

What's the Score on Jousting in Renaissance England?

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Jousting was an aristocratic martial art that evolved from the Middle Ages throughout the Renaissance into the elite professional sport with sophisticated organization, rules, and scoring. Most scholars have viewed the later tournaments largely as Renaissance spectacles, overstuffed to the point of embalming with political, social, and dramatic implications. Sports historians, however, open up a fresh perspective in focussing on the actual game and its players instead of examining jousting in only a social context as the decadent show-boating of the once-warrior nobility. Combat skills of chivalry had been idealized and celebrated in romances and chronicles for centuries before the Renaissance in England. By the time of Henry VIII and the famous Field of Cloth of Gold Tournament in 1520, apprentice-knights were emulating any number of ideal and actual heroes in the arena called "the school of prowess." Excellence in the tiltyard represented one of the most highly prized goals of a chivalric education. No man-to-man contest could be more vivid in showing which athlete is the champion of the field. This paper studies jousting as a sporting event played by select nobility during the later period. Although tournaments with jousting were usually elaborate affairs connected with prestigious state functions of the English court, many elements of our modern spectator sports were present: challenges for prizes, professional eligibility, specific regulations, contact-sport equipment, officiating as well as scoring, even paying spectators. In discussing the particulars of several English tourneys, we examine the system of scoring through the use of box scores or "jousting cheques" as discovered in a few manuscripts.



One of the Conference's highlights was the boat cruise down the Mississippi.