



# A Partnership In Patience

Anyone who's travelled the mounted shooting circuit is familiar with Jim Hanson and Andra Olson. The owners of AJ Horses are two of the most recognized competitors in the game. As high profile spokespersons for Colt Firearms, the pair have hauled coast-to-coast spreading the word for the world's most iconic firearm brand, while at the same time teaching, sharing and spreading enthusiasm for a sport they truly love.





*Above: Jim and Okie at the 2013 CMSA National Championship in Tunica, Mississippi.  
Opposite page: Andra competes on Okie at the 2012 CMSA World Championship in Amarillo, Texas.*

**A**sk Andra Olson and Jim Hanson about their training philosophy, and you'll get two words—relationships and patience. And the two concepts work hand-in-hand.

It's certainly worked for them. AJ Horses is one of the most successful partnerships in the history of mounted shooting, one that itself is based on a strong relationship and a great deal of patience.

#### **A Passion For Horses and Guns**

Things got rolling in 1998, when both Jim and Andra began competing in mounted shooting. They had a lot of success, individually and collectively. They together hold several CMSA World Champion Team honors, Andra has three CMSA World Champion titles, and five National Titles along with several other top championship wins. Jim also has several World and National titles, including the 2012 CMSA Western Championship Overall title.

But they believed that they had more to offer the sport. While they didn't live in the same area—Jim was in South Dakota, Andra in Minnesota—they had similar ideas and

approaches. And when they got together at matches, they compared notes and formulated plans. So by 2000, they had their common goals in the works.

That doesn't mean it was easy getting to that point. Andra says, "We learned the hard way ourselves, because when we started there was nothing in the sport to give you pointers. Everything was new. In fact most of the rules weren't even established yet. So once we went through it, we decided to share what we'd learned so others wouldn't have to go through the same trial and error process."

Jim—a lifelong professional horseman—says it came down to one thing: "We knew we could help people in the sport, especially in becoming better horsemen."

The first step was putting together a video on mounted shooting. It was a winner. And the AJ Horses brand soon expanded to training riders, more videos, clinics, creating and distributing a variety of products, and more. As their experience and renown grew—both in and out of the arena—Jim and Andra took on the high profile job of representing Colt Firearms as national spokespersons.

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#### **The Process**

One of the really interesting facets of the AJ Horses program is that it's done in two locations. Jim Hanson's ranch at Sturgis, SD, is the starting point where the new horses are started and worked toward the sport. The place butts up to the Black Hills National Forest, which adds 150,000 acres for intense training. Andra's spread, about 40 miles from Minneapolis-St. Paul, features the arena and round pen that help finish the process (and bring the riders into the mix as well).

For the most part, Jim and Andra work their own animals, most of which will later be sold to mounted shooters. And picking the horses is a key to success.

Andra says, "It's in their temperament, it's in their mind-frame. It's in the way they handle themselves. Before we purchase a prospect we go through a screening process. We ask the previous owner several questions to learn as much as we can about the horse, their personality traits, their experiences and background. Then we'll ask them to ride the horse and we'll watch how the horse moves, their

athletic ability, and their agility. But there's also something... when you've trained horses for a long time, you can see something in their eye, a kind of connection that you can read."

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Very few horses meet those standards.

But those that do get the full AJ Horses treatment. It's a 10-step process, based on Jim's lifetime of knowledge and experience as a cowboy, a trainer and a rider. It's predicated on building a relationship between the horse and trainer, one built on trust and understanding.

And it's also a broad-based program, one that gives the horse a strong foundation for various competitions. As Jim says, "The training we do is appropriate for any discipline the person might want the horse for."

#### **Slow Down, You Move Too Fast**

Jim Hanson is the first to admit that he had to relearn training practices. Growing up on a ranch, time was at a premium. You had to break the horse fast so that it could go to work.





*Above: Jim and Andra get work done on the road, managing the AJ Horses operation from a 50-foot living quarter trailer. Opposite page: Jim Hanson on the road, Cave Creek, Arizona, 2013.*



But once he made the change, he was pleasantly surprised: “It’s a lot easier process. It might take longer, but it’s a lot easier for everybody. Instead of telling the horse to do something because I say so, the training aspect is showing them what you want and then getting them to do it.”

Andra adds, “It’s just like teaching a child—some learn faster than others. And you need to be patient to teach them.”

For that reason, they don’t estimate how long it will take to finish a horse—it varies from animal to animal.

**Relationship: Horse and Rider**

One of the final steps—matching the rider with an appropriate horse. Andra says it’s not always easy: “A lot of people come in looking for color and size. The first thing we do is tell them that you can’t buy color and size. If you’re lucky, it comes together. But what you need to do is find a match. Can you work well together? Can you accept each other?”

It’s a relationship thing. AJ Horses emphasizes education and developing the connection between horse and rider. They take pride in teaching the rider horsemanship skills

to gain trust and confidence in themselves and their horse. It’s a partnership that will stand the test of time, allowing both horse and rider to grow and develop together in the sport.

Maybe not so coincidentally, the AJ Horses partnership fits that same mold—a great fit between two well-matched horsemen who have learned and grown in mounted shooting, much to the benefit of the sport itself.

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**Safety First**

Jim and Andra have always placed safety and health concerns for rider and horse at the top of their agenda. As inventors and manufacturers of Super Soft Earplugs for horses, the team stresses the importance of hearing protection in every aspect of their horse training and competition activities. They also take this mission further with rider hearing protection and have developed a relationship with SportEar, manufacturers of serious hearing enhancement and protection for the rider and outdoors enthusiast.

Jim and Andra have recently begun to work with sport eyewear manufacturer, Pilla, to develop eye protection for the mounted shooting competitor.



*Left: Western Shooting Horse Magazine publisher, Ken Amorosano with Andra and Jim in Las Vegas at the SHOT Show, where they promoted mounted shooting to the firearms industry as part of the Colt exhibition display. Right: Andra Olson in Cave Creek, Arizona, 2013.*

### Still Growing Strong

In the past several years, Jim and Andra have taken their Colt responsibilities beyond the mounted shooting arena to other events and venues. One of their roles is to convey the iconic Colt brand to a broader equine and western lifestyle audience and the pair has become familiar fixtures in Las Vegas during the annual Wrangler National Finals Rodeo. From their exhibitor booth at the Las Vegas Convention Center, the Colt brand is exposed to tens of thousands of rodeo fans and equine enthusiasts who get to hold everything from a Colt Single Action Army revolver to many of company's semi-automation pistols and rifles.

"It's wonderful when a parent brings their child over and explains what the iconic Colt brand meant to them growing up," says Andra. "It's a great feeling to know that it just takes one little spark to remind people of our company's impressive American legacy."

Jim and Andra also play a role in the development of products for the sport. In the competition arena, Jim and Andra are in partnership with Cactus Saddlery where they have developed a line of mounted shooting saddles, tack and gun holsters. The relationship has broadened the appeal of Cactus in the mounted shooting community

and the national brand has exposed the sport to many in the other field in which Cactus excels.

Perhaps no other collaboration of individuals had more impact or influenced the growth of the sport of mounted shooting than Jim and Andra's AJ Horses. The pair is behind the most successful training video series ever created, have developed competition products used industry-wide and have brought responsible firearms ownership front and center to thousands as spokespersons for Colt.

They eagerly do this while traveling from coast to coast with their huge Colt decaled trailer, teaching students techniques in horsemanship and mounted shooting in venues for the CMSA, MSA, CSA and many other organizations.

### They Won't Slow Down

Jim and Andra just put the final touches on a book that covers their techniques in horsemanship with an in-depth section on mounted shooting. The pair is also gearing up for the 10-day Colt exhibition trek to the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas where they will continue to extoll the virtues of responsible gun ownership, horsemanship and the sport of mounted shooting.

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