

Ring Tournaments ^[1]

Ring Tournaments

by Louis P. Towles, 2006

Ring tournaments were relics of the medieval sport of jousting, dating from the eleventh until the fifteenth century. Rather than trying to knock another rider down, as in jousting, a ring tournament participant negotiated a course ranging between 80 and 125 feet long on horseback, attempting to spear a series of small (1/2- to 2-inch) rings suspended overhead using an 8½-foot lance. This sport spread from France to England and to the American colonies. Participants often dressed in colorful medieval garb, assumed titles, and presumed to honor certain ladies. Judges observed the contest and declared as victor the one who took the greatest number of rings. Chivalry, honor, and the virtues of womanhood were the consistent themes. At a tournament held at Bellevue Plantation in [Beaufort County](#) ^[2] on 4 Jan. 1867, men were implored to be courteous, amiable, and polite, while maintaining their personal honor and self-respect and recognizing the principles of "a sound, moral, and religious government in all the secular interests of the world."



Illustration of a Ring Tournament from Harper's New Monthly Magazine, 1875. Image from Cornell University Library. ^[3]

The earliest ring tournament noted in North Carolina was held at Shocco Springs on 15 Sept. 1857. The pageantry was contagious, and several other tournaments followed in various towns. Following the hiatus occasioned by the [Civil War](#) ^[4], a schedule of tournaments at [Wilmington](#) ^[5] on 1 Feb. 1866 drew large gatherings. On 1 Jan. 1867 nearly 3,000 people—including former governors [Zebulon B. Vance](#) ^[6] and [Thomas Bragg](#) ^[7], and Gen. [Robert F. Hoke](#) ^[8] as speaker—attended tournaments on the banks of the [Neuse River](#) ^[9] at New Bern with several inches of snow on the ground. The popularity of ring tournaments continued unabated into the next decade. In February 1867 a modified version for children, described as "chivalry in pantelets," was staged. Of even more significance was the organization in early 1871 of the Wilmington Tournament Association by the young black men of the city and the ensuing parade and successful tilt on 1 May.

Interest in the sport dwindled after 1876, especially in the towns of Wilmington and New Bern, where there was more interest in the social aspects of the tournaments. In New Bern on 1 Jan. 1895, only the Queen of Love and her court, not the tilt, merited the attention of the local press.

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