

Getting back on the horse

A fall in the equestrian portion of the modern pentathlon offers a chance to show resolve **BY GEORGE SANDERLIN**

▶▶ ALL OF US HERE AT *GEEZERJOCK* compete in Masters sports to one degree or another. Bill Ferguson, the advertising sales director, plays rugby. Publisher Brian Reilly and editor Sean Callahan compete in triathlons. Editor at large Steve Boman is a sprinter. And I'm a modern pentathlete.

I'm the magazine's southern regional sales manager, and I've been competing in modern pentathlon since 2005. The sport actually consists of five Olympic sports – pistol shooting, epee fencing, swimming, equestrian show jumping and cross country running – which all take place in a single day.

So why do I get up at 5:30 a.m., fire 20 shots on a gun range, fence 20 to 30 bouts, swim 100 meters, climb on an unfamiliar horse and ride 450 meters over 15 3-foot-tall jumps, and then compete in a 2K cross country race? For me it is the challenge, uniqueness and variety of this sport.

Modern pentathlon was introduced at the 1912 Stockholm Olympic Games. General George S. Patton, then a lieutenant, competed for the United States. He placed fifth, ironically done in by a poor shooting score.

At the recent 2007 Canadian National Modern Pentathlon Championships, which were held in August in Calgary, Alberta, I competed in all five events for the first time. (Previously, I had only competed in the tetrathlon – everything except the equestrian).

The first three events went fairly routinely. The first event, the 10-meter air pistol, requires stress control and precise technique. I finished with an average score.

Fencing, my weakest event, is a “round robin” tournament where the first person to score a “touch” wins. The competition was fierce, and my timing was off. I felt like a pin cushion when it was done.

In the 100-meter freestyle swim, my objective was to relax and save a bit for the remaining events. I met that modest goal, although I was not happy with my time.

I have been training 2½ years for the equestrian portion of the pentathlon. In the equestrian, you draw for horses and have a warm-up period. Riding an unknown horse requires a mix of adaptability, self control (you need to trust the horse) and courage.

Being a fairly novice rider, I was fortunate to enlist Katie Schaaf, a riding instructor, as an on-site coach. Katie is an American who posted perfect scores in winning the ride part of the modern pentathlon both this year and last year.



SANDERLIN, ATOP PICASSO, JUMPS DURING THE EQUESTRIAN PORTION OF THE MODERN PENTATHLON.

PHOTO: LAURA PIPER

I got lucky by drawing Picasso, one of the top horses. He reminded me of the horses I ride in training. Picasso had good impulsion and a great sense of distance to the jump. I just needed to stay out of his way and trust him.

In the competition, we cleared the first two jumps. On the third jump, I was looking at the jump and not the approaching tight corner. Picasso reacted, “dumping” me to the inside. Fortunately, he veered outside, or it could have been a dangerous situation.

Picasso looked down and stared at me with a “What are you doing down there?” expression. Without pause, I remounted and finished the course within the allotted time. Yes, we dropped a couple of rails. However, I had mastered one of the most difficult challenges of my sporting career.

The final event, the cross country run, is my strongest event. However, this was the first time I had ever rode prior to the run. I felt the toll of the day catch up with me. I did manage to gut out the last 350 meters with my usual hard kick, which was good enough to capture the Masters men bronze medal for the U.S.

The whole event was a great experience. I was especially pleased with my first modern pentathlon equestrian competition.

I love what sports can teach you about life. If you fall you have to get back up on the horse. You can't wait for someone else to help you up. Otherwise, you may be waiting for a long, long time. **g**