

# Ventura County Fair's Cowboy Challenge is all about teamwork

It's called the Cowboy Challenge, but it's not just the cowboys who find this part of the Ventura County Fair challenging.



With a rope gate, a rocking bridge and jumps, this obstacle course at the Morgan Arena is pretty intimidating for the horses, too.

Sharon Haley, of Ventura, wondered on Thursday whether her 6-year-old quarter horse, Ozzie, was up to it.

"I hope to get him through the whole course because he's young in the head — he's like a little kid," Haley said. "The teeter-totter rocking bridge moves, so that might be a little scary. But we're just here to participate and have fun."

Haley was among 20 competitors who participated in the challenge, an annual event put on by the Ventura County Cattlemen's Association.

"We consider this a horsemanship-type event, trying to see what the rider and horse can accomplish in going through obstacles that you might experience on a ranch," said Otto Schimmel, of Santa Paula, a board member with the Cattlemen's Association.

All competitors got awards, including a belt buckle for first place, a saddle pad for second, a breast collar for third, and a headstall for fourth. The rest received halters as consolation prizes.

"The Cowboy Challenge is more about horsemanship and skill at their own rate," said Evon Kurtz, wife of international horseman Bill Cameron, who designed the course and judged the challenge. "Horsemanship is the most important. It's what the judge is looking for — the skill, not just the race."

As a result, she said, "It's more laid-back, more untimed."

The event was designed by cowboys who wanted to compare their abilities — and their horses' abilities — and turn it into a contest, said Cameron, who was inducted into the Extreme Cowboy Association Hall of Fame in 2012.

“So the contest was about, 'I can do anything you can do — but better. I can jump higher than you, I can run over a bridge better than you, I can open a gate quicker than you — and better,'" Cameron said.

“You're operating on a horse with extreme finesse, and it's really about pushing yourself — not so much trying to beat someone else, but pushing your comfort level up another notch.”

Above all, the Cowboy Challenge is about showing the confidence and trust between a horse and rider, he said.

“This is the ultimate experience as far as trust, because you'll see a lot of horses refuse a lot of things,” Cameron said. “It's very much of an art. Once you've pushed horses through things that they weren't sure of — and they start trusting you — it's a lot of fun.”