

Commentary... Sisters rider on the steppe

By Lynn Woodward
Correspondent

I'm fond of horses. I'm fond of archery. And of archery from a galloping horse as well. So is Holm Neumann. That's why we were in Mongolia last month.

Holm and Susan Neumann established the Cascade International Mounted Archery Center (CIMAC) in 2006, where they train horses to horseback archery, teach clinics and hold competitions from their ranch outside of Sisters. When we hosted the 2010 Horseback Archery Competition, the Mongolians had planned to come, but didn't show at the last minute because they didn't realize they needed visas to enter the U.S. This year, we came to them.

About 20 competitors were at perhaps the only training facility in Mongolia, just south of the capital city, Ulaanbaatar. They hailed from Brazil, Ireland, Bavaria, Sweden, Japan, the U.S. and, of course, Mongolia.

Of all the places in the world, Mongolia probably has the most renowned history of horseback archery — depictions of the warriors of Chinggis Khaan (Western spelling: Genghis Khan) are on horseback in armor with knives, swords, bow and arrows, and it was common to hunt from horseback. But mounted archery is not much practiced anymore.

The riders paraded near the spectator seating for the opening ceremony. One Mongolian had a falcon on his wrist. The Irishman, Andrew O Donngaile, who trains and teaches at CIMAC, was in chainmail with a fur-rimmed medieval-style helmet. The Japanese were dressed in elaborate bright silks with bows about seven feet long. A young Mongolian man dressed in fine blue silks played a tune that evoked the tempo of a galloping horse on the quintessential Mongolian folk instrument, a horsehead fiddle.

Each competitor has only one chance at each of the

three courses: a Korean-style five-shot, the furry ball, and a Hungarian-style. Points are scored on a standard bulls-eye target, or a furry soccer-sized ball for one of the courses, placed about 10 meters from the running lane. The more points the better.

The Mongolians Otgo and Miigaa took third and second, and Ryoya Takemura of Japan won first-place honors. Other participants sidled over to the score sheets after the ceremony to examine the scoring. Takemura won with 11 points.

Unlike other competitions — where if a rider's run is over the established reasonable time, points are deducted for each second — on this course riders over the established 16-second time were disqualified. One of the teenage Mongolian girls likely would have won with her target score of 19. That's not the point. We were there for the camaraderie and to help bring part of the Mongolians' heritage back to them.

Several of the Mongolians, who perform with a circus, made a few runs on the course to show off their impressive horse-vaulting skills, and the falcon was passed around. And then it was time to go. We loaded into a bus right out of 1960s California, and headed to the tourist ger camp where we would stay and ride horses for three days.

I mounted the liver-chestnut horse I was assigned, and was struck by two things:



PHOTO BY LYNN WOODWARD

Holm Neumann of Sisters presented Ryoya Takemura with a quiver made by Three Ponies Saddlery, also of Sisters.

His shoulders are maybe 16 inches wide; it seems I might topple him over. The second is that this saddle resembles a packsaddle — a wooden tree with a leather-covered pillow strapped atop. And the cinches (two camel-hair ropes) were rigged with something akin to a shoelace made of worn leather. Old. Very worn. I pointed this out to our travel guide, who was bilingual, and one of the horse guides came over and retied a couple of the knots. I was hoping for replacement; something perhaps two inches wide and new.

We headed to Khustain National Park, about 30 km away, in hopes of seeing some takhi (Przewalski's horse). A few steps at the walk and we were off trotting and cantering. For long, long stretches at a time. Uphill. Downhill. Side-hill. I was amazed at how my horse skittered over the rodent holes at a gallop, needing no guidance from me, only balance.

No takhi sightings, so we turned around. Holm and a

few others followed our route by car, and we gathered for lunch. The horsemen hobbled one horse with its leadrope and then tied four or five others to the hobbled horse's neck.

Remarkably, my horse had not sweated much and was barely winded. However, I was not faring as well.

The padding of the pillow was in places where my butt was not — much like how gravel gets pushed to the side of a road by the passage of tires. My thighs were bruising on the edges of the wood frame. And there was a sizeable rock-hard lump on the left of the seat where, well, where a lump just should not be.

Interestingly, Mongolian saddles prior to the 15th century resemble our Western saddles. Beyond that, further research turned up little information. I was told that the Manchurian rule introduced much shorter saddles with hard seats and very

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PHOTO BY LYNN WOODWARD

Ryoya Takemura displays his tournament-winning form.



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