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Pennsylvania Cowgirl takes Extreme Cowboy Races by Storm

by Jennifer Autry - March 2010

Sally Addington of Polk, Pa., vividly remembers watching Craig Cameron's Extreme Cowboy Races on television. The races' emphasis on horsemanship and speed mesmerized her, and the tricky series of obstacles for horse and rider to navigate only made her more eager try her hand at this up-and-coming discipline.



"I thought, 'I can do that,'" Addington said, so she applied to compete at Equine Affaire in Columbus, Ohio, in 2007. "I had a real big head thinking I was going to win this thing. But my horse decided he didn't want to go through the obstacles. So I ended up placing 13th. It was an eye opener for me and I'm glad it happened because I needed to be taken down a peg or two."

The next year, she missed the deadline to apply for the Extreme Cowboy Races, but in 2009 Addington applied and was accepted. With a new attitude, she set off for Ohio with the goal of placing in the top 10 and establishing a better bond with her horse, Ghost of a Chance, an 11-year-old grade gelding.

"It was just he and I time. Every moment was spent together, talking to him," she said. "He's got such a large vocabulary of words, and he does know them. He's my best bud. We had a beautiful ride in the semi-finals, and at that point I didn't even care if I made it to the finals."

When scores were posted, Addington was third going into the finals round, so she made a new goal to make it into the top five. Cameron requires all riders to ride the finals round bareback, so Addington removed her saddle and anxiously awaited her turn.

"Then someone told me to put my saddle back on because there was going to be a run-off for first place," Addington said. "I started crying because I knew the worst I could do was second place. I went into the run-off and won."

Later in 2009, she competed in another Extreme Cowboy Race in West Springfield, Mass., winning that competition, too. By now, Addington had garnered enough attention on the Extreme Cowboy Race circuit that people began asking if they would see her at Equine Affaire in Pomona, Calif., in January 2010.

Gone west

"I said, 'That takes a lot of money.' And they would say, 'Get sponsors,'" Addington said. "Then I wondered how I would get Chance all the way to California, and my friend said he would haul him for me. I ended up raising \$3,000 through my sponsors, and I made the trip."

She nailed her semi-finals ride the first night and went into the rider's meeting feeling very confident. At the meeting, Extreme Cowboy Race officials told the riders they would be inviting 20 riders from the United States to compete at the prestigious Calgary Stampede.

"I shook my head; I knew there was no way I would be invited," Addington said. "I haven't been doing the races on the national level. I didn't even sign up for the Extreme Cowboy Association until this year because it's based so far away."

But later that night, a man came up to her and asked if she would like to compete at the Calgary Stampede. Stunned, Addington said she was concerned about the distance, although the man pointed out it was the same distance as driving from Pennsylvania to California.

With Calgary on her mind, Addington went into her finals ride, finishing the competition in third place. Although she was disappointed with her ride and how Chance responded to her cues, she is keeping her sights set on the Extreme Cowboy Association World Championship in Topeka, Kan., in November, and trying to make it to the Calgary Stampede.

"This year I'd like to try to hit some World qualifiers and see if I can qualify for the World Show," she said. "Financially it's tough and the payout is not that great. But Calgary is paying out \$14,000. I'm going to look at vacation time with my job and try to reserve it, and if I can't financially come through with it, I'll just have that time off."

Laying the groundwork

With Chance back from California, Addington is taking a break from her whirlwind experience at Equine Affaire. She regularly goes on long trail rides with her friends, and continues to focus on training Chance, who she bought as a three-month-old colt at the Crawford County Fair almost 12 years ago.

"He is so well-trained because I've logged hours on end of being with him," Addington said. "It's nothing special that I do. If I go out and get on his back and he's done everything I ask him to do in a half-hour, I'm done. Especially when I'm training him, I want him to like me and enjoy what he's doing. There can be minimal minutes, but they must be quality minutes."

In Extreme Cowboy Races, every obstacle is worth a certain number of points, and each team receives a horsemanship score based on how well the horse responds to the rider. Addington and Chance consistently receive high horsemanship scores because of how well he responds to her, she said.

"One of the biggest things that gets me a lot of points is when I tell him to 'whoa,' it means you don't move at all," she said. "When Sally says 'whoa,' my horses know they aren't allowed to move. When you have to rope the dummy during the race, I can drop my reins and do whatever I have to do, and the judges notice that."

Addington's hard work with Chance has paid off, and her success has made her a celebrity in the world of Extreme Cowboy Races. In Pomona, she was stunned when famous stunt rider Tommy Garland patted her knee and said, "Ride like you did in Massachusetts."

"In Columbus after I won, I was swarmed by people," she said, "They wanted my autograph and asked about my horse. It's mind-boggling. I can't put myself in the ranks of all these professionals, but that's the way I've been treated. It's like a fairy tale – very surreal."

Part of the reason she has become so popular on the circuit is her age, she said. At almost 58 years old, many riders would shy away from the fast-paced, hair-raising Extreme Cowboy Races, but Addington thrives on the adrenaline rush.

"They say I'm a crowd pleaser," she said. "People think it's unbelievable that I still do this at my age. But I've ridden all my life, and God willing and if I'm able, I'll still be riding when I'm 68. Age is just a number to me."