



# Gunplay

*Cowboy Action Shooting and mounted shooting are growing and popular sports that are changing ideas about firearms in America. Deputy Editor Tom Wilmes goes on assignment and tries not to shoot himself in the foot. >>>*

*Light glints off the cold* steel in my hands as the sun sinks toward the western horizon, casting a long shadow of a lone gunfighter on the desert floor. I struggle to control the itch in my trigger finger as the armed caravan comes into view. It's an eternity before the wagons rumble through the narrow gulch below.

"Look out boys!" I yell. The beep sounds, and I unleash a hail of buckshot that scatters soldiers and sends them ducking for cover. I grab my rifle and keep the soldiers pinned down before I notice a small detachment scrambling toward my position. Drawing my Colt 1873 single-action revolvers, I cock the hammer and fire until the chambers are empty and smoking.

"Time is 122.18 seconds, and he shot it clean," says Joel LaBorde (a.k.a. J.T. Wild), a national-champion Cowboy Action Shooter whose guns I've borrowed and whose leather I'm wearing. "The first 100 seconds will be easy to shave off, and then you'll be competitive," he says. "It's those last seven seconds that are a real bugger."

My time is a far cry from the top shooters who I've been watching clear this scenario in 14 seconds or less—hitting the steel targets so fast that two spent brass casings often hung in the air as the next shot was fired. But the thrill is enough to help me understand why more than 1,200 shooters, exhibitors, and guests have convened on this arid, windswept landscape for the 30<sup>th</sup>-annual End of Trail World Championship of Cowboy Action Shooting.

PHOTO BY MR. QUIDLEY PHOTOGRAPHY



**MOUNTED SHOOTING IS A POPULAR DISCIPLINE THAT COMBINES MARKSMANSHIP AND HORSEMANSHIP.**

Founders Ranch, a 480-acre property on the high plains east of Albuquerque, N.M., is a locus of the Single Action Shooting Society (SASS) and the site of End of Trail, a 10-day shooting match and Wild West festival that's like the Super Bowl of Cowboy Action Shooting. Except here everyone gets to play, and champions are distinguished by black metal badges not diamond-encrusted rings. I meet people from all walks of life and from all over the country (some from as far as Italy and New Zealand) who've traveled here to immerse themselves in a world where dressing cowboy is mandatory, the gunplay is serious, and being known by your assumed alias is part of the fun.

Clearly the appeal is widespread. In its three decades of existence, Cowboy Action Shooting has grown from an obscure shooting sport into an international organization with total SASS membership approaching 95,000 people and more than 600 affiliated clubs representing every state and 35 foreign countries.

Most participants are introduced to the sport

through a local club, and many are content to shoot at monthly practice matches and maybe travel to regional finals. For the dedicated shooters who make their way to End of Trail, however, it's the ultimate Cowboy Action Shooting fantasy camp.

The heart of Founders Ranch is an Old West-themed town and encampment, flanked by 18 outdoor shooting bays that are cordoned off by tall berms of earth and staged to represent specifically themed scenarios such as saloon shootouts or ambushes. The sound of gunfire and of lead plinking off steel targets is nearly constant background noise,

## **While the fantasy and costuming aspects are a big part of Cowboy Action Shooting, the bullets are real.**

punctuated by spurs jingling on the boardwalk and the occasional horse-drawn wagon lumbering down the dusty main street. The "town" is populated by citizens in all manner of Western dress—from frontier-style buckskins to military garb, late-1800s classic cowboys, and even B-Western movie stars. The costumes offer clues to which category people shoot in. Most also push gun carts laden with a full complement of single-action revolvers—cowboy-style six-guns that are manually cocked before firing—shotguns, lever-action rifles, ammunition, umbrellas, coolers, and everything they need to shoot the 12 stages that comprise the match. While the fantasy and costuming aspects are a big part of the sport, the bullets are real, and many procedural redundancies and rules are in place to ensure safe handling of firearms.

"We play cowboys, we don't play with guns," SASS Advertising Manager Kirsten "Sassy Swede" Thompson tells me.

Still, with all of these people in close proximity to all of these guns, you'd think that something would go wrong. But in the 25-year history of SASS, there has never been a shooting-related fatality, and accidents are extremely rare. As a whole, SASS members are committed to the strict safety rules and core principles collectively known as the "Spirit of the Game," a code of conduct akin to the Cowboy Way. Participants adopt these rules and tend not to seek unfair advantage over other competitors. More than just playing fair, though, a spirit of shared community and of watching out for your neighbor pervades this sport.

Cowboy Action Shooting has also inspired several related shooting sports, most notably the Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association (see sidebar), and the groups' collective success has gone a long way toward changing negative perceptions regarding firearms in mainstream America.

*The origins of Cowboy Action Shooting* can be traced to a rainy Saturday afternoon in 1981 and a screening of the *Wild Bunch*, director Sam Peckinpah's gritty, gun-centric Western. Harper Creigh, an avid competitive shooter, was watching the film when he began to daydream about what an organized shooting match might look like 100 years ago. He called a few of his shooting buddies and proposed the idea of shooting their next match with Old West-style guns.

They soon switched to shooting cowboy guns exclusively, and organized the first formal single-action shooting match in 1982 at their home range in Southern California. They called it End of Trail.

"I figured it's the end of a long trail drive, you've got money in your pocket and three or four days to kill before you have to go back to the ranch, and you just want to raise hell and have a few drinks and do what you do," says Creigh, 74, who is better known by his shooting alias, Judge Roy Bean. In fact, Creigh wears SASS badge #1, which has been exhibited in the NRA's National Firearms Museum in Fairfax, Va., along with his revolvers.

"We never dreamed that this thing would grow beyond our little area," he continues. "It's like seeing your baby for the first time and thinking, 'Well, he's going to grow up to be 6'6'."

Those early matches were well received, but they had little to do with the historical Old West. The costumes were modeled after old cowboy movies and television shows, and most of the shooting scenarios involved Hollywood-style stunts like sliding across



**EACH STAGE IS THEMED TO REPRESENT A SPECIFIC SCENARIO. IN THIS CASE, SHOOTERS GUN THEIR WAY OUT OF A HOUSE THAT'S SURROUNDED BY A SHERIFF'S POSSE.**

tables and busting out of jail cells.

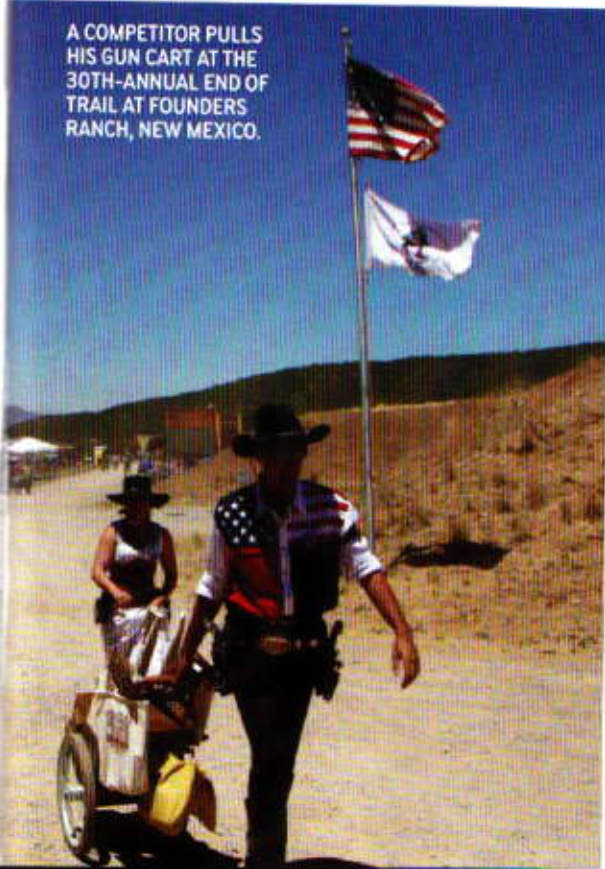
"We all wanted to be up on the screen with Gene, Hoppy, and Roy," says Creigh.

Many other shooters also grew up idolizing those silver-screen heroes and playing cowboy in the backyard, and they craved an opportunity to live out their childhood fantasies more than once a year.

"There was a lot of pressure to take End of Trail on the road, but we all had jobs and didn't have a lot of time to put it on more than once a year," recalls Brad "Hipshot" Myers (SASS member #7), longtime Match Director of End of Trail. "So we formed SASS in 1987, developed a rule book, and said, 'If you want a match in your area, go home and put one on.'"

This autonomy has been a key factor in the organization's success. Members can start or join a local affiliated shooting club and organize their own practice

**A COMPETITOR PULLS HIS GUN CART AT THE 30TH-ANNUAL END OF TRAIL AT FOUNDERS RANCH, NEW MEXICO.**



### **SINGLE ACTION SHOOTING SOCIETY (SASS)**

An avid shooter in International Practical Shooting Confederation and *Soldier of Fortune*-type shooting matches, Harper Creigh (a.k.a. Judge Roy Bean) and several shooting buddies held the first official Cowboy Action Shooting match in 1982 using Old West-style guns. SASS was founded in 1987, and today total membership approaches 95,000. **877-411-7277, [sassnet.com](http://sassnet.com)**

### **COWBOY MOUNTED SHOOTING ASSOCIATION (CMSA)**

Jim Rodgers, a member of the SASS Wild Bunch, branched off and started CMSA in 1996. Today, there are 98 clubs and nearly 11,000 members worldwide. Mounted contestants use matched .45 caliber single-action revolvers—loaded with five rounds of specially prepared, burning powder blank ammunition—that burst balloons within a 15-foot range. Participants ride one of more than 50 official shooting patterns and shoot 10 balloons for time and accuracy. Although any breed of horse may compete, most contestants ride Quarter Horses. In fact, CMSA is now an official American Quarter Horse Association Alliance partner and will be recognized as an event at the 2011 AQHA World Show. **888-960-0003, [cowboymountedshooting.com](http://cowboymountedshooting.com)**

### **COWBOY SPORTS ASSOCIATION (CSA)**

The national organization that promotes the sport of Mounted Shooting through its affiliates, CSA tracks member mounted shooting points from national, regional, and state competitions. **[cowboysportsassociation.com](http://cowboysportsassociation.com)** (Mounted Shooters of America, another national organization, puts on mounted shooting events. **[newmsa.com](http://newmsa.com)**)

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**KATHY "MORNING DOVE" HOLLMANN BEGAN COMPETING IN MOUNTED SHOOTING AT AGE 7. TODAY, AT 18, SHE'S A RISING STAR IN THE SPORT.**

shoots, design shooting stages, and host their own matches. Territorial Governors oversee each region and meet with the board of directors (known as the Wild Bunch, naturally) to discuss any rule or policy changes at the SASS convention and Wild West Christmas held each December in Las Vegas. SASS directly oversees the End of Trail World Championship at Founders Ranch, which is privately owned by the Wild Bunch, and sanctions state and regional championship matches, as well as a national championship called Winter Range, plus Canadian, European, Australian, and South African championships.

Notably, there are no cash prizes. This would detract from the sport's appeal, says Creigh, who grew tired of competing in other shooting matches where the top 10 percent took home all the prize money. Rather, the stages are designed so that most shooters will be successful, and buckles and prizes are given in a wide variety of categories. An affiliated group, called the Wild West Performing Arts Society, hosts workshops and contests in gun spinning, whip cracking, and other Western arts. There are also costume contests, seminars, and many social events.

"As long as we have something for everybody, we'll keep growing," says Creigh. "Between 20 and 30 percent of our members are women, and in other shooting sports if they've got 5 percent they'd be doing good," he continues. "I'm real proud of that number. But the majority of our members are men 60 and over, so it's important to get the kids in, too. The only way we're going to do that is if their families bring them in."

**Chance Koch, 18**, represents the next generation of Cowboy Action Shooters. Polite and well spoken, he's a high school senior in his hometown of Redmond, Ore. Known here by his SASS alias, Last Chance Morales, he's also a world champion in Wild Bunch Action shooting, a category that uses 1911 semi-automatic pistols and rifles, .40 caliber and higher, like those depicted in Peckinpah's film.

Koch became involved with SASS through his father, J.W. "Bubba" Koch (Texas Jack Morales), who owns a gun shop in Oregon. When traveling for matches, father and son say they often attract bemused looks at hotels for wearing their Cowboy Action Shooting clothes and carrying firearms cases.


*Continued on page 92*

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"If we'd have walked in wearing camouflaged and carrying firearms, the place would have cleared out," says Bubba Koch. "But people aren't afraid of cowboys, because they're always the good guys—the heroes."

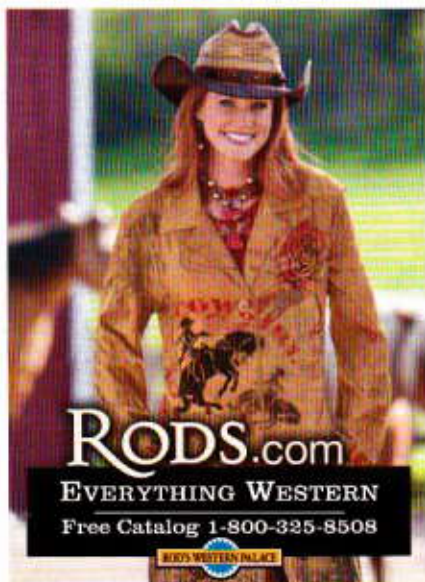
Gene "Evil Roy" Pearcey, one of the sport's most well-known personalities, agrees. "Cowboy Action Shooting is, of course, a gun culture and a shooting sport, but the press doesn't seem to have a problem writing about it," he says. "I've been interviewed by big-time newspapers that are anti-gun to the extreme, but they don't have any problem talking about cowboy guns. That's really good for the gun world."

Like Koch, Evil Roy brought his family into the sport, including his wife. Granddaughter Randi "Holy Terror" Rogers, 24, is a decorated shooter and won her ninth world champion title at this year's End of Trail. His 11-year-old grandson has taken up shooting, too.

"It's a really good platform for a kid to launch from," says Evil Roy. "There's a lot of responsibility, but it's also a lot of fun. We've had a lot of kids that have gone on to have great success."

Kathy "Morning Dove" Hollmann is a shining example. A rising star in the CMSA, she was introduced to shooting at a young age by her father, Jim "Sierrita Slim" Hollmann, a retired police officer and firearms instructor. Morning Dove started competing in Cowboy Action Shooting at age 7 with her dad and two older brothers and in SASS mounted shooting at age 10. Today, at 18, she's one of only three women in the history of competitive mounted shooting to win an Overall World Champion title. At this year's End of Trail, she won her third Ladies World Champion title, as well as the World Champion All Around Cowboy title for combined mounted shooting, Cowboy Action Shooting, and a special mounted rifle stage. Morning Dove received scholarships from both SASS and the CMSA and recently graduated from high school with 30 college credits under her belt. She's now enrolled at Eastern New Mexico University.

"It was hard at first getting used to riding and shooting at the same time, but



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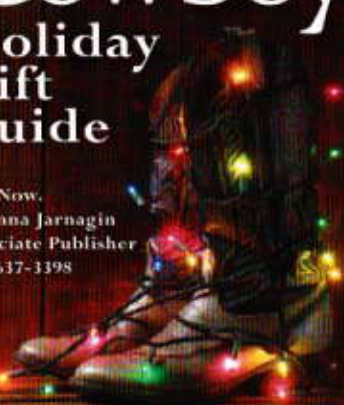


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after that it was a lot of fun," she says of mounted shooting. After watching this petite, soft-spoken young woman fly full-bore around the arena in complete partnership with her horse and busting balloons like a tactical agent, I can say that she's being modest. I can also say that it looks like a lot of fun.

One of the hallmarks of cowboy shooting sports is the camaraderie. I heard from many people that you could essentially walk into a match with nothing and in short order have clothes, guns, ammunition, food, and a place to stay without any trouble. I experience this generosity firsthand when Kathy's dad Jim walks over to me leading a borrowed horse. He cinches his holsters around my waist, and Kathy hands me her guns (Taylor's & Co. "Runnin' Iron" pistols specifically designed for mounted shooting).

Competition has ended in the arena, but the stands are still packed. Local 4H kids run out to refill the balloons in preparation for an exhibition run by Gary "Bad Dog" Bennett, a World and National Champion Cowboy Mounted Shooter who also performs in Dr. Buck's Wild West Show. Let's just say he's a tough act to follow.

When it's finally my turn, I mount up and ride into the arena. Still unsure of how I'm going to control a horse and two loaded revolvers, I draw a bead on the first balloon, cock the hammer, and fire. Slow and deliberate. We're up at a trot now, and I start to feel the rhythm. I even catch a few shouts of encouragement from the stands as I round the last barrel and head for home. My official time (like my Cowboy Action Stage) is dozens of seconds from being competitive, but I feel exhilarated.

The ride gives me a sense for the work and dedication required to shave off those elusive extra seconds. Yet I also realize that speed and accuracy matter as little with these sports as your real identity or career. At its core, the culture of cowboy shooting only expects a person to have a positive, helpful attitude and to give it their best shot—literally. The winners get bragging rights, of course, but it's the spirit of the game that matters most. ☘

► For video from End of Trail and a list of upcoming shooting events, visit [AmericanCowboy.com](http://AmericanCowboy.com).

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