

'Hunger Games' helps build target audience

Popular movie raises popularity of archery — especially among girls, women

March 29, 2012 | By Andy Grimm, Chicago Tribune reporter

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When the Archery Bow Range opened two years ago in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood, the owners expected a small stream of regulars, bow hunters and target shooters — the mostly male crowd that has defined the sport's fan base since the days of 1930s film star Errol Flynn.

But Hollywood has rediscovered the bow and arrow, and the target audience has shifted and grown. Archery may not have had much of a coolness factor when it was just a staple of summer camps and gym classes, but now it may have something better: a Katniss factor.

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Mirroring a national boom, introductory archery classes have been packed as the buzz for "The Hunger Games" and its bow-toting heroine, Katniss Everdeen, has grown. This weekend, as "Hunger Games" fans spent \$155 million at theaters, classes at the range were filled, mostly with girls and women hoping to channel their inner Katniss, said instructor Eva Yam.

"The last couple of weeks have been crazy, especially this last weekend," said Yam, who read "The Hunger Games" trilogy last year, hoping to keep up on story references from her new students.

"(The crowds) were definitely all 'Hunger Games'-related. We had a group of 20-something women who came in for a birthday party, who were going to the movie afterward. One of them had a T-shirt that said 'Team Katniss.'"

At an introductory class Tuesday night, so many newbie archers showed up that they had to rotate to the shooting range in three groups of six. All three instructors were female, as were more than half the participants — as were the shooters in an archery league across the hall.

The appeal of "The Hunger Games" to young and not-so-young adults was strongly in evidence. The periodic breaks between rounds of shooting gave 12-year-old Isla Herrera, of Skokie, time to thumb through her copy of "Catching Fire," the second book in "The Hunger Games" trilogy.

"In the movie (Katniss) seemed softer," Isla said "I liked her better in the book."

A trip to the range seemed like an ideal date for Victoria Kim, 29, who jumped at the invitation from Eric Seto, 30.

When Seto asked, "I was like, 'I am so down to go to archery,'" admitted Kim, who saw the movie during its opening weekend. "Yes, Katniss was my inspiration."

Archery, which has struggled to find a niche in popular culture roughly since the invention of firearms, is enjoying a rare moment in the spotlight.

In the past year, the Archery Trade Association has noted a 20 percent increase in equipment sales. Visits to USA Archery's website jumped 30 percent in January and February, and the youth divisions at sanctioned events are now the largest portion of the sport, spokeswoman Teresa Iaconi said.

"I think the kids now have heroes in the sport," Iaconi said. "Now you've got Katniss with her bow, and she's badass. We have a lot of kids getting into the sport, and a lot of them are saying it's because of 'Hunger Games.'"

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Iaconi notes that archery's profile also has gotten a boost from several recent blockbusters: Orlando Bloom dispatched many a monster with bow and arrow as the elf Legolas in "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy; and "Avatar," the 2009 release that is the all-time box-office champion, featured blue-skinned, bow-wielding denizens of the planet Pandora.

This summer's slate of releases also includes "The Avengers," with wisecracking superhero archer Hawkeye, and "Brave," a Disney-Pixar production featuring willful heroine Princess Merida, who might give Katniss a run for her money in both feminine moxie and sharpshooting.

USA Archery is hoping to make stars out of real-life archers in August, when the 2012 Summer Olympics in London will feature favorite Brady Ellison, the world's No. 1 men's archer, and Khatuna Lorig, a Team USA member who coached Katniss herself, "Hunger Games" star Jennifer Lawrence.

"Brady Ellison is a young, cool-looking guy. I think he'll be good for the sport," Iaconi said. "It's not an overnight thing, but I think in general (the movies) are making archery look cool."

Iaconi is hoping that a few gold medals will get kids and the media interested in a version of archery in which — unlike in "The Hunger Games" — competitors don't shoot their arrows at each other. Incidentally, archery is a low-injury sport. Rule No. 1 at Archery Bow Range is "Don't get shot." Rule No. 2 is "Don't shoot anyone."

"The Hunger Games" phenomenon has coincided with major turnover and reorganization at USA Archery after a disappointing finish in the 2004 Olympics. Denise Parker came aboard as CEO in 2009, and the group has renewed its focus on youth development.

Whatever the reason, the archery boom is real, said Terry Pryor, whose Archery Custom Shop has operated an indoor shooting range in Forest Park since 1948.

"I have never seen anything like it," Pryor said. "There was a little something in the 1980s, when 'Rambo' was out. But that was all young men coming in."

Over the past two years — the first "Hunger Games" book was published in 2008 — Pryor has seen an influx of students, many of them girls. Still, Pryor wasn't aware of "The Hunger Games" until he heard one of his grade-school students talking about the movie.

"I'm going to read the books now for sure," he said with a chuckle. "I'm doing 15 to 20 private lessons a week now, mostly kids. Two years ago, I was doing, maybe one or two (lessons), and it was men."

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