

Mounted Archery: An Old Tradition that is New Again

{Excerpt}

by Anne Beggs

Wild about horses? Want a challenge? Did the movie The Hunger Games leave you aching for more archery?

What is more aesthetic than the noble horse, one of the most magnificent animals in creation? And what could be more exhilarating than cantering your glorious steed, wind in your face as you fly, lifting above the ground, instinctively one with your horse? Thwack. The musical sound as your arrow hits the target. Your life may never be the same. This is mounted archery!

From the Cradle of Civilization, Africa and Mongolia, through Asia and across Europe to the Americas, brave and enduring equines of every size and color have carried their riders into savage battles or thundering herds of dangerous prey animals. This extensive and far reaching culture was replaced with firearms and technology, and nearly lost to us.

Today's mounted archer rides a variety of courses: straight, circular, serpentine, and with obstacles, shooting at a variety of targets - stationary, moving, and even 30 feet high! Many horseback archers train bareback. Still others ride with only a rope halter or bitless bridle because communication is through the body. Imagine the trust and bonding achieved through training and practice, as you guide your horse onto the course, then drop those reins and ride by the seat of your pants, as you nock, draw, and shoot your arrows.

If you have a willing and free spirit and wish to take your partnership with your horse to a whole new level, mounted archery may be the sport for you.

The Mounted Archery Bow

You know your horse has a soul, but did you know the bow has a soul? Archery has its own magic. Maurice Thompson's 1878 book, *The Witchery of Archery*, captured the instinctive nature of traditional archery for a post-civil war America that still resonates today.

Horse bows are generally smaller and lighter than field bows. An exception to this is the long, asymmetrical bow used in the stylized and elegant Japanese form of archery, Yabusame. Draw weight varies from 15 pounds to 85 or more, if hunting is involved. Whether made of modern composite materials or time-honored wood, horn, sinew and bone by a master bowyer, each bow is unique. Each bow has a soul.

Mounted Archery is a team effort between horse and rider (even rider and rider).

Horseback archery demands instinctive skills. Trust, training, and teamwork are the core of all equestrian activities. Mounted archery is a martial art and a sport. Our equines are partners, not tools. Mounted archery is not breed specific; any equine - horse, mule, or pony - may participate with proper desensitization and training. Your horse must be ridden hands free, able to rate speed

by body cues or voice, be calm, smooth, and desensitized not only to a bow and whizzing arrows, but to the targets, other horses, and perhaps an audience. If you have never ridden hands free... once you've let go, you'll never go back!

Most of us spend hours, months and years bonding and playing with our beloved horses. Olympians, reiners, and professional rodeo riders transport their well-honed horses across the country and around the world. But the core of mounted archery is small globally, with no financial backing. Most riders cannot afford to transport their equine partners and some riders do not own their own horses, but depend on friends and instructors. Unless you bring your horse to mounted archery clinics and competitions, you are assigned an equine partner. Often we share that partner with another competitor. How is that for teamwork above and beyond competition?

This is our opportunity, not just as riders, but as horsemen, to meet, greet, and form a relationship with a new horse. Like us, this trusting horse shows up, "punches a time card" and is expected to canter his or her heart out for us. What does that say about the soul of a horse?

There is such spirit and camaraderie at competitions and clinics. Not only do competitors share the responsibility for watering, walking down, and offering a healthy snack to their horses, they often share equipment or gear if something breaks or is forgotten. Instead of a rigid, competitive air of proprietary information or "secret weapons," competitors readily exchange tips and techniques for improved shooting or riding - elevating the quality and caliber of mounted archery for all.

Horseback archers are passionate people.