

Whoever invented jousting was a genius. In a nutshell, you've got a sport that consists of two burly armoured blokes on horses charging at each other full-tilt, trying to knock each other off of their mount with a big pointy stick before going at it for a while on foot. It's like someone found a checklist of things that would make for some kind of mythical "perfect" sport, presumably carelessly discarded by some drunken deity or other, and then went off and invented something that would satisfy all of the criteria.

So simple that anyone can understand it? Check. Even the most impressively clueless village idiot can muster the brain-cells to figure out what's going on when two people are trying to do each other a mischief. Hell, they could probably participate.

Must be an amazing spectacle? Check. If ever there were a sport that really truly deserved slow-motion replays, here it is.

Room for unfortunate mishaps? Check. It shouldn't require too much imagination to figure out the ways that this could all go wrong, even when the best attempts are made to keep it safe – let's face it, trying to make a sport that involves people hitting each other completely safe is like trying to make a swimming event be completely dry.

Timeless? Well, this is an interesting point. We shouldn't forget that jousting did take a rather long hiatus, but after a few hundred years of slumber this sleeping behemoth had a bit of an unexpected awakening. A few things have changed, mainly in terms of the equipment used by the participants (which we'll get onto in a little while), but also in regard to the fact that today's jousting is predominantly focused around "tilting," the part of the original medieval joust that involved charging with lances – the combat on foot that followed has largely been discarded.

I can think of a couple of reasons for jousting's sudden resurgence in popularity, although I daresay there are more. First up is the small matter of excitement. As mankind becomes more "advanced," for want of a better word, so the lifestyle of the average human-being becomes ever more mundane and sterile. People need some small semblance of danger in their lives, something to act as a bit of a thrill and get the adrenaline going, and when scientific progress tries its damndest to eradicate every risk and inconvenience from our existence then we search for something to replace these things with – a little escapism, via a sport from a time that was probably filled with more than enough "risk and inconvenience" for most people. Second is mankind's inexplicable need to invent new and wonderful things, and then misuse and abuse those things in various ingenious ways for greater entertainment. After all, what better use is there for really fast vehicles than trying to make people fall off of (or out of) them? And, having made such enormous strides in terms of preventing injury (and treating injury, just in case the prevention fails), wouldn't it be a sin not to put these things through some rigorous testing?

There must be more to it than the reasons listed above, but I'm not going to dwell on the matter any further. Popularity is unpredictable by nature – after all, certain games involving people punting spherical objects around prove more endearing than others, and I'm not sure whether the more popular ones are really "better" than the others in any way. Things just catch on through

blind luck.

The only drawback to jousting is the prohibitive cost of the equipment you need to do it, at least to a sufficient level that you wouldn't end up with some form of horrendous injury. In medieval times you needed a horse, a decent suit of armour, and a whole bunch of weapons (half of which were even designed to break, just to add further expense). This is one aspect of the sport that hasn't really changed much – even the cheapest ride nowadays will set you back a pretty penny, and skimping on protective gear is something that you probably *wouldn't* live to regret – although there is consolation to be taken from the idea that technological advancement inevitably leads to yesterday's state-of-the-art items becoming more affordable.

Since we're on the subject of gear, I will take this opportunity to say a little about the things that every modern jousting needs. There are three essential pieces of equipment: steed, lance and armour.

The steed is loosely defined as some means of transportation that can be straddled. The use of horses (or any other creature that can be ridden, for that matter) is strongly discouraged, and while there was a brief period of using land-based motorbikes as the sport began its resurgence, they are much less popular now; they serve as a decent alternative to other choices if you need to do things “on the cheap,” but limitations including lack of maneuverability and the need for a large, flat, solid surface upon which to drive make them undesirable.

These days, it is all about the aerial bikes. Bikes that float at a fixed height relative to the ground beneath them (hoverbikes) are the most popular choice of steed when it comes to official competition, but recent years have seen an explosion in the popularity of jousting with variable altitude bikes (airbikes) instead. The use of airbikes in sanctioned competition is currently prevented by two main factors; the first (and most obvious) is concern over the safety of riders falling from their bikes at a significant height, and the second is the complaint from purists that vertical mobility transforms the sport into something more akin to cat-and-mouse rather than true jousting.

The lance is a long weapon that needs to be sufficient in size to strike at the opponent while remaining seated on your steed. The modern lance is typically made of a lightweight metal, or something similarly durable yet manageable. Officially sanctioned lances are restricted in shape and size, and are also required to temporarily retract upon contact in order to avoid unseating the opponent (since that is deemed unsafe). Unofficial lances are much more varied in nature, being all kinds of different lengths, shapes and weights (basically, anything goes so long as you can carry it), and sometimes incorporating fun little extras such as an electrical discharge (essentially turning the lance into an oversized cattle-prod). These unofficial lances rarely retract since knocking the opponent from their steed is commonly the aim of the game.

Finally, the armour – a competitor's armour needs to protect them from both the opponent's lance and falling from their steed. Because injury is considered less likely in official competition (particularly when you consider the nature of the competitive lance, as described above), the armour is worn less for protection and more to assist with the judging of score, being fitted with electronic sensors to accurately determine when a successful hit has been landed upon the body.

Obviously, injury is a much greater concern in unofficial bouts, and therefore substantial head and body protection is strongly advised, *particularly* when using airbikes in which case some form of advanced reactive armour should be considered a bare minimum. Of course, people are predictably vain and sometimes there seems to be greater emphasis placed on looks and style rather than protection.

As you can see, there are some pretty big differences between the sport as practiced officially (whether by professionals, or in clubs or what have you) versus its unofficial counterpart. The selection of gear is radically different, with formal competitions typically seeing participants provided with identical equipment to ensure a true comparison of skill.

Official jousts are typically held in a controlled environment, ideally with some kind of padded floor in order to prevent injury in the case of accidental dismounts. Unofficial jousts can occur anywhere, although doing it in a random public area is obviously pretty likely to land you in trouble with the law – still, there is a lot to be said for the skill involved in jousting in a built-up environment, and the spectacle of man and machine darting around overhead while the public watch in awe and disbelief.

Something common between all types of the sport is the strong emphasis on the spirit of chivalry. Official matches have a series of pre- and post-match customs that must be followed, and any display of poor sportsmanship can see a deduction in points for the offender. Even in the unofficial version of the game, where matches may be provoked by bad blood between individuals and there may be high stakes involved, outright dirty play is a rarity (perhaps largely because cheating is likely to be met with significant hostility). There is also a nod to medieval hierarchy, with some successful jousters employing wannabes to act as squires, carrying their equipment and keeping an eye on it to make sure that no-one tries to tamper with it in any way.

I don't know whether the imaginary checklist would have had anything on it about a game being awesome enough to cause a war to be put on hold for its duration, but if the history books are anything to go by then it would still have been checked off. Whether or not this will happen again in the future, only time will tell. Somehow I wouldn't be that surprised.