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- ▶ [Jousting: The Men in the Iron Masks](#)
- ▶ [Rolling in clover at ClovisFest](#)
- ▶ [2 Cents Worth](#)
- ▶ [Paddling on the wild side of the delta](#)
- ▶ [Living For The Weekend](#)

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## Jousting: The Men in the Iron Masks

In a revival of the days of old when knights were bold, jousters, jesters and fair maidens will converge on Sonora this weekend for the world tilting championships

By **AMANDA NEUFELD**  
BEE STAFF WRITER

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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 joust is from Norway, another from Canada — are Saturday and Sunday at the Mother Lode Fairgrounds. Expect to see lots of hits and a few "unhorsings."

"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



Lancers wear 100 pounds of armor, and sometimes both get unseated.  
**RANDALL BENTON/THE SACRAMENTO BEE**

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don't know what's going to happen."

During jousting's heyday in the Middle Ages, knights— mostly from Northern Europe: England, France, German baronies — fought one another to gain prestige and notice from nobles, who would then hire the knights to fight for them.

Later, jousting was adopted by the nobles themselves as a way to prove their horsemanship and physical prowess. It died out in the mid-16th century as weaponry improved.

At Sonora, 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.

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. The meeting ended abruptly when King Henry challenged King Francis to a wrestling match, which ended when Francis threw Henry to the ground and won. Soon after, the two countries went to war.

"We really haven't evolved that much from the times of the Romans," said Bassett, a history buff. "You look back at gladiator fights or some of the extreme ballgames they had in Meso-America, and there's this craving for humans to have some kind of connection to their more primal beginnings."

At the Sonora tournament, there will be two jousting rounds of 90 minutes each per day, Karnahan said. Each jouster 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.

Each joust round will begin with a series of skills games: the rings (jousters aim their lance through hanging rings), the quintain (jousters hit a shield and make it spin) and spear throwing. Points are awarded for successfully completing each game.

The jouster with the most points will win \$4,000. In addition, each jouster will be paid \$500 for competing.

The money, however, isn't why they compete, the jousters say. Most of them — unless they earn money training horses or making the armor used in competition — have day jobs.

"This is for my own personal satisfaction," said Marty Collins, head groundskeeper at Sanger High School, for whom the Sonora tournament will be his first competitive jousting match. "It's not for the glory, not for the fame. It's just because I want to do it.



Knighthood doesn't come cheap: \$7,000 for a suit of armor, \$5,000 for a horse  
**CHRISTIAN PARLEY/THE FRESNO BEE**

"I need that whole internal, getting hit, adrenaline rush of it all," Collins, 36, continued. "It's the only place where I can hit somebody with something and not go to jail for it."

Buying the supplies needed to start competitive jousting, including a full suit of armor, a quality draft horse, numerous lances and a vehicle to transport all of it, is steep.

Bassett, who is also a blacksmith and trainer/seller of jousting horses, said the midrange cost for a suit of armor, which must be custom-made to the jouster's body, is \$7,000. The horse, a Belgian, French or English draft, can cost \$4,000 to \$5,000.

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

"(Jousting is) kind of a young man's sport, physically," Bassett said. "But it's hard, because at that age, you don't have the resources to fund it."

To help defray some of those costs, most young jousters join troupes, like Bassett's Knights of the Azure Cross. Once jousters earn enough money from their winnings, they tend to venture out on their own, as a free-lance knight.

Yet even with the expense, those who joust competitively say there's no way they'd compete in a different kind of hard-hitting activity, like boxing or rugby.

"The one thing I like is, number one, you're not reliant on a team," said Charlie Andrews, 37, a jouster from Utah and former Navy SEAL. "You sink or swim on your own. Whatever you achieve, or don't, is up to you."

And, he added, "the whole being-a-knight thing, that whole rock-star persona, is pretty cool. You go to these events and you're kind of the star of the show."

Even so, competitive jousting is a physically brutal, grueling sport. Each jouster wears up to 100 pounds of armor and can expect to be hit by a lance weighing 15 to 25 pounds carried by a rider atop a 1,500-pound draft horse that is galloping at speeds approaching 30 mph.

"Hit first and hit hardest," Andrews, who runs a private security firm, advised. "You have to ride hard and tight to the list (the lane divider). It puts you closer to the other jouster."

"If you ride with your lance dead straight over the horse's head, you're guaranteed a big hit. You may take yourself off or the other knight, but when I ride, someone's coming off their horse, even if it's me."

Interestingly, the jouster most in danger of getting injured is the one holding the lance when it slams into the other rider's body. The force from the hit can reverberate up through the wood, shattering the bones in the jouster's hand or breaking his wrist.

Other common jousting injuries include broken ribs, shoulders and collar bones.





"It's equal to bull-riding or jumping without a parachute," Andrews said. "You can die doing it."

But it's that possibility that feeds a jouster's desire to compete.

"We all kind of cheat death every time we do a joust," Bassett said. "But, hey, who wants to live forever?"

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