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SONORA, TUOLUMNE COUNTY
Modern-day jousters, fans throw
down the gauntlet
Armor-clad warriors vie for cash,
crown at two-day contest

- [Kevin Fagan, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)
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Clifton Bassett sat on his horse in the 97-degree sun Saturday, sweat squeezing in rivulets through every spare spot beneath his 120 pounds of full-body, medieval steel armor. He shifted his 11-foot lance snugly into the palm of his right hand, shook his head to seat the helmet lower.

The air, the crowd of 2,000 and the very dust of the dirt-bottom arena seemed to stop stock-still for a moment. Then came the command they had waited for all morning -- the command that would roll time back 1,000 years and deliver this little Sierra town, for one brief weekend, to the days of knights and daring steeds and lances held high.

This was the Second International Jousting Championship.

It was no joke.

"Charge on!" came the scream over the loudspeakers, and as the audience erupted into a deafening howl, Bassett wheeled his charger and sped full force across the arena, armor rattling and skirting flying around the horse's flanks.

Exactly 180 feet away, Tim Tobey whipped his cream-colored steed around and charged full force straight at Bassett. In seconds they were 40 feet apart, then 30. At 20 feet their lances dropped simultaneously and aimed at each other's chests.

With a smack louder than a sledgehammer on a car hood, their lances slammed into each other's armored breastplates -- and both men pitched crazily in their saddles, then went flying into the dirt. Bassett bounced twice, shook off the stun and stood up, but Tobey straddled a wooden post midair, rode it to the dirt and lay like a man dead.

"Ohhh!" the crowd groaned, and the air seemed to stop still again for a minute as a team of "squires" ran to Tobey's side and hovered. Finally, after an agonizing pause, he stood up. The crowd roared and began stomping the beat to "We will rock you." Tobey trudged slowly out of the arena, full-body armor clanking and clumping -- but before he hit the gate,

the next two contestants galloped in.

There was no stomach for waiting around.

Whoever wins this two-day competition claims \$10,000 and the crown of heavy-contact jousting champion of the United States, and the 10 male and female combatants were itching to get at it.

They had to be invited from other jousting preliminaries in the United States, Norway, Canada and Australia -- and as Tobey indicated with gritted teeth and a shake of his head outside the arena, nothing short of a bad bone break will keep these riders out of the saddle. In fact, 15 minutes later, he was back at it.

"Hey, you only live once, so why not?" Bassett, 29, cracked with a grin as four squires -- actually just volunteer pals who help the "knights," as the contestants are called -- peeled off his armor after the joust. His left hand took a stiff smack in the collision and was either broken or badly bruised, but he shrugged as a squire wrapped it in ice.

"Nobody says this is easy," he said.

Contestants regularly crack ribs and break minor bones. Some even take lance fragments in the chest -- like Shane Adams of Canada, Bassett's main foe this weekend, did a few years ago.

"And at least it's not my lance hand," Bassett said with a sigh of relief.

Up in the stands, it was clear the only things regarded as novelty acts were the "rabble rousers" -- women in alluringly overflowing bodices -- whose job it was to rile up the crowd with yells of "scream thee loud!" and such.

"A little bizarre, sure, but man, these guys are good on those horses," marveled Karolyn Pye of Volcano (Amador County). "We see a lot of horses and cows and goats up where I live, but nothing like this."

Out in the arena, two more riders slammed into each other with lances, and she winced. All around her screamed with delight -- forsooth, ye'd think this was a football championship from the noise.

The contest is the highlight of the two-day Celtic Faire at the Mother Lode Fairgrounds of Sonora, which features the usual assortment of broadswords and kilts for sale, with wenches and laddies in peasant dresses and breeches strolling around trying on their best auld-day accents. Roaming jesters make sure the laughs roll on, but the boldest fun is in the horse arena.

"Wow," was all 7-year-old Stephen Liptrap could say, as last year's champion, 34-year-old Adams, signed the boy's wooden sword. A line of impatient autograph hounds huddled behind Stephen, who stood for a moment looking in wonder at the signature.

"Boys like things that go bang," his mother, Christina Liptrap, explained sheepishly. "I guess we do, too."

Co-organizer Marti Miernik of San Jose said the 1,000-year-old craft of jousting has been revived as a serious sport since the early 1990s, mostly in Europe and Canada. The Sonora event is the first international competition on the West Coast, but regional contests have been going on for a decade unbeknownst to most folks outside the swords-and-horses set.

Most jousters also do re-enactment shows for Renaissance fairs, but if they're serious riders, tearing at each other with lances is where the real thrill lies.

"We'd actually like it to be an Olympic sport," Miernik said. "Heck, if they can do synchronized diving, they can include this." There are about 200 serious jousters in America, she estimated, and hundreds more in Europe.

Bassett has won several regional jousting competitions in his 15 years of competition, and he placed second to Adams last year in Sonora. It takes years to train not just the humans but the horses, too, he said. Neither species naturally likes charging straight at each other with long sticks.

The object is not to kill someone, he said, but to score points by hitting targets on the opponent's shield or 1-foot-square breastplate, called a realgestch -- or best of all, knocking the other guy or gal off the horse.

"When I was 5, I saw some Popeye and Bugs Bunny cartoons with guys in armor and thought, 'Wow, I want to do that,' " Bassett said. "Then when I was 10, I met a man named Jay Bliss who built armor. I started doing it myself, and I was hooked for life."

Bassett said he's completing a bachelor's degree at California State University Fresno so he can teach history later, but for now he makes his living jousting and doing re-enactments.

Natalie Woodridge, a 36-year-old executive secretary from Sylmar (Los Angeles County), said that if she had her way, her sole job would be spreading the gospel of jousting everywhere.

"Basically, if you can ride, you can joust," she said, tightening her leather armor suit to get ready for the "gauntlet" part of the competition, where riders test their accuracy by tossing spears and smacking shields hung on poles. "It's a helluva lot of fun, a real adrenaline rush."

And with that, she wheeled her horse and slammed a lance into a hay bale. "Yeah!" she screamed.

E-mail Kevin Fagan at kfagan@sfgate.com.

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