

*Danny Lopez*  
*Extreme Sr Cowboy*  
**Duels It Out In Pomona**

Dan Lopez admits he'd heard about Craig Cameron's Extreme Cowboy Race and had even seen the number one rated RFD TV show a time or two. It was fun to watch, but adds that it had never occurred to him that he might one day become a seriously Extreme contender.

At 74, Dan is semi-retired but still trains and shows a few horses for long time clients. The past few years he has geared down his operation and enjoys some free time riding his favorite mount, a colorful 12 year old Appaloosa stallion known as Badger Lee. The pair



help friends out at cattle round ups and of course he wouldn't miss a spring branding with his friends and neighbors.

During the holiday season several of Dan's friends had stopped by and talked up Craig Cameron's Extreme Cowboy Race. They asked his opinion on how he felt about entering the fast paced event that was scheduled for a run during the upcoming Equine Affair in

Pomona, California. Several of his clients had asked that if he weren't interested in taking a shot at the title himself perhaps he'd consider training them.

Dan reflected on the idea for a short time and gave them the answer most had hoped for. He didn't feel he could honestly train someone to do something he'd never done himself so all bets were now on Dan. Family and friends alike reasoned, 'wouldn't it be something for that old Reinsman to show those youngsters how it's really done'.

Once Dan's entry had been accepted he was informed that there were a total of 32 qualifiers. The event would be run in two elimination rounds with 16 competitors per go. After the first go rounds only eleven would proceed to the finals.

Things were really starting to get exciting as the stands filled with a 2,500 seat capacity crowd. The fans just kept coming, pouring into the stadium, eating up all the available floor space. The crowds lined the building walls and stood three deep around the arena fences.

The noise level became a roar as entrants were announced to the enthusiast crowd. This proved to be a little more than some of the equine competitors could handle. The Marine color guards, who traditionally ride Mustangs, entered the arena front and center

accompanied by a rousing rendition of the Star Spangled Banner. Once the music ended the crowd erupted in cheers of wild abandon which proved to be a little more than those Marine mounts appreciated. The Mustangs reared and the Marines held fast, the competition was off to an Extreme start, exactly as promised.



As luck would have it Dan had drawn up a slot in the first elimination round. Up to this point none of the riders had been told what would be required nor were they given any instructions or information regarding the race course.

The first sixteen riders were called to enter the arena afoot. Only then did they receive the paperwork containing the race directives and informed that they had a mere thirty minutes to walk the course and prepare for their individual goes.

If a contestant had any hope of making it through the eliminations they had to cover the set course at top speed.

All obstacles have a maximum thirty second time limit before the rider is flagged onto the next challenge. According to Dan a few of those challenges were a little more notable than others.

There were the three, twelve foot high sand dunes. As Dan watched the other riders, he noted that many of the horses had some problems negotiating or outright refusing the dunes.

Dan admits he needn't worry as Badger Lee ran the first dune dead center, up and over he flew, but seemed a might surprised to find a second sand pile mere strides after hitting the backside of the first. He did a little belly shinny on the second dune but once he eyed the third he had it all figured out and blazed right on over the top.

The three jumps on the course gave Dan pause to reflect. They consisted of oil drums laid end to end in three separate rows. To the best of his recollection Dan was sure that Badger Lee had never been asked to jump a series of obstacles at any time during his illustrious cow horse career. But again the game little Appaloosa stallion never missed a stride.



Still covering ground at great speed they were next required to stoop very low from the saddle and stretch long to lift a tennis ball from the top of a very small cone, then quickly ride through obstacles and place the ball in a bucket. Sounds simple enough, however this maneuver required a great deal of agility as all of the riders had to stand on their tip toes in order to reach the bucket which had been placed high overhead on an arched gateway.

Next up turned out to be a real test for some, but dragging a wooden pallet loaded with two bales of hay was a real plus on Badger Lee's resume. The hitch was that a small cone had been precariously balanced atop the dueling bales. Too much speed could lose the cone which would cost you the points. According to Dan, Badger Lee had earned a reputation as a real bull dozer at the calf brandings but this night was going to take some roping finesse and a slower pace to drag the pallet without adding the extra weight of arena footing piling up at the nose.

After the dust had settled and the first elimination round had come to end, Dan and Badger Lee stood solidly in second place.

Charles Hilton, the official event photographer had commented that when he had seen Dan sitting atop his horse next to the in gate he'd thought that, being a man of advanced age he couldn't possibly be an Extreme competitor, probably sitting there to cheer on or lend support to a friend or relative.

By the end of the first round eliminations Charles had become a big fan of the senior cowboy from Ojai. In a very short time it became pretty apparent that he wasn't alone in that sentiment. Once Dan's second place standing was announced the crowd roared akin to an in your face freight train. Badger Lee radar-eared the thunderous noise, but stood steadfast as Dan smiled happily up at the crowd.

Finals night had been whittled down from 32 contestants to 11. Coming into the Saturday event, Dan knew that the race was about to get a lot tougher. Some incredibly challenging elements had been added, especially when you consider the speed that would be required to stay at or near the top in the standings.

As Craig Cameron, microphone in hand headed toward the arena gate he announced to the crowd that Dan and Badger Lee would be next to run. Dan and the stallion made their way to the entry gate seemingly as cool as if they were about to ride out to pick up the afternoon mail. Dan flashes a big smiles down at the announcer, who returned the same in kind and asks, "Dan you nervous?" It was classic Lopez style as he shakes and rattles his fringe cut, chink covered legs. In a voice two octaves higher than his normal range says 'Noooo'. The crowd laughs and cheers, there's no doubt who the crowd favors this night.

When Dan had received his final round instructions he made a few decisions he knew would drop his position in the finals standings. Many of the elements were a variation of



the elimination round with the exception of a few potentially good old boy killers.

He conferred with his number one fan, wife Virginia and she agreed the tennis ball drop requiring riders to stand on the saddle in order to reach the

bucket placed at the highest point of an arched gateway was a little more risk that they thought prudent; after all they reasoned old bones just don't bounce like they used to. Dan figured he'd do his best and make up the lost time during the last half of the race.

Shiny as brass they raced on to the steel barrel where they had to pick up a five gallon bucket of water (approximately forty pounds) then carry it one handed while riding through a horse twitching, cowboy curtain. Once through, Dan had to drop the reins and

two handed the bucket in order to empty it into an empty container sitting atop another steel drum. Much of the water splashed out which soaked he and his horse. It tested their resolve as the noise of the sloshing water was magnified by the echo effect of the hollow steel drum. This test had become a booger fest for many of the uninitiated who had lost precious time, but Dan and Badger Lee were back in the race.



Next up was what Dan knew could be the real difference between he and his much younger competitors. Bareback! He hadn't ridden bareback in more than sixty years. He pulled the saddle from Badger Lee and led him up to the straw bale that had been designated the official mounting block. He tried to get the stallion to pull up

parallel to the bale but was losing precious seconds in the trying. He had managed to get the stallions shoulder lined up so made a great leap of faith and again the stallion stood his ground and waited for Dan to pull himself up. In the end bareback proved to be a little trickier taking jumps and sand dunes at a high rate of speed.

With the final obstacle behind him, the race instructions called for him to dismount and lead his horse the last number of yards to the finish line in the center of the arena. He ran for the finish pulling Badger Lee along with him, at about half the distance to the line Dan jumped in the air and clicked his heels to the left, ran a few strides further and again made a great leap to the right and with an audible click of his heels had the crowd on their feet as they again showered Dan with waves of roaring cheers and admiration for a spirited, great old cowboy.

When the last ride was run and the final point tally was known, Dan held eighth place. Craig Cameron shook Dan's hand, congratulated him and told the crowd that had the race continued under tack he had no doubts that the competition would have had a much different ending. The crowd shared his sentiment as they cheered their approval and awarded Dan the only standing ovation given to a competitor during the entire event.

After the awards ceremony as Dan was leaving the arena he was literally mobbed by fans as they packed in around he and Badger Lee. They wanted to pet the 'great horse' and praise Dan on their awesome partnership. The crowd became so deep that Dan's wife Virginia had to have assistance from the ring crew just to reach her husbands side. As Virginia stood along side her champs she smiled broadly as the crowd repeatedly told her how awesome her boys were.

When all was said and done photographer Charles Hilton probably summed it up best for many, “Dan showed up in that bright red shirt that posted notice that he was somebody that intended to get noticed. Watching Dan made people realize that old is just a state of mind, he’s absolute proof that you can live the dream you thought lost to time or circumstance, all it takes is a belief in yourself and a little try.”

What Dan had won was a far greater achievement than a bit of satin or a fleeting title. He made people forget their troubles for a time. He won the hearts and minds of many during those two nights of competition and for some, he’d put the sparkle back on a long lost dream.

*Dan Lopez is a living legend in the Appaloosa World. Known as a fiercely, friendly competitor by those who’ve competed with Dan over his many years in the show horse world. He’s known by the top competitors from the humblest of shows in the high desert of California all the way to the Calgary Stampede. Over his long career in the show horse world he has laid claim to 19 Appaloosa World Show championships, 11 Appaloosa National Champion titles. In 1994 Dan was named Trainer of the Year by the ApHC and in 2003 was inducted to the Appaloosa Horse Club Hall of Fame and the California State Appaloosa Association, Cal-Western Appaloosa Show Horse Association Hall of Fame. Dan and Virginia have been married for more than 35 years and reside in Ojai, California*

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