

Equine sport finding its ‘cutting’ edge

The sport of “cutting” may not be widely recognized outside the equine community, but on the farm of Lisa and Shawn Minshall near Hillsburgh, it’s a family tradition.

At the 100-acre Minshall Farms, where the couple raises thoroughbreds, they also host cutting horse competitions about twice a year and most recently hosted a training camp for riders on how to handle their specially-trained horses for competition.

In the United States the activity is a “million dollar sport,” according to Lisa Minshall, herself an accomplished cutting horse competitor.

In the Minshall family, it was Shawn’s father Aubrey who was the first Minshall to take up the sport and become a champion in it.

Shawn and Lisa have followed, along with their 23-year-old daughter Lauren who has joined her parents as an accomplished rider and champion.

The sport originated in the 1800s, when American cowboys used their best horses to separate individual cows from a herd.

Separating cows was often a necessity on the open range, when animals owned by one ranch might get intermingled with a herd from another ranch.

The cutting practice also became part of cattle herding, in order to keep herds together, and would eventually become a competitive sport.

Lisa Minshall sums up the sport’s origins in a simpler way.

“It got to be ‘my horse is better than your horse,’” she said. “That’s how it started and now it’s a multi-million dollar sport.”

The first record of cutting as an arena spectator event was in 1919 at a show in Fort Worth, Texas. Fort Worth remains the hub for cutting horse events, training and the sale of cutting horses.

However, the sport has also taken hold and is popular in several European countries and Australia, where vast expanses for herding necessitated its use.

The Ontario Cutting Horse Association (OCHA) states Roy Ionson and Dale Purdy brought the first two cutting horses to Ontario in the late 1950s and showed them at the first cutting near St. Catharines at a large horse show.

Not long after, Walter Hellyer was named the first president of the OCHA and the first vice president was Ionson, who was the first OCHA member to show his cutting horse in the U.S.

The OCHA was incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1973.

Noting the sport’s extreme popularity south of the border, Minshall said her family lived for a time in Tennessee before moving back to Ontario and settling on the Erin farm about 10 years ago.

Minshall, who was born and raised in the Erin area, said she started out working with horses as an English hunter rider before she got her first taste of riding a cutting horse.

“When I started dating Shawn, his dad Aubrey put me on a cutting horse and that first time that was it,” she said. “I sold my horse. I was done with hunters.”

She added, "If you ride and you get on a cutting horse and you feel what it's like, it's incredible."

In competition each rider is allowed two-and-a-half minutes to cut at least two, but more often three, cows from a herd, according to competition instructions published by the U.S. National Cutting Horse Association.

"The rider must bring at least one cow from deep inside the herd ... If he brings out a small group (herd) and waits for all but one to peel (go back to the herd) he has 'cut for shape.' His other cuts may be chipped from the edge of the herd. Extra credit is given if the rider drives the cow ... from deep inside the herd."

When a cow has been separated from the herd, the rider loosens his/her grip on the reins, at which point the specially-trained horse takes over moving back and forth with abrupt stops in each turn following the movements of the cow and keeping it separate from the herd.

"To make a good cutting horse the horse has to have a really good stop," Minshall said. "They're athletes."

She likens it to a collie herding sheep.

"You have to have a herd of cattle. You go into that herd and decide which cow to cut," she said.

"You separate it and you work your cow. The horse is reading the cow. You've got two-and-a-half minutes to show the judge what you can do."

In competitions hosted at the farm, the couple uses between 60 and 90 cows weighing between 350 and 600 pounds.

It's essential, she says, that the herd animals have no previous exposure to horses.

"The best situation is they are fresh cattle and have never seen a horse before."

Minshall's prized cutting horse is Fraggie Rocks, which she rides in competition. Her daughter has also ridden the same horse in competition.

"You need special trainers for cutting horses," Minshall added.

"They teach the horse the proper way of training. The horse, if it makes its turn right, it will hold the cow.

"The trainer is teaching the horse to read where the cow is."

The couple usually competes in the U.S., entering about three events a year.

They are planning a competition at their Erin farm tentatively set for September 27-28.

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