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Serious horse play Extreme Cowboy race challenges riders as well as horses

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Bill Stanfield, organizer of the Extreme Cowboy Competition, rides his horse Dusty under a bridge that is part of the course that challenges riders and their horses.

COTTAGEVILLE — Most of the horses balk at one obstacle or another — the drop to the water, the steep scramble up the log steps, the teeter-totter platform.

Or the steely ferocity in the eyes of Dusty, the American saddlebred who will take on the eventual champ.

“He’ll climb a tree if I ask him to,” said owner David Stanfield.

Nope. The Horseshoe Lake Extreme Cowboy Competition is not your usual rodeo.

It's a timed obstacle course race through woods, field and lake with pits, hills, jumps, swims, log pulls and gates. It finishes with a flourish, target bow-shooting from the horse.

The first hint comes early, when riders at the start are greeted with the coyote-howl flute notes that open the classic Western "The Good, The Bad and the Ugly."

The competition is edgy enough that riders can wear wetsuits, if they want. The horses just wear their pride.

The bond between horse and rider is everything. The animals are curious but skeptical and flighty, like the grazing prey they are in the wild.

Neither their eyesight nor their depth perception is as good as the rider's. Even a shadow that moves across an obstacle is enough to make them queasy.

"The rider needs to be confident and sensitive to the horse's lack of confidence," said Rebecca Wilken of the Horseshoe Lake Saddle Club, one of the competition judges.

That's the marvel of the event.

"The horse will balk at some obstacle, and sometimes within 30 seconds, that horse and that rider will get a bond, and the horse will go right through," said John Hickman, who was helping with Saturday's race.

Extreme cowboy competitions were started a few years back by Texas Hall of Fame cowboy Craig Cameron. They are a play on the traditional, no-holds-barred cowboy race across open ranchland.

The races are developing a following throughout horse country, but are still rare in the Lowcountry.

The Horseshoe Lake version was launched this year, and literally by Dusty. Stanfield, who owns the lake ranch, kept putting his plucky horse through tougher and tougher field tests; Dusty kept acing them with a signature snort.

What the heck, Stanfield thought. Let's make it a race.

He's filing paperwork to get the competition sanctioned by the Extreme Cowboy Association. There's just one minor hitch: Some sanctioned races have relatively tame obstacles like opening a mailbox.

"We're a little more maverick," Stanfield said with a wry, cowpoke grin.

"This course here is really the real thing, more like how it would be back in the old days," said rider Tommy Rembert, as the 63-year-old saddled up.

Saturday's race was the third of six scheduled over the spring and summer, leading to a winners-only championship in October.

As a finale, that champion and horse take on Stanfield and Dusty.

"See if they can best the horse and the guy who ride the course every day," Stanfield said with his grin.

Judges watch it all from a tower, with Stanfield at the loudspeaker calling out dry cowboy observations like thanking the "gentleman" when a horse nudges a gate closed as the female rider attempts to shut it.

Riders pay fees to compete in various categories. A trophy is the only payoff, but there's a lot more at stake.

Starlite bucked while Ely Archambault put her horse through a practice run, but the 9-year-old rider squared her jaw and spurred her horse into their first competition.

"Woo hoo!" whooped Christie Jones of Ridgeville, after Bellaza waded under the bridge through the cold "shower" spray for the first time.

"Enter all who wish to be proven," the sign at the course entrance invites.

By the time the loudspeaker crackles with Gene Autry yodeling his way through "Back in the Saddle Again," any proven cowboy is ready to yodel right along.

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