

Rio Grande Renegades

Teach'n Old Dogs New Tricks



by Lobo Tom

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They say you can't teach an old dog new tricks. Not true, Pard. I'm living proof that if you find the right bunch of new friends, you can learn lots of new things...like how to get into Cowboy Action Shooting. After all, who doesn't like dressing up and playing cowboys and cowgirls like we did when we were kids?

Two years ago my wife and I decided to attend End of Trail, the weeklong event celebrating cowboy action shooting at Founders Ranch, a 480-acre spread 50-ish miles east of Albuquerque. The ranch is the headquarters of SASS (Single Action Shooting Society). Though it sounded like a fun outing, I had no idea this one day adventure would forever change me. No wonder cowboy action shooting has become the fastest growing shooting sport on the planet. After all, SASS has over 90,000 members worldwide.

Over the years, I have collected several guns and done some target shooting. But, I had no experience with cowboy action shooting, the folks who follow it, or the lifestyle it promotes. Well, End of Trail changed me. It was a day filled with new sounds, new sights and loads of friendship from people we'd never met.

We were mesmerized with the gun handling dexterity, speed and precision of some of the better shooters as they competed in various steel target stages using real ammo. We were amazed with the authentic Western clothing, the predominance of leather and of course, the guns. Above all, we noticed that these folks were having some serious fun. Wow, we thought, where had we been all these years?

Back home the memories from a day at End of Trail began to soak in, and I found myself nearly obsessed with my growing interest in cowboy action shooting. Seems like once you've experienced it, there's no turning back. You see, this old dog was already learning a few new tricks.

I haunted the internet for days to learn more about SASS, find appropriate cowboy guns, cowboy clothing, and cowboy action gun carts. I also began to study the rules of safe gun handling, and cowboy match department. Before long I found myself in my garage building a gun cart, no matter that I had no cowboy-ready guns, no duds and only a speck of knowledge about the sport.

Soon, my cart was ready, so I contacted "Jack Diamond," aka Doug Kunz, who has become my SASS mentor. Doug lives in Albuquerque, is a longtime cowboy shooter and an expert gunsmith who specializes in cowboy guns. He is also works part-time at Founders Ranch. Doug knows a lot.

After a few months Dog had "slicked up" a brace of three-screw Ruger Blackhawks, two period-correct lever action rifles, a double-barrel 12 gauge coach gun, and my 12 gauge pump shotgun. Meantime, and while I continued to study cowboy action shooting, and gather up some cowboy clothing. I also learned that getting ready for cowboy action shooting is as much a process as anything. Yikes, there is lots to do, I discovered.

Jack Diamond worked hard to teach me some basic cowboy action skills, and safe gun handling at a local range. He also convinced me to join the Rio Grande Renegades, a local SASS-affiliated club. When I visited several of their matches, I quickly found many Renegades willing to be encouraging and gracious with their advice. They were also nice folks to be around. In cowboy action shooting there's allot of talk about "...the spirit of the game." After all, it's a game, not rocket science.

Since I had run out of lame excuses, it was time to shoot my first match. However, my eye doctor interrupted the process by scheduling cataract surgery on both my eyes. After wearing glasses for nearly seven decades, I found myself learning to see all over again. After I healed and my eyes seemed adjusted to my new lenses, it was time to "send lead down-range."

My first six-stage match with the Renegades could best be described as a combination of humiliation, exhilaration, fun, and graphic confusion. However, it was the most excitement I've had in years. My shooting score was dreadful; I finished last among three-dozen participants, and made way, way too many mistakes. I also learned way more than my brain could process in a single day. Interestingly, every one of my posse members was helpful and patient with "...the greenhorn." They actually made this 74 year-old newcomer feel welcome.

So, if you're an old dog like me and you're up to learning new tricks, I encourage you to attend a cowboy action match. You'll be sorry if you don't. You'll likely get hooked. And, you'll have a Conestoga wagon full of good clean fun with some really nice Pard.

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