

Loeffelbein, Robert L. *Knight Life: Jousting in the United States*. Lexington Park, Maryland: Golden Owl Publishers, 1977. Pp. ii, 96. Bibliography, notes, jousting sites, rules, records, pictures. \$4.95.

“Bob” Loeffelbein claims to have written well over 900 articles in 136 publications; he is also assistant dean of men and assistant professor of health, physical education and recreation for the University of Seven Seas, a ship-board college sailing around the world. Such an exotic background makes quite natural Dr. Loeffelbein’s fact-filled, fully-illustrated (53 photos) booklet on the 140 year history of ring tournament jousting competitions in the American South. With the notable exception of the 1936 *Ring Tournament in the United States* by Esther J. and Ruth W. Crooks, this is the only work devoted to tracing the sport’s history. The soft-covered booklet is unpretentious in its demands, and gives the reader a vivid narrative and descriptive look at a pseudo-medieval sport that was surprisingly popular in the South for much more than a hundred years, and still exists today in the District of Columbia, Maryland’s Eastern Shore and rural Northern Virginia.

For reasons that are not at all clear in this book, well-to-do and upper middle class white Southerners before the Civil War began these week-end tournaments in emulation of the European jousting tournaments that were so important from the twelfth century through the fourteenth century. Southerners of the last century transformed a serious militaristic, physically dangerous sport—one with political and religious overtones—into a rich social event filled with gaiety, romance, good food, and frequently, superb horsemanship and individual motor coordination. A large flat field of at least 160 yards is needed. Three jousting arches are planted firmly in the ground, 30 yards apart

and in a straight line . . . with 40 yards of starting room and 60 yards after the last arch for stopping the rider's horse. Metal rings, as provocatively small as a wedding band, are hung from the center of the arch, approximately level with a hard-riding "knight" carrying a wooden or metal lance. The young man (and sometimes young women in modern jousts) must cover the course in less than ten seconds, ask his horse to run as smooth as silk, and with the steadiest of hand spear all the rings with a six to seven foot lance, weighing between one and fifteen pounds.

Nineteenth century ring tournaments were richly ornamental social and athletic affairs, the riders taking the names of King Arthur, Sir Galahad, or tongue-in-cheek names such as Knight of the Fallen Garter. Many of the younger ladies, dressed in medieval garments, took the names Queen of Love and Beauty, the "Faerie Queene," and scores of idyllic rubrics straight out of Sir Walter Scott's works or Bulfinch's *Age of Chivalry*. Hundreds of people, including a background of black "folk" attended the festivities, good times, and the culminating cotillion ball. All this was in the "olden times" before the Civil War. These ring tournaments resumed in the late 1860's and author Loeffelbein refers to several score jousting affairs in Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia, Tennessee, Alabama, Florida, and even to pageants at the great Philadelphia Centennial celebrations of the American Republic in 1876. Hundreds of such tournaments took place during Reconstruction.

By far the majority of the text, the photographs and sketches deal with modern ring tournaments in the state of Maryland since 1947. Members of the Maryland Tournament Jousting Association proudly clustered around state senator, Henry J. Fowler, Sr. on June 1, 1968, as the unique sport was honored as "the only officially designated state sport in the United States." (p. 10). There was some good-natured kidding, and an editorialist in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* cracked that "a legal status conferred upon jousting is no more likely to turn us into Chevalier Bayards than the possession of an Italian motto makes us readers of Dante and Petrarch . . ." (p. 12). Careful, almost painful details of contemporary male and female champions in this Maryland parochial pageant-sport dominate the book—some of the 96 paragraph headings titled: "Jousting Humor"; "No Married Men"; "Black Jousters"; "Knighting Ceremony," five great champions, the rules of the games, and lastly, a useful bibliography.

There is no such thing as a "minor" sport. Jousting ring tournaments are important to a small clique in the states of Maryland and Virginia. For a very long time the sport had an enthusiastic following. Robert Loeffelbein rendered a service in vividly portraying the seriousness as well as the tomfoolery of an ancient European pageant brought to life in an antebellum South and

retained by a few believers. But the booklet has serious deficiencies for the discriminating reader and for serious students of sport history. It will have to be left for Dr. Loeffelbein at another time or to some other scholar to attempt a scientific analysis of Southern Ring Tournaments and to answer, if possible, questions such as:

1. What were the exact circumstances under which ring tournaments were imported into the United States in 1840?
2. What social and psychological factors prompted Southern plantation owners in the years before the Civil War to embrace a recreational sport that was nearly unknown in Europe for 500 years . . . and utterly foreign to anything American?
3. Why did “Yankee” sport enthusiasts before and after the war not only fail to accept the sport but regularly ridiculed the modern-day jousters?
4. What was the nature of the “Southern Mind” that revived in a very big way the ring tournament ritual during the period 1866 to 1875—the Reconstruction Period—and the South’s period of deepest economic depression?

Other important and difficult questions come to mind. It was never the author’s intent to address any of them. I’m glad that the book was written, however, because along with careful readings of the Crooks and Crooks history, several essays on ring tournaments plus a long, long “drink” of Southern history, the above questions and more might soon be addressed . . . and answered.

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