

*A hard  
day's*

# Knight

Take your sword, grab your lance and prepare to do battle . . . that's if you can stay on your horse. Candia McKormack is a trainee knight for the day.

Photographs: by Mark Townsend of Eventz Photography and Knights of Middle England.

**A** SMALL GIRL sits uncomfortably astride a rather chunky, scruffy off-white pony. She's no more than five or six – the pony considerably older – their expressions say the same: 'hurry up and get this photo taken so that we can part company as soon as possible'.

Fast forward 30-something years. The same 'girl' is sitting on a proper, full-size mount, lance in hand, expression of poorly-concealed terror on her face.

What the hell was I thinking when I approached the editor asking if I could spend a day in the Warwickshire countryside playing at being a knight for the day? "It'll be fun," I said. "You must be mad," she said.

Well, having thrown down the gauntlet, I wasn't about to back down. I mean, would Sir Gawain have wussed out? Would Lancelot have said 'on second thoughts, I might fall off and bruise my bum'? No, they would not. Never mind the fact that I'm a middle-aged woman living in 21st-century comfort, having not sat on a horse since I was five.

I arrive at Warwick International

School of Riding, heart beating wildly; my fight or flight instincts kicking in very nicely indeed. Either side of the driveway are children – no older than toddlers really – doing quite extraordinary things on ponies: taking jumps with confidence, cantering with ease around the ménage. I'm undecided at this point as to whether this is a comforting sight or whether it merely highlights my own inadequacies. 'Flight' seems the

“As I hear the spectral voice of Sir Gawain urging me on, I am shamed into keeping schtum.”

sensible option right now...

I descend the stone steps into the authentically-decorated barn, to be greeted with warm smiles and hot coffee. Maybe I can do this after all. Glancing around the room at the other candidates I can see we're a mixed bag of sexes, sizes and ages. And, it turns out, abilities too. Hurrah and huzzah – things are looking up. I latch on to Beverley, who has been 'treated to the knights experience' by her husband as

a birthday present – she too has no riding experience. I note absence of said husband and question his motives.

The 'knights-cum-tutors' who are to put us through our paces are a ruggedly good-looking bunch (with one female who is equally good-looking, but perhaps less rugged) led by Karl Ude-Martinez, a professional polo player, TV presenter and actor. Known collectively as 'The Knights of Middle England', they have amassed years of experience and talent, and have an incredible ability to instil confidence in all.

We are treated to a performance in one of the ménages, now transformed into a jousting arena, by Alex riding a beautiful black mare called 'Star'. He illustrates with expert precision the art of riding at speed while collecting rings from the 'tilt' (the long pole in the middle of the arena which jousters ride along) and lancing a quintaine (a training device consisting of a central upright pole with a horizontal pole holding a shield on one end and weight on the other). I could happily watch this all day and not actually get on a horse myself, and consider ►

## WARWICKSHIRE DAY OUT



Candia McKormack prepares to do battle.



“ My inner bloke just wanted to cut straight to the screaming while swinging a sword round my head.”



mentioning this to one of the ‘knights’. But, as I hear the spectral voice of Sir Gawain urging me on, I am shamed into keeping schtum.

After Alex’s performance, we are shown to our mounts, and I am both delighted and, I think understandably, anxious to be led to Star. She is – as indeed are all the horses at the riding school – trained to work with riders of all skills and experience, but as the day goes on I get the distinct feeling that she is barely tolerating this complete novice on her back. Horses are incredibly perceptive, so I whisper in her ear that if she gets me through this day alive I’ll hand her back to Alex without suggesting canine chow to be the best use for her. From that point on, we have an ‘understanding’.

I am pleased to say that I took to the jousting experience better than I would have dared think possible, and even managed to pick up speed a little (though we’re talking trot more than gallop here). And, as for sword-

fighting, I’m sure I would have shone if only I could have got my head round the whole choreography thing. My inner bloke just wanted to cut straight to the screaming while swinging a sword round my head.

After spending a morning practising collecting rings from the tilt, skewering blocks on the ground from horseback, hitting the quintaine and beating each other silly with foam swords, we convene for a pub lunch to prepare ourselves for the afternoon’s tournament.

Now, this is where things get really scary.

Friends and family of trainee knights are invited to watch from the stands as we compete in several rounds displaying our newly-learnt skills. The audience was very kind - not a single pantomime-style boo or hiss was heard.

The highlight of the day has to be when we had the chance to joust against a real living, breathing human

being, in the form of the plucky, and possibly insane, Alex. One at a time, we were given full rein to ride ‘full tilt’ towards him, lance in hand, while he rode towards us with, well, absolutely nothing but a small shield in his hand. Seems fair to me.

After being ‘knighted’ by one of our tutors, we are led back, tired, grubby, slightly bruised, but actually rather ecstatic, to the medieval hall to be presented with our certificate of knighthood.

Well, it’s official now – just call me ‘Lady Candia’. Oh, and best watch your step in case I’ve a foam sword in my back pocket. ■

Warwick International School of Riding, Guys Cliffe, Coventry Road, Warwick, CV34 5YD, tel: 01926 400401, email: [info@knights-of-middle-england.co.uk](mailto:info@knights-of-middle-england.co.uk) or visit [www.knightsofmiddle-england.co.uk](http://www.knightsofmiddle-england.co.uk) The Medieval Jousting Experience Day costs £165 – gift vouchers are available.