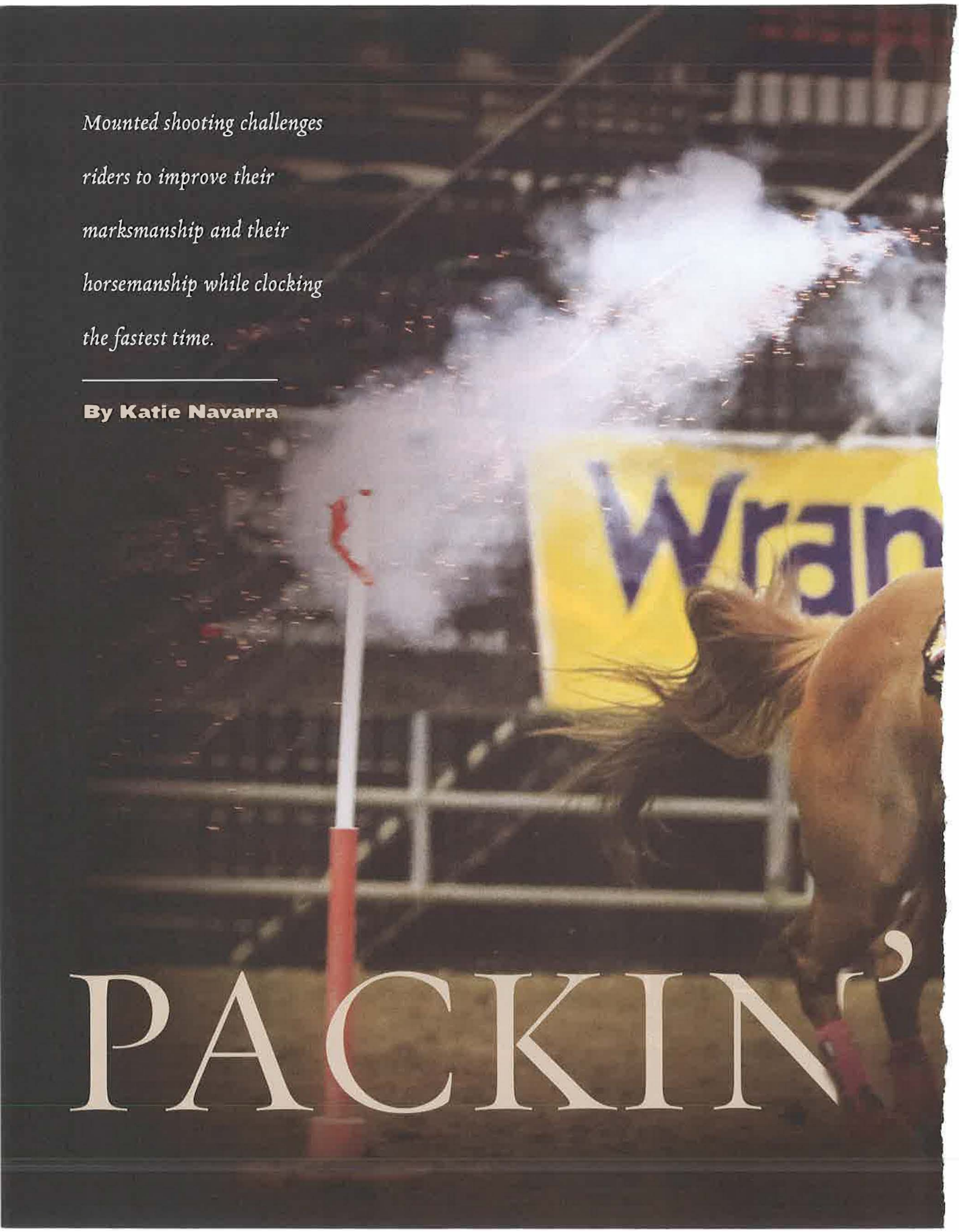


PACKIN'

Mounted shooting challenges riders to improve their marksmanship and their horsemanship while clocking the fastest time.

By Katie Navarra

MARK QUIGLEY

Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association Hall of Fame inductee Kenda Lenseigne holds 16 world records.

Heat

"IT'S NOT THE FIRST BALLOON THAT YOU HIT THAT GETS YOU hooked on cowboy mounted shooting," says Leann Lawson of Valley Center, California. "It's the first balloon that you miss."

When you take aim, fire and pop your first balloon, adrenaline courses through your body, she explains. But when you miss – even one out of 30 targets – your pursuit of perfection keeps you coming back for more.

Leann, her husband, Kenny, and the entire Lawson family participate in mounted shooting. They're hardly alone in this healthy horse addiction.

"Mounted shooting is kind of like chocolate and peanut butter," says Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association Executive Director Greg Fry. "You take two things that people really like and put them together and have Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. Horses and guns are two of people's favorite things. You put them together and you have mounted shooting competitions."

CMSA was founded in 1991 by Jim Rodgers and an inaugural board of directors that included J.J. Peel, Beth Shotwell, Mel Astrahan, Don Womack and Charles Wirken. Today, CMSA boasts more than 16,500 members.

"We gain two new members every day," says Greg.

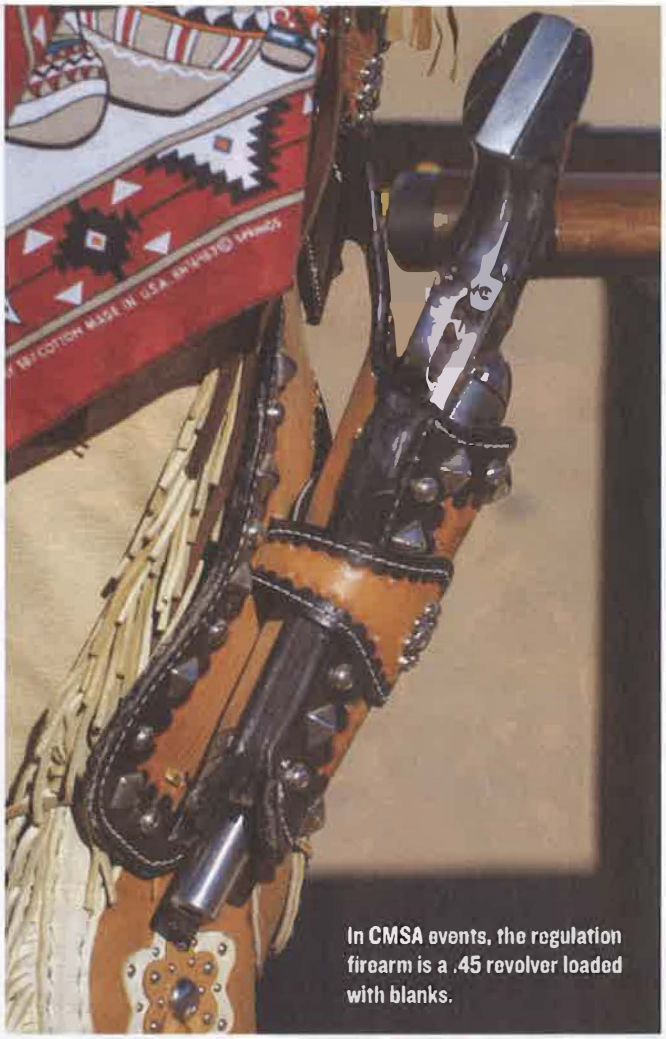
There are nearly 700 events held each season, which runs October to October. The majority of them are held in the United States, but international riders are also getting involved. There are clubs in Canada and France, and Greg says there is interest for a club in New Zealand.

While CMSA events are open to any breed, American Quarter Horses are by far the most popular mount.

"The sport requires a horse that can navigate a course with speed, and that's where the Quarter Horse really shines," he says.

In 2008, AQHA joined forces with CMSA and began tracking achievements in mounted shooting. Earnings and awards are included as part of a horse's official AQHA record. In 2011, CMSA also became an AQHA alliance partner. Since then, CMSA members have been able to earn AQHA points in CMSA-sanctioned competitions and nearly 100 riders participate in mounted shooting at the AQHA Cowboy Mounted Shooting World Championships.

Participants describe the sport as "edgy" and "thrilling." It challenges riders to compete against themselves, improving both their horsemanship and their marksmanship while clocking the fastest time. With 80 approved patterns, no two competitions are exactly alike.



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In CMSA events, the regulation firearm is a .45 revolver loaded with blanks.

First Impressions

WHEN TENNESSEE SHARPSHOOTER KRISTI HUTCHINGS FIRST watched cowboy mounted shooting in 2007, her first thought was, "You've got to be kidding me."

"I wondered how they didn't shoot someone in the stands," Kristi says, recalling her total lack of knowledge. "Then I learned they didn't use live ammo."

Kristi competed in western pleasure with Zippin The Breeze and Blazed To Perfection, but she had to admit, mounted shooting looked like an incredible diversion. Her show horses were nearing retirement age, and she decided maybe it was time she tried something new.

"There is a big difference between loping on the rail and running around the arena with a .45. It scared the hell out of me," she confesses.

Kristi didn't let fear stop her. She started shooting aboard her homegrown half-Arabian and then she bought Poco Diamond Paprika. Since then, Kristi has won numerous titles, including the Eastern U.S. Championships in the Level 2 division, several year-end high-point awards, and was a top-five amateur at the AQHA CMS World.

Her husband, Derrick, enjoyed a different kind of horsepower – race cars. He was not a horse person, so when Kristi left for a show, he headed to the track. That changed when Derrick saw mounted shooting. He absolutely loved the speed and the guns. Very quickly, he went from being a green rider to being an amateur reserve world champion cowboy mounted shooter two years in a row. He is also the president of the Tennessee Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association. Kristi currently serves as the treasurer.

Arizona sharpshooter Kenda Lenseigne experienced her first shooting event at a western festival in California where a friend was performing in a demonstration.

"The announcer was bantering back and forth with one of the participants and asked if anyone in the crowd would like to give mounted shooting a try," she says. "Since I knew the participant, I was singled out."

Kenda was given a quick introduction on gun safety, and before she knew it, she was racing up the arena full-tilt, attempting to hit targets in front of a packed audience. It wasn't as easy as the pros made it look, but she was hooked immediately. She entered her first match the next weekend with a borrowed horse, guns and holsters. Prior to that, Kenda competed in western and English disciplines and apprenticed in Texas with top cutting horse trainers.

The mounted shooting experience was life-changing. It has

Leann Lawson says adrenaline and a pursuit of perfection keep her and family members hooked on the sport. Meanttobeminnie M28 carries her through a round.

MARK QUIGLEY

since become Kenda's profession. She is a four-time world champion, five-time national champion and has 16 world records. Kenda was inducted into the Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association Hall of Fame in 2015.

"My most noteworthy accomplishment was in 2009 when I became (and still am) the only woman in CMSA to have won the high overall at the world championships – meaning, I beat all the boys," she says. She did it with her two best horses, Lieutenent Justin and My Familys Famous.

Marcus Wadley of Springtown, Texas, is AQHA's 2016 cowboy mounted shooting open world champion. He first got involved in the sport after seeing a corn maze race with his family. This Extreme Cowboy Race, Stock Horse of Texas, roping and barrel racing competitor was attracted to the speed and coordination mounting shooting requires. Today, this discipline is an important component of his training business, Outlaw Performance Horses. In fact, Marcus' entire family competes.

These top competitors had no previous experience in the sport, but quickly shot to the top. They've learned along the way and offer advice to riders interested in getting involved.

Head of the Class

THE OFFICIAL PATTERNS USED AT CMSA EVENTS HAVE VARYING degrees of difficulty and technicality. Many patterns require lead changes, barrel turns, rollbacks and more – all while racing against the clock.

Mounted shooting horses come into the sport from all disciplines. Maybe they weren't considered "showy enough" or

CMSA Executive Director Greg Fry (pictured with Four Lucky Pals) says the association gains two new members each day.

ALL FIRED UP TO COMPETE AMONG PEERS

Mounted shooting is a timed event. Riders navigate a designated pattern that includes 10 balloons. The objective is to hit all 10 targets in the specified order using two .45-caliber, single-action revolvers in the fastest time. Each gun is loaded with five rounds of blank ammunition.

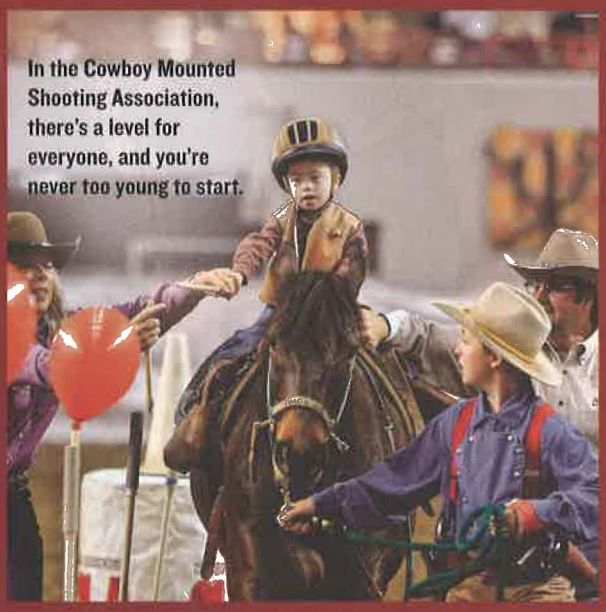
Six levels in men's and ladies' divisions provide an opportunity for beginner, seasoned and professional competitors to advance as they earn points. Participants over age 50 are eligible for the Select division, which also has six levels.

The leveling system offers a place for everybody. When you first start shooting, you don't have to go fast. Many riders trot through the Level I patterns and add speed when they're ready. The divisions by gender and level allow riders to become competitive quickly and to advance through the levels as skills improve. Last year at the AQHA Cowboy Mounted Shooting World Championships, the winning amateur, Josh Ingle, clocked a time of 15.159 seconds on JK Shining Watauga, while Marcus Wadley won the open division on Barons Flashy Lady in 17.634 seconds.

Safety is emphasized at all times. Many clubs sponsor clinics to assist new shooters in starting their horses and to teach the basics of safe firearm handling. Range masters are in the arena at all times during competitions. New shooters are usually required to demonstrate that they have achieved minimum acceptable levels of riding and shooting skills.

In 2008, AQHA partnered with the Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association, the national association that sponsors clubs and sanctioned shoots in the United States, to offer AQHA members an opportunity to earn points and recognition in both associations.

CMSA's World Championship Show is in October in Amarillo, Texas. AQHA also hosts the AQHA Cowboy Mounted Shooting World Championships in March in Houston.



In the Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association, there's a level for everyone, and you're never too young to start.

MARK QUIGLEY PHOTOS

Kenda Leseigne worked for a cutting horse trainer before choosing mounted shooting as a career. She has won four world and five national championships.

the "ideal prospect" for specialty disciplines such as reining, cutting or barrel racing.

"Some of the best horses in our sport were flunkies in something else," observes Kristi. "Those horses come to our sport and are usually great. Here, they become superstars."

Even though the majority of shooting horses come from other disciplines, their pedigrees often represent lineages that are familiar to performance horse enthusiasts, such as Paddys Irish Whiskey, Shining Spark, Grays Starlight, Hollywood Dun it, Cat Ichi, among others. If they haven't proven to be ideal candidates for a specialty event, prospects can often be bought inexpensively and taught to shoot.

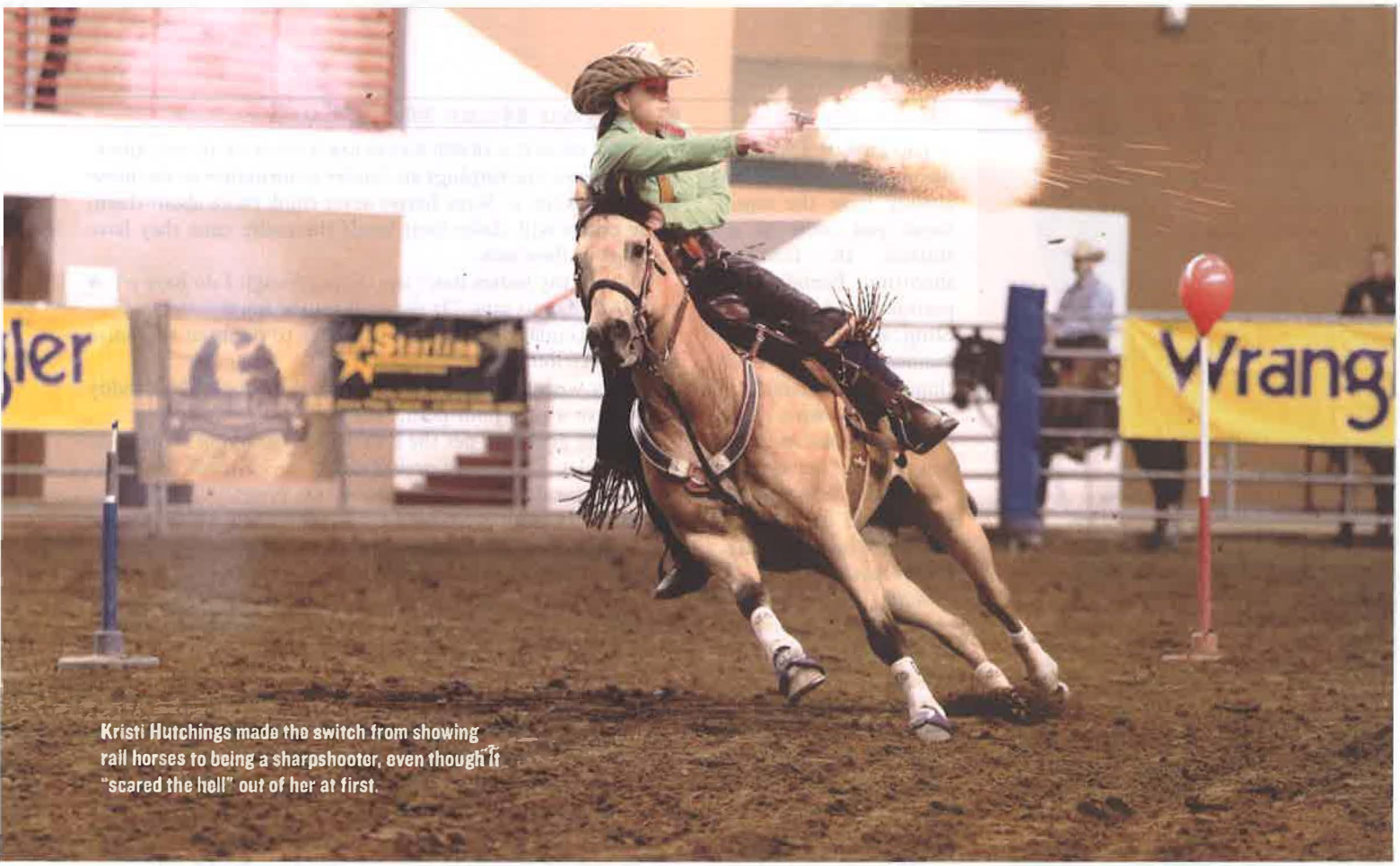
"I've gone to several different cutting and reining facilities looking for horses," says Marcus. "It definitely gives breeders and trainers another window to look at as far as places to go with them.

"The combination of speed and agility is where the Quarter Horse really shines," he adds.

Beginner horses start at around $3,500-$5,000, but the more competitive horses command $10,000 to $15,000 – or as much as $40,000, depending on the level of the rider.

"The mare I won the world with is for sale for $30,000," Marcus shares, providing a baseline for comparison. "But she can carry a Level 1 rider all the way up through Level 6. She ropes and runs barrels, too."

As might be expected, the more expensive horses are gen-



Kristi Hutchings made the switch from showing rail horses to being a sharpshooter, even though it "scared the hell" out of her at first.

erally faster and better trained, which also requires better riding skills. But just because you have a top horse does not mean you will win every time.

"I won several year-end awards on my home-bred horse while others I competed against paid a lot more money for theirs," Kristi confirms. "My new horse was on the upper side of the price range, and I have been beaten by a girl on a $300 pony."

Better than Bombproof

MOST HORSES CAN BE TRAINED TO TOLERATE GUNFIRE. Patience – and a good set of ear plugs – are key. It's critical not to blow up a shooting horse by doing too much too fast, the experts caution.

Kenda uses a building-block process to introduce her horses to the sights and sounds of gunfire. She begins with the buddy system and pairs up the newbie with a seasoned shooting horse. She rides alongside, as a shooter on a veteran horse fires a .22 caliber gun at a walk or a slow jog. The .22 produces considerably less noise than a .45-caliber revolver does. Generally, the inexperienced horse feeds off the confidence of the buddy horse and is quicker to accept the noise.

After the preliminaries have gone well, Kenda then trades places with the buddy horse and fires the gun from the newbie's back. She pays close attention to extending her arm at the 3 o'clock position so she's not too close to her horse's ears. If all goes well and the horse is gaining confidence, she moves on to half-loads in the .45.

"This is louder than the .22, but not as loud as a full competition blank," Kenda explains.

"Horses also have to get used to the smell of gun smoke and be confident traveling through clusters of balloon targets," she adds.

At home, Marcus introduces his shooting prospects to gunfire gradually. He also hauls inexperienced horses to shoots to get comfortable with the atmosphere.

"Once they start to relax, I'll get on them and shoot straight behind them, or above my head, so the smoke doesn't get in their eyes," he says.

MARK QUIGLEY PHOTOS

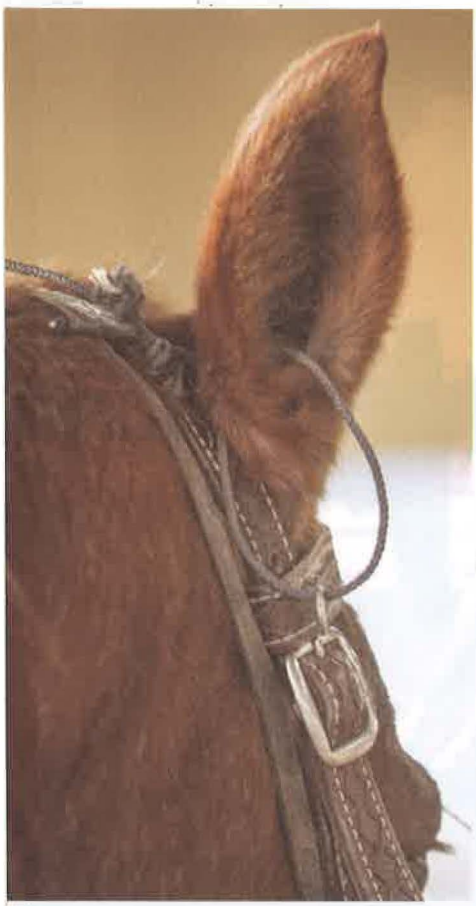
Jim Rodgers founded the Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association in 1991.

The balloon targets can actually be more bothersome to horses than the noise and smell of firing guns.

"If I had a nickel for every time a horse shied at the busted balloons on the ground, I would be rich," Kristi says. "That is something you might take for granted, but the horse needs to see that on a regular basis, too."

She sets up a pattern with balloons and hangs out in the arena with them to give the horses time to acclimate to the sight.

"Sometimes we carry balloons while we ride, or we blow them up and try to get the horse to step on them," she says. "Anything that is fun for you and the horse will help get him more broke for shooting."



Earplugs are optional. Getting a horse to accept them is sometimes the touchiest step in the mounted shooting training process.

Gear up

IF YOU RIDE IN A WESTERN discipline, you likely already have the equipment you need to get started in mounted shooting. Female competitors tend to go for bling, while the men still maintain a mostly traditional tack preference. If you already own a pair of chaps or chinks and a hat, you can use them.

"For the first year, the hats I used for showing, I used for shooting," Kristi says.

Some riders choose to wear helmets, which can be purchased for as little as $40.

There are specialized mounted shooting saddles that are hybridized barrel-roping-cow horse saddles. They range from $1,100-$3,500. Roping, reining and trail saddles also serve the purpose, as long as they fit the horse well and are comfortable.

"The best thing to do is use what you have until you advance in the sport and need an upgrade," Kristi recommends.

Two single-action revolvers and holsters are a necessity. The easiest way to figure out what guns you like – or how you want your holster made – is to go to an event and try different types.

"The great thing about our sport is that the competitors will lend you anything you need," Kristi says. "It's important to figure out what works best before you buy."

Although all the guns are .45-caliber, single-action revolvers, there are many different types of hammers, lengths, grips, etc. that affect the way a gun feels and shoots. Kenda explains that guns can run around $1,500 for the pair. Holsters are generally in the $400 range. Practice ammo can be up to 50 cents per round for certified mounted shooting blanks. That averages $50 per hundred, which pencils out to 10 practice runs.

However, at competitions, the ammo is provided by the event organizers, so you won't have to worry about having enough bullets for a show.

When it comes to guns, Marcus urges new participants to invest in quality.

"We all bought cheap guns, thinking they would work for 'now,' and we ended up buying what we really needed later on down the road," he says.

"Spend a little more in the beginning on good holsters and good guns," he advises. "The quality does make a difference in the action work that can be done."

Can You Hear Me Now?

WHETHER OR NOT A HORSE WEARS EARPLUGS IS UP TO THE RIDER. In some ways, the earplugs are harder to introduce to the horse than the gunfire is. Some horses never think twice about them, while others will shake their heads the entire time they have earplugs in their ears.

"Most of my horses don't use them, though I do have a few that do," Marcus says. "It depends on the horse."

All of Kenda's horses wear earplugs to dampen the noise of competition.

"I start with mildly invasive puffs, which look like a teddy bear tail or a yarn pom-pom," she says.

Her first goal is to get the horses used to having something in their ears. Once they accept that, she switches the pom-poms out for full-foam, noise-reduction plugs.

"These are similar to the memory-foam plugs that I wear, but bigger of course," she says.

Kristi provides an additional tip:

"I put the earplugs in when they eat so they relate it to something nice," Kristi says. "There are a thousand ways to do it, but that has worked best for me."

Ready, Aim, Fire

HORSEMANSHIP SKILLS PLAY A MAJOR ROLE IN MOUNTED SHOOTING performance. The rider is not just a passenger.

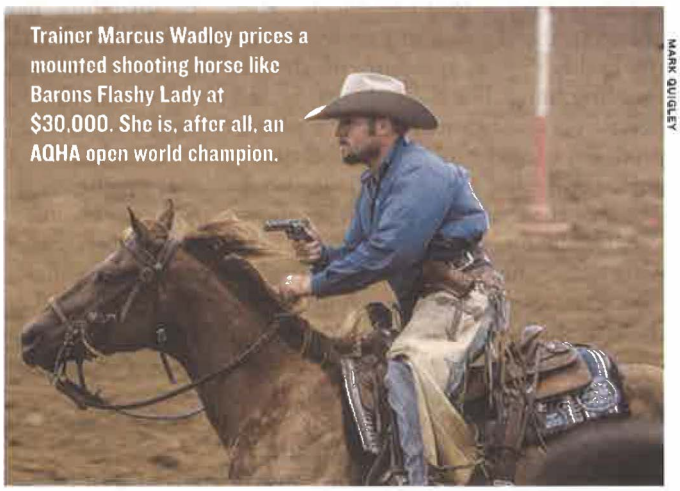
"As the sport grows and gets more competitive, the mental aspect of the game also provides a significant advantage to those who can hone their skills and stay cool and focused under the pressure of adrenaline and competition," Kenda says.

"There is a lot going on during a run and it takes time, even for an advanced rider, to get the timing right," Kristi agrees. "The key to success is to take your time. Don't try to go faster than you can handle the horse and the gun."

Marcus advises riders to strategically plan the competitions you attend.

"It is very addictive and very fun," he says. "I see people jump into the sport, run for points and make all the shoots. Within a year, they're burned out. Enjoy it. Don't let it consume you." ■

Katie Navarra is a special contributor to AQHA's Performance Horse Journal *from New York. She rode in her first mounted shooting clinic during the American Horse Publications gathering in Scottsdale, Arizona, in June 2017. To comment on this article, email* aqhajrnl@aqha.org.



Trainer Marcus Wadley prices a mounted shooting horse like Barons Flashy Lady at $30,000. She is, after all, an AQHA open world champion.

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