

Sisters native lives by the lance

By Craig Rullman
Correspondent

“There are no ties in jousting,” says Sisters native James Johnson, who is travelling to Estes Park, Colorado, for the Longs Peak Scottish-Irish Highland Festival, where he will compete against joustors from around the world in a full-contact jousting tournament.

The Estes Park tournament is considered the premier jousting tournament in the United States, hosting joustors from around the world, and draws crowds in the tens of thousands.

The medieval sport of jousting has experienced a tremendous resurgence in recent years, and Johnson, who competes under the nom de jouter “Wild Eagle” while riding with a group known as the Knights of Mayhem, has been competing for several years with some success. He has previously taken second place overall in the light-armor category, and third overall in the heavy-armor category at Estes Park.

Johnson says the Knights of Mayhem group is composed largely of adventure and adrenaline junkies, including UFC fighters, bull-riders, and other Xtreme sport athletes.

“This isn’t a dinner show,” James says. “It’s a real event, and it takes a special kind of person to want to do this.”

In modern jousting, riders take five passes at each other down the list. A panel of judges award points for strikes to the chest, a broken lance, or for unhorsing the opponent. If the score is tied at the end of the initial passes, the riders square off again until a winner is determined.

In a typical tournament Johnson may joust several opponents a day, for three days.

Johnson, a former professional bull-rider who now works in the film industry as an operator of the world’s longest camera crane — known as the Strada — says his interest in full-contact jousting was sparked by a *National Geographic* special featuring Charlie Andrews. Andrews is considered the world champion of heavy- and light-armor jousting, and is widely regarded as the man responsible for reinvigorating the joust as a modern professional sport.

James, who says he “needed a vent,” contacted Andrews, and then traveled to Utah to learn the rules and techniques of modern jousting.

A jousting’s equipment is highly specialized, and the armor Johnson wears is hand-made. Combined with layers of chain mail, the armor adds significant weight and

severe mobility restrictions. The lance itself is made from either pine or hemlock, and capped with copper to help prevent the lance from splitting. The lance is 11 feet long and weighs up to 25 pounds.

As they charge down the list at upwards of 30 miles per hour, joustors are required to release the reins prior to contact, for the safety of horse and rider, and they must control the horse through cues from their legs.

Johnson is taking three horses to the Highland Games in Estes Park — the first tournament for all three horses. The horses, Johnson says, are trained using a combination of dressage and ranch-horse techniques. He emphasizes the importance of being calm, utilizing breathing and meditation techniques, which he believes translate to the horse.

The horses are gentle giants, Percheron-Clydesdale-Belgian and quarter-horse crosses, large enough to carry the weight of a modern jousting in heavy armor. Johnson stresses that horse-safety is paramount in jousting, and that strict adherence to the rules largely prevents equine injuries.

The same cannot be said for the joustors. Johnson’s list of injuries is as impressive as it is appalling, including three surgeries, broken ribs, a broken scapula, a crushed urethra, and enough plates and screws in his body to light up metal detectors around the nation.

Johnson is dedicating his performance in this year’s tournament to his friend James LaMere, his “best friend and little brother” who recently passed away.

Johnson is confident but



PHOTO BY CRAIG RULLMAN

James Johnson is ready to joust in Estes Park, Colorado.

circumspect about his chances at the games this year. “If you get unhorsed, you get unhorsed. But in the end it isn’t what you have, it’s what you’ve done.”

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