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Jousters Battle at Annual Sonora Competition

By Amelia Neufeld
THE MODESTO BEE
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Knights, like Clifton Bassett from Sanger, will compete at the Third Annual International Jousting Championships from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Saturday and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday in Sonora.

In the world of jousting, there are two types of knights: those who joust for show at Renaissance fairs and those who joust for real -- painfully so -- in competition. It's like pro wrestling vs. heavyweight boxing.

In theatrical jousting, the passes are scripted and the lances are built to break rather than deliver much of a blow. In tournament jousting, however, every hit is the real deal and the winner is, literally, the last man standing.

"We're just crazy enough to crave the impact," said Clifton Bassett, 30, from Sanger, who has been tilting on horseback competitively for 11 years.

"The dinner theaters, like Medieval Times, that's more of a stunt show," he said. "Here, anytime someone makes a run, it's like a car wreck."

This weekend in Sonora, Bassett and other jousters will battle in the only heavy-armor tournament on the West Coast. The third annual International Jousting Championships -- one jouster is from Norway, another from Canada -- are Saturday and Sunday at the Mother Lode Fairgrounds.

The grounds open at 10 a.m. both days, with jousting on Saturday taking place at noon and 3 p.m. The competition will continue on Sunday when best of the knights from the first day will compete for the prize and title.

"This is how it was in the 1500s," said tournament producer Patrick Karnahan. "It's the real thing. This is not phony or fake. You don't know what's going to happen."

The two-day jousting tournament is being modeled after an actual event in 1520, when King Henry VIII of England and King Francis I of France organized a jousting tournament between their respective knights to prove which country had the better fighters.

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It was called the Field of the Cloth of Gold because each king spent an outrageous sum of money to impress and outshine the other.

There will be two jousting rounds of 90 minutes each per day, Karnahan said. Each jousting round is scored on points, with five points given for unhorsing the other rider, three points for breaking a lance and two points for breaking the tip of the lance. At least four trained judges will be on the field to grade the passes.

Jousters usually make their own practice lances, but those used in tournaments are supplied by the organizers to ensure compliance.

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