

It's Good to be King

Nobody slings it better than cow chip throwing champion James Pratt.

By Roy Deering

There are no fan clubs, no big-time endorsement deals and no million-dollar salaries. The crowds are relatively small and the media coverage minimal, but in the high stakes arena of World Championship Cow Chip Throwing, hometown hero James Pratt is the undisputed king.

Chief of the Beaver, Oklahoma Fire Department by day, Pratt is the five-time defending World Cow Chip Throwing champion. To his credit, he has held eight titles since 1996. He will defend his crown and shoot for six straight titles during the 40th annual tournament this month in Beaver.

When it comes to throwing around pasture cookies, there's no name more recognizable than Pratt's. One international magazine labeled him the "Tiger Woods of Cow Chip Throwing."

In addition to his eight titles at the Beaver event, Pratt also picked up the 2005 Nebraska state title, and knows he'll have a target on his back at this year's toss.

"It's lonely at the top," Pratt jokes. "My wife said I've been throwing it around pretty good for years, so it only makes sense that now I'm officially the five time defending world champion.

"When you're the top dog, everyone wants to beat you, and that's

Beaver resident James Pratt will compete for his ninth World Cow Chip Throwing championship at this year's contest.

how it should be, I guess. So far, though, none of them have been able to step up and do it.”

Originally from south Texas, Pratt moved to Beaver in 1985 in search of employment. He became involved in helping run the annual cow chip toss through his work with the city’s fire department, and half-heartedly



▲ Pratt slung his way to a fifth straight championship at last year’s World Cow Chip Throwing contest.

decided to enter.

“I guess that’s when all this started, and now the world’s at my feet,” he says. “I entered for about five years and placed every time, but never won until 1996. Since then, it’s been the high life with all this attention and, to be honest, it’s good to be the king,” he says.

If Pratt is the king, high school counselor Dana Martin of Guymon has to be the queen. This year she will gun for her 10th overall title and fourth in a row. Had it not been for a loss in the 2005 contest, Martin would be

throwing for her seventh straight trophy this year. Ironically, it was Pratt’s daughter, Terri, who defeated Martin in 2005.

Martin, whose first world title came in 1993, threw the discus in high school and is the current cow chip toss world record holder for women. Her 146 feet, six inch throw has stood for several years, but she hopes to someday surpass the 150-foot mark. Like Pratt, Martin views her world champion title with a lot of humor.

“You can’t take it seriously,” she says. “After all, when you think about it, we’re just out in the pasture throwing around pieces of dried cow manure like Oklahoma kids have done for a hundred years. It’s not dignified and it’s sort of gross, but it’s a lot of fun.”

Although they’ve been asked hundreds of times, Pratt and Martin both insist they do not practice. The two also agree that picking the right chip is the single most important part of having a successful throw.

“You want to make sure you don’t get a wet one, for several reasons,” Pratt says. “First, it’s sort of messy. Also, the wet ones don’t go very far.”

Martin says winning is all about the chip.

“James and I laugh sometimes when we’re going through the pile of chips looking for one be-

cause there will be a dozen people right beside us, watching for the one we’re going to choose. They think we have some kind of secret,” she says. “It’s not a secret at all. We tell people all the time that we look for one that’s cured real good, not too big and not too small.”

The annual Cimarron Territory Celebration has been held for many years in the Oklahoma Panhandle, but it wasn’t until 1970 that community leaders touched on the rather quirky idea of having a tournament to see who could toss dried cow manure the farthest. Since its inception, the World Cow Chip Throwing Contest has drawn contestants from across the country, as well as

media coverage from around the world.

Beaver Chamber of Commerce officials have shipped cow chips all over the country – even sending a “sample” to the National Archives of France at the request of one government official. “Cow Chip” tee shirts can be seen all across America. Visitors to the contest have come from as far away as Australia, West Germany, Brazil and Central America.

Standing 6’4” tall, Pratt is a large man. He wasn’t much of an athlete growing up, but in the high profile sport of cow chip throwing, he’s a legend. His strong, overhand toss has sent many a challenger home with a broken heart, and has elevated Pratt to the status of first man to toss a chip more than 200 feet in competition.

“The official world record is 185 feet, five inches,” Pratt says. “I did get one throw that went just a hair over 200 feet, but because of the wind that day, it didn’t officially count. I’m still looking to get the world record, and I want to get a 200-foot throw that counts.

“I’ve heard just about every joke on malarkey you can imagine,” Pratt says. “I’ve been on national television and every year I do about 15 to 20 interviews, so I guess you could honestly say cow dung made me famous.”

Martin has had her moments of fame as well, thanks to her prowess with bovine droppings. In 2001, she was scheduled to appear on a national television news program out of New York City, but her appearance was bumped because of the death of the Pope.

“You think you’ve reached the pinnacle of success and then something like that happens to remind you you’re not as important as you thought,” she laughs. “I said that day poop lost out to the Pope.”

Pratt knows his days as Cow Chip King won’t last forever, but even at 51 he’s not considering retirement from active competition.

“If one of these young bucks thinks he can beat me, let him come,” challenges Pratt. “I’ve got two boys that think they might beat me. All I can say is I’m never going to let anyone win. They’re going to have to knock me off fair and square with a chip in their hand.”

Martin, just 39, said she might “retire” from her cow chip career if she wins her 10th title this year.

“It’s been a fun ride, and I’m not certain when I’ll hang up my chips and go out to pasture,” she laughs. “But I know there will come a time when I won’t be the Cow Chip Queen anymore, and this high profile celebrity life will be in the past.

“But that’s okay,” she continues. “It’s been a wild ride and I can always sit around and talk about the glory days when I could toss it, like nobody’s business.” ■