

Cowboy race goes to the extreme

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Worldwide Extreme Cowboy Race comes to Panoche Valley

Michael Raynor was both promoter of and a competitor at the race. Photos by John Chadwell.



Lifting a 50-gallon barrel was just one of the obstacles during the race.



Roberto Flores, 19, has competed in rodeos and extreme races.



Some horses were shy about walking up wooden blank and stepping into water.



Noodles and horses did not always mix well.



It was a challenge to get a horse to straddle a pipe and walk sideways.



Michael Raynor blasted balloons while at full gallop.



Extreme Cowboy Racing is a family event.



Competitors had to dismount, walk their horses around the stand, unsaddle them, and then ride bareback over jumps.



Julia Birdwell and her pony, Captin, go through the race course.



Gary Lubben keeps track of points as Julia Birdwell goes through race course.

Cowboys, cowgirls and just plain horse fanciers took part in the Extreme Cowboy Racing event April 23 at the Douglas Ranch in the Panoche Valley in southern San Benito County. The event was part of a circuit of obstacle races held under the Extreme Cowboy Association (EXCA) banner, with races held throughout the year from Canada down into Texas, and even as far from cowboy country as France and Belgium.

The EXCA is the only recognized association for the sport of Extreme Cowboy Racing, according to the association's website, <http://extremecowboyassociation.com/>. The Extreme Cowboy Race was founded 10 years ago by Craig Cameron, who is known as the "cowboy clinician," and conducts riding clinics at the Double Horn Ranch in Bluff Dale, Texas. He is a member of the Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame and Culver Riding Academy Hall of Fame, and is taking the Extreme Cowboy Challenge across the country. Gary Lubben, who owns a ranch in Acton, in northern Los Angeles County, has been involved with producing Extreme Cowboy Races for six years. He has hosted some events and was acting as a judge for the event at the Douglas Ranch.

"The essence of the event is to perform activities in a race format that are similar to what a cowboy would do on a ranch," Lubben said. "There will be roping and riding and cow chasing that are typically done from horseback."

Lubben said in just a few years the event has grown internationally, with every event governed by the same rules. It is a timed equestrian event where competitors accumulate points by guiding their horses through obstacles, all the while racing against the clock.

"Some races have more points than others," he said. "There are state, regional and world championships. We see a wide range of competitors. Obviously, horse-oriented people compete, but we get people from all disciplines. We get casual trail riders to English riders to working cowboys. More than 50 percent of them are women and children. There are no limitations on what kind of horse can compete."

Lubben said there are 18 regions in the United States, Canada and Europe. He said the event being held in San Benito County was part of the South Pacific Regional that includes California and Nevada. It was the second time for the event to be held at the Douglas Ranch, and the regional championship is scheduled to be held there in October.

While he said he enjoys putting on the events more than judging, Lubben does it because it's a necessity and there aren't that many people who want to judge.

"Any time you judge you're judged, too," he laughed. "But people put their trust in you to judge fairly and it's nice to have people believe you're doing what's right."

While he compared the EXCA circuit to a rodeo circuit, Lubben said, at present, most competitors are not in it for the money.

"There should be money in it, however, in a small event like this one you have to meet the costs first," he said. "It's based on the size of the activity. I've seen races with as many as 150 competitors. I had one race where we gave away three saddles. Most of the people who won saddles were professional horse people, so they probably sold them."

Lubben said the promoter of the event, Michael Raynor, who is a member of the Bay Area Ravine and Ridge Riders (which was hosting), the San Mateo County Horseman's Association, and the Mounted Patrol, is the leading regional champion.

"He started putting on events last year and will have two up there this year," Lubbon said. "He's the promoter of this event and he's also a competitor today."

He said some people have managed to work their way up through competitions to the point where they could be considered elite riders. Most are working cowboys or horse trainers.

"These people will normally show up at the world championship in Texas, and there's some pretty good money in it for them," he said. "It hasn't reached the level or profession rodeo and riders having sponsors. However, there are trainers who make a pretty good living and they use this event to showcase what their horses can do. That's probably one of the most advantageous things this sport is used for."

Jeff Birdwell was watching proudly as his daughter, Julia, 11, rode her 23-year-old pony, Captin, through the race course. He and the family drove down to Panoche Valley from Portola Valley, west of Mountain View, the night before so she could compete in the event. He said Julia has been riding for six years and began competing last year and had won state and southwest championships for her age bracket, which qualified her to compete in the world championship, where she placed fourth.

Birdwell described the event as one of the fastest growing equestrian sports in the country.

"Each race consists of between eight and 13 obstacles," he said, "so the horse and rider have to navigate obstacles that are different race to race and are designed to create a challenge that would scare most normal horses. So it's really a test of the rider's and horse's ability to work together."

Birdwell said Julia is a natural competitor by the fact that extreme sports seems to be part of her DNA.

"All three of our kids seem to have an extreme gene," he said. "Our oldest is 18 and he has two race cars. Our middle one is an extreme athlete and plays lacrosse and basketball. For Julia it's horses. I used to rock climb and do other things and it's joyful to let them grow and learn."

Roberto Flores, 19, and his younger brother, Johnny, drove up with their family from Burbank so they could both compete in the event. He said the family had brought up four horses and he was riding one named Toro. He said he has been riding since he was nine.

"When I was 13, I started getting into it with team roping, sorting and cutting," Flores said. "When I was 15 and he (Toro) got too old, I had to stop that and started doing this because we could still compete and have fun, but you don't have to pull a steer and it's less heavy on the horse's joints."

He said Toro was a state champion and qualified for the world event. He said he has competed in Acton and in Texas, and it was his first time to compete in Northern California.

"I like doing this because it's way different than any other event, like gymkhana," he said. "You can't just go fast. You still go fast, but you can't be crazy about it. It's kind of scary and you have to really control your horse."

Flores had just gone through the course and Toro did not perform well. The horse shied away from most of the obstacles and Flores lost points throughout the race.

"Today was a poor example," he said. "It's this new feed that we gave him. It's senior active and it's really great for his joints in his hips, but it has molasses and it gets him all hyped up and so he's thinking everything is scary and he's just not himself."

All ages can compete. Competitors are divided into the following groups:

- Young Guns, ages 7 – 11
- Youth, 12 – 17
- Novice (no professional riders)
- Intermediate (no professional riders)
- Non-pro, 18 and up (no professional riders)
- Pro, 18 and over
- Ride Smart, 55 and over (no professional riders)

The South Pacific Regional Championship race will be held at the Douglas Ranch Oct. 1 and the world championship is scheduled for Oct. 26-30, in Hamilton, Texas. The schedule for the entire circuit is available at: extremecowboyassociation.com/schedule.aspx.