of shattered lances, clanging swords, flailing arms, and legs – astride and a foot – that went on all day and into the night.

At first, the battles served more to hone fighting skills than to provide popular diversion. But in peaceful times, a knight needed a way to retain his skills. The Jousts were great money-markers for the victors; instead of claiming mere points, the winning team held the losers for ransom, often accepting their horses and armor as payment.

The many deaths which resulted from such “sport” led Popes and English Kings to ban jousting tournaments, though English subjects often persisted and were repeatedly excommunicated. The tournaments had become a featured attraction at any kind of market faire or other significant gathering. At the height of their popularity, jousts rivaled a state fair, Super Bowl, rock concert and Oktoberfest all rolled into one.

By the middle 1200’s, the joust emerged as the favored way to prove which of two (or more) knights was better. Most contests were a “Joust a Plaisir” (for pleasure) in which a winner was declared on the basis of points scored, though some were still conducted “a l’Outrance” (to the death). In the sporting version, the knight’s swords were dulled, and their lances tipped with

“coronals” (little crowns) to prevent their penetrating a joint in the armor. Some authorities believe that the lances were deliberately weakened, a precaution still in effect today.

The training of a knight included spearing a small ring, some on stanchions and some tossed in the air, and quintain jousting. In quintain jousting, the knight tilted with a mock opponent, which sat on a revolving pedestal. If he was inaccurate or too slow, the jouster might get struck by the sandbag on the other end of the contraption.

The joust became very civilized and formalized, though injuries were quite common. According to the chronicler of an English tournament in 1256, many of the noble contestants “never afterward recovered their health”.

England’s King Edward III put a temporary public ban on jousting in 1370 but an intrepid troupe of stunt riders and actors brought it back in the 1980’s. Clad in authentic looking breastplates and helmets, wielding heavy lances, and blunted swords, victor and vanquished. Some fakeries, as in professional wrestling, is to be expected.

Modern re-creations of Renaissance era jousting tournaments are depictions of historical events, coming from a time of high ideals, noble causes, and grand chivalry.

At the Festival, visitors of all ages are welcome to CHEER on their favorite knight in the 5,000-seat arena! Don’t miss this spectacle at the jousting arena three times a day! Huzzah!

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