



# SERA NEWSLETTER

SOUTHEAST ENDURANCE RIDERS ASSOCIATION

## Summer in SERA country!

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1st 100 miler by Sara  
Borkosky



### Photos from Summer Slam

by Jill Hough [houghj@comcast.net](mailto:houghj@comcast.net)



## President's Message

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### Newsletter editor-

Nancy Sluys

### Taking care of our athletes

Here we are mid season....I hope most of you are having a grand time of it and watching your equine athletes perform with aplomb. Sometimes, though, things that can go wrong do go wrong. This spring and summer there have been some unusual events in the endurance family. Some of you have battled equine tick borne disease. Some of you have been accosted by Potomac Horse Fever. Some of you have witnessed horse train wrecks that have caused soft tissue damage. Some have horses with ligament and tendon tears that require rest and treatment. How are we to make peace with these disappointing curve balls? Great dilemma.

I think at the end of the day there are some things to remind ourselves. We ask our athletes to perform at the top of their game. They give their best to us and often don't let us know they are in trouble til they are in real trouble. We can watch them carefully and see what we see as soon as we can. We can pledge to give them anything in our power and resources to give to address what is wrong. And then we can remind ourselves that just like in the human world, equine athletes aren't machines but living, breathing mammals who even with enormous talent experience the downsides of life. We can take a deep breath, feel gratitude for all they do for us, and carry on.

Here's to believing in our athletes.

Happy trails....

Sudi



## EDITORS LETTER

Hi Folks, hope you are having a great season!! It's been a challenging time for me as far as rides go. Between last year and this year I have had more than my share of pulls for a variety of reasons. I usually pride myself in completing safely on my horses and the fact that the number of pulls I've had in the last 1 1/2 years just about equals half of all my pulls in over 4000 miles gives me cause for concern. Looking back on what has been happening I realize that some were just plain bad luck but some I may have had some control over.



photo by Becky Pearman

Last year I was caught up in a personal issue that was distracting my attention off my horses. I was riding for pure therapy and going straight down the trail was my medicine. I realize now that I may have missed some signs that my horse, Zanie, was not 100% comfortable. After her first and second pulls (JDs in 11/15 and Leatherwood 3/16) for a left front lameness I took her to the vet upon returning home both times, only to have her trot sound. In training she appeared sound but went lame at a ride. I had a complete work up done after the third pull at Biltmore and discovered that she is showing some wear and tear and had some inflammation in her joints that was causing the problem. It made sense, we had had a big year and in fact she has been going strong for quite a while now and could probably use a good break. She is very stoic and businesslike so it takes careful attention to know when something is bothering her. I did not have my mind on my job and have learned something by it.

Another pull on Able at the Vermont 100 last year was due to being overtime at a vet check. Another example of not having my mind totally on my job.

At On the Edge in Florida this winter a pacing mistake cost my young horse Snap his first 50 as I misjudged how fast we were going on the easy terrain. Slow gut sounds worried me and the vet at the second hold and we called it a day. He did recover on his own a short while after getting pulled but another lesson was learned.

As demanding as our sport is, paying attention is paramount. Without attention we miss things. I will be sure to keep this in the forefront of my mind in the future!

Happy trails, Nancy Sluys

**Mark Your Calendars!!!!**  
**January 13-15, 2017**  
**SERA Convention at**  
**Amicalola Falls Lodge**  
**Lots of great speakers and**  
**events to be announced!**

In honor of Garrie Bates, who passed away earlier this year, the Iron Mountain Jubilee Endurance Ride and the Virginia Highlands Competitive Trail Ride (sanctioned by NATRC) will be dedicated to her memory. Please bring a story to share! For more information about both rides go to the web site

<http://www.ironmountainjubilee.com>

# Endurance Riders Make a Strong Showing at the National Equestrian Trails Conference

by Nancy Sluys

The National Equestrian Trails Conference was held in Raleigh, North Carolina on July 8-10, 2016 and SERA was there with an informational booth.

Speakers included members of the USDA Forest Service, Equestrian Land Conservation Resource, Back Country Horsemen of America, Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards, International Mountain Biking Association as well as other trail advocacy groups and land management agencies.



**Endurance riding trail advocates in front of the SERA booth at the National Equestrian Trails Conference**

The discussions carried many common threads such as the transition to multi use trails, trail system management, the lack of funding and manpower for trail maintenance and new trail construction, the challenges our land managers face in trail system management, managing user conflicts, maintenance backlogs, and what, as trail users, we can do to help. More than anything else the message is that if you use trails, and we certainly do, then you need to contribute in some way to ensure that trails stay maintained and open to our use.

What can you do to help? Participate in a volunteer organization such as the Back Country Horsemen of America or start one if there isn't one in your area. Become involved and knowledgeable on trail issues in your area and nationally. Offer solutions to trail problems instead of complaining to your land managers, attend an AERC Trail Master Class or a trails conference. If you do trail work, don't keep it a secret, log your hours with your land manager or volunteer group. Volunteer hours translate into dollars when land managers are seeking federal funds.

As the focus of public lands shifts more towards recreation it is important for our user group to be heard and counted. Horse people are generally solitary folks and many don't give trail issues a second thought, but we need to band together to make sure trails stay open to horse use. Other groups such as mountain bikers and hikers have strong unified voices and are getting things done on the ground and in Washington DC. We need to take it upon ourselves to become informed and active in trail issues and not take it for granted that equestrian trails will always be there. It will not happen without strong organization! Groups such as AERC and SERA are doing their part, so please join in the work and support these efforts. Donate your time and or dollars to help these groups succeed in expanding our trail opportunities!

The one thing that became painfully clear to me, as I recognized many people from the last trails conference I attended years ago, is that there are not many new people entering this arena and we need that to be successful. The pool of trail activists is small and getting old. Please consider becoming active at least on a local level but also on a regional and national level. If we don't then we risk an ever decreasing trail inventory open to horse use and as endurance riders this is an important issue.

For more information on trails and trails issues here are a few links for you to peruse:

<http://www.bcha.org> - Back Country Horsemen of America

<http://www.elcr.org> - Equine Land Conservation Resource

<http://www.americantrails.org> - American Trails

<https://www.nationalforests.org> - National Forest Foundation

<http://www.etaca.info> - Equestrian Trails and Conservation Awareness

<http://www.nationalequestriantrailscoalition.com> - National Equestrian Trails Coalition

<https://www.lnt.org> - Leave No Trace

<http://www.ustrailride.org> - United States Trail Ride

<https://www.imba.com> - International Mountain Bike Association

<http://appalachiantrail.org> - Appalachian Trail Conservancy

<https://www.trailmeister.com> - Trail Meister

## **BILTMORE ENDURANCE CHALLENGE!** by Nancy Sluys

The Biltmore Endurance Challenge is always filled with excitement and intrigue and this year was no exception. Biltmore is beautiful but it is also deceptively difficult. The hills or footing are not extreme but they add up throughout the day, especially on the longer distances, and can be easily underestimated as you get caught up in the beauty of the estate making this one of the more challenging rides in the region.

Ride Managers Cheryl and Stagg Newman continued the new tradition of multi-day rides with 25, 30, 50, 55, 75 and 100 distances throughout the two days of competition. The weather cooperated this year with beautiful sunny days and moderate temperatures. Riders from all over the world participated in FEI and open divisions to make this a true international event.

Meg Sleeper won first and BC in the 100 mile division riding her home bred Syrocco Rabia in 12:32 besting a field of 30 riders. The following are winners in their divisions: 25- Susan Kain on MNX Shaidinn Tyib (Tyler)(BC); 30- Mallory Kapps on Savannaa Night, BC was won by Amazing Kon ridden by Jamie Wedel; 50- David Augustine on Syrocco Rimbaud (BC); 55- Bonni Hannah on FinderZkeepers (Z) and Ayeesha with Kelsey Lewis up winning BC; 75- Kelsey Russell riding Gingersnap Gold with BC going to JS Comet ridden by Marbie Kollath;

Many thanks go to Cheryl and Stagg Newman and their gargantuan team of dedicated volunteers!



Photo by Nancy Sluys

David Augustine trots out Meg Sleeper's horse for vet Art King

# More pics from Biltmore



Photos by Nancy Sluys





## 2 Ole Geezers Win 25-Mile Old Dominion Endurance Ride Best Condition Award- Story by Deck McCain & Mary Howell

With 90 years between them, and nearly 50 years of endurance experience, the team of Deck McCain and Mary's Howell's 24-year-old 1/2 QH gelding Count Shiloh earned Best Condition in their completion of the annual Old Dominion 25 Mile Endurance Ride on Saturday, June 11, 2016. "Deck and I became close friends last summer," Mary explained. "He kept Shiloh at his farm in Nash County, NC while I getting our new place in Virginia ready for my horses. Each time I'd visit Shiloh, Deck and his mare Smarty would take us out on their local trails, and we had a blast riding together."

Knowing Deck would enjoy the Virginia mountains, she offered him to loan him Shiloh for the Old Dominion limited distance ride in exchange for helping at the 54-mile mark gate & go, her volunteer assignment later that day.

"I was on my other gelding Gryphon, and figured we could finish the LD in time to make the hour-long drive out to Waites Run before it needed to open at 2:30 p.m.. We took it easy first loop, with walking the long hill climb and dismounting to jog both horses down the steepest part of downhill road to help Shiloh stay sound."

Despite the heat and humidity, both horses vetted through in great shape, so they agreed to pick up their pace on the return. "Once Shiloh realized we were heading back to camps, he switched on his super-efficient trot, with Gryphon cantering to keep up. The two pasture mates crossed the finish line together, but predictably big-bodied Shiloh took almost 15 minutes more than Gryphon to meet the 60 pulse criteria.

"I decided to show both horses for best condition after learning how close we were behind the winning horse," Mary said. After weighing in and trotting both horses for the hour-after-exam, they hit the road for Waites, arriving in plenty of time to set up and help cool the horses of 100-mile frontrunners Stagg and Cheryl Newman.



photo by Becky Pearman

"I was thrilled by how many first-time 100 mile riders were entered this year, and what a good job they did of managing their horses in the heat," Mary said. As the last horses left Waites around 7 p.m., she and Deck loaded water tanks from both there and Bucktail camp, arriving back at basecamp just after the 25 & 50 milers awards ceremony wrapped up.

"We walked up to get our completion awards and learned that the 216 lb Shiloh carried, plus good vet scores, more than made up for the time difference. For him to earn a BC after 17 years and 5500 miles of AERC competition shows what a great team he & Deck made, and that all ages can excel in this wonderful sport!"



Photo by Mary Howell

### More pictures from the Old Dominion by Becky Pearman



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A Ride & Tie team

Barb Mathews, Liara Gonzalez and Leggs



©2016 Becky Pearman Photography

Stagg and Cheryl Newman tie for 1st in the 100



©2016 Becky Pearman Photography

Old Dominion vet staff



Marty Head

Images from  
the GERA  
Fundraiser



Shannon Conrad

by Jessica Willis &  
Unbridled Imagery



Alice Lowery



Jane Moss

# Sara Borkosky's First 100 Miler!

I have a new motto in life. I began saying it in jest about two weeks out from Biltmore when Gem was acting crazy, but I will continue to use it more seriously for the rest of my life. It has deep meaning to me and has helped to ground me in many ways over the last month.

*"It's nothing a hundred miles won't cure"*

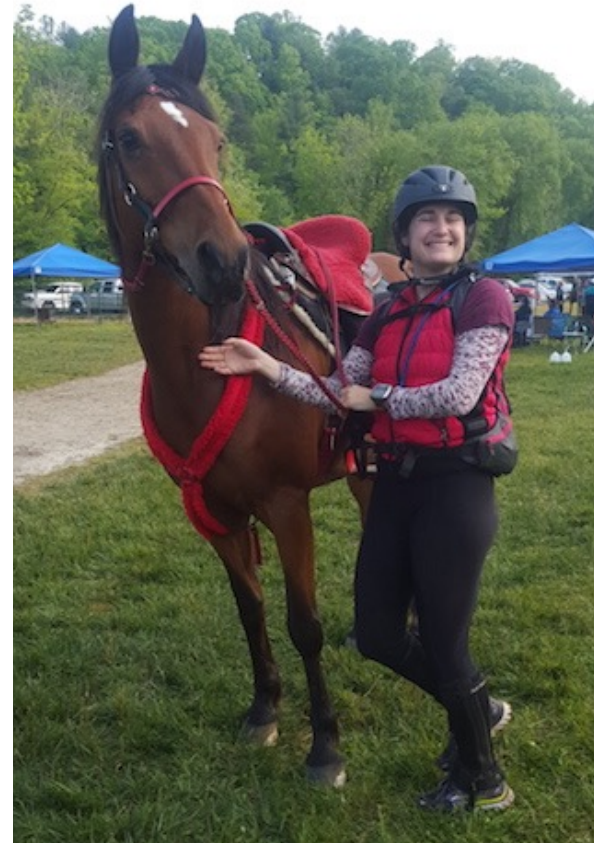
Sleep was hard to come by Friday night and I finally gave up on the idea just shy of 3 am and crawled out of the warmth of the sleeping bag, kissed Wyatt on the cheek and headed out into the dark, cold morning. I had 3 hours to kill before ride start, but the knots of nervous anticipation in my stomach wouldn't let me settle on any one task. I was thankful when the clock finally read 5 am and I roused Dusty from his own cocoon of sleep to help watch over Gem and make sure she didn't roll and break all her tack to pieces while Liz, super crew extraordinaire, went to check us in.

I'm pretty sure the words "I hate ride start" spewed out of my mouth a dozen or more times as the group of us hand walked Gem down to the starting line. Liz probably wanted to slap my helmeted head at that point, but waited until the 5th loop to do so instead. Regardless, the trail was eventually proclaimed open and I mounted up to head off in a small pocket behind the front runners who were already out of sight.

## **LOOP 1: 14.5 miles, orange.**

The start heads down a trail I would see pieces of a lot that day. The "river road" is a gravel trail that follows the French Broad River and orange took us upstream past camp a ways before making a sharp left turn into the woods. Gem was in beast mode and just wanted to go. She was kept to a dull roar as we half trotted and half pranced down the lane passing horses along the way. I was tense and nervous and introduced myself to those I passed warning them all that it was my first 100. We passed a nice couple of ladies who were also doing their first 100 and I tried to tuck Gem in behind them, but she was having none of it and we blew past and into the woods. It was at the perfect time too. Gem was just starting to lose patience with my death grip on the reins and had begun to flip her head back in forth in a very clear pissed off mare gesture. The trail went up, up and up some more into the woods.

Thankfully, right around that time we came across a lovely woman going for her third attempt and Gem decided that they were worthy of her company. As we climbed the hill, the two previous ladies fell in behind us and by the top we had caught up to a larger group in front of us as well. The trail climbed, dipped back down and traversed ridge lines staying predominantly in the woods along gravel strewn trails and down access roads.



At some point I realized that I was actually having fun. Gem was moving along steadily and with flare and hadn't spooked once. I looked at my Garmin and it read 5 miles. A record. It usually takes 10 miles for me to have fun.

The first hold was a bit frazzled as Liz and I learned our ways around each other and Gem. Liz grabbed my in time slip so I could head straight to dropping tack and sponging. We came in at 7:59 am, so the loop took us 1 hour 59 minutes from the time the trail was called open.

It was a cool morning, but Gem had covered the 14.5 miles at an overall 7.5 mph and was sweaty. Three minutes after arriving, we headed to the vet where Gem had a CRI of 40/40 and received all As. The vet asked me if I even rode her on that loop. She looked like I had just pulled her out of her pen for the day.

We headed back to my trailer for the 50 minute hold and Dusty and Liz got to work on feeding, electrolyting and babying Gem while I sat down and ate some donuts. I was very nauseous coming off the loop and had barely touched the water in my camelbak. Dusty topped it off again and I changed out of my fleece riding pants and into my tights for the remainder of the day.

### **LOOP 2: 20 miles, black access to green**

Gem had settled down pretty well during the first loop, so I made the decision to drop the bit. Liz was smart enough to shove it in the camelbak so I would have it just in case. I headed out alone down the gravel drive behind crewing and hit the river road once again only this time the trail took us downstream.

It wasn't long until my companion for the second half of the first loop came up behind us. We crossed through a field of lush grass and over a new horse bridge to head into the woods. The black trail is a mix of woods and gravel roads as it leads you to a concrete bridge giving access to the west range of the estate. It was just the two of us for the first 3 miles as we made our way to the water troughs and spotters at the bridge.

Once we reached the water trough, Gem dove her entire head up to her eyes into the trough. I have never seen her do this before. She tanked up deeply. Gem is the most polite horse at communal troughs and food stations. She never pushes anyone away and I have never seen her make an angry face at another horse. She just takes her turn, drinks until she is full and then moves away.

There was a big pile up at the bridge crossing and at this point we all stuck together. I got to be introduced to some pretty "famous" riders in our region and was in the company of some really spectacular riders. The 10 of us kept together as we left the black trail and picked up green on the other side of the bridge.

I had been dodging a rising sense of nausea since the hold. I believed it to be due to a slight dehydration and forced myself to drink frequently from the camelbak. By the time we crossed the bridge, the bladder was half empty and my stomach was settled.

Green is a lovely trail winding through the woods, along fields of lush grasses and past old farm buildings. We went past cows grazing, sheep playing with their new lambs and saw herds of deer galloping among the trees. The footing remained mostly gravel with some sections of dirt floor in the woods

Unfortunately, we were going fast. Faster than I had planned and faster than I was comfortable maintaining for the long haul. Try as I might I could not contain the fire breathing monster that was Gem on this early part of the loop.

She was determined to keep up with the front runners and we had already cantered nearly the entire first loop and had just cantered 5 more miles of this one. She was blowing right through my side pull and was not tuned in to me at all. When we reached a water trough roughly 5-7 miles in, I pulled over, got off and shoved the bit in her mouth while allowing the others to move out away from us. We would do the rest alone and in a more sedate mind frame.

Gem was extremely unhappy with this plan. She listened to the bit, but was furious and stressed. She continued to move out at 9 mph as before as she tried her best to catch everyone else. I was no longer having any fun. My brain raced at all the ways we were going to get pulled. We were going too fast. Way too fast. Finally, around mile 10 we caught up to four of the original group at a water trough. The leader was a wonderful high mileage rider with a ton of experience and one of the nicest people I have encountered on the trails. I made a decision. I could either continue to fight Gem for 10 more miles and hit camp with a stressed out and unhappy mare or I could just let her go. We might get pulled for gong too fast, but at least we wouldn't get pulled for metabolics in a horse with blown ulcers and a mental breakdown.

When we all left the water trough, I tucked in behind and let go. I started having fun again. Eventually green ended back on black and we made our way across the bridge again. Gem was not brave enough to lead across the bridge and from that point back to camp she remained behind the others. Back on black, we took a slightly longer route back than we did going out and this took us past the Biltmore Estate.

From there it was a short jaunt to camp. Way back at 14 miles, I had texted Liz that we were coming in much faster than the predicted 4 hours. In fact, we hit camp at 2 hours 48 minutes for a 20 mile loop. Liz hadn't gotten the text, having taken advantage of a long reprieve to nap, so when I hit crewing she wasn't there yet. I texted her that Gem was in and hot. As luck would have it, my two friends riding in the 30 LD and sharing my crew spot were in for their hold and Sheree was quick to help sponge and scrape Gem. Liz came running into crew and helped finish the job.

Gem vetted in after 3 minutes in crewing with a CRI of 56/48 and mostly all As. The vet said she didn't run after me with enough spark so gave her a B for impulsion and attitude. I was fine with that and took her over to camp. Liz and Dusty went to it with Gem as I downed half a stick of real, hard pepperoni and a block of cheese to get salt and protein in me. I followed this with an entire can of Mt. Dew.

### **LOOP 3: 17.4 miles, blue**

Once again it was time to tack up and head out. Gem was feeling just as fresh as ever. I believe we left the hold 2-3 minutes late and this short amount of time left us completely alone for the loop.

Blue starts off behind crewing but before it reaches the river road, turns to the right by the horse barns and heads up into the woods. Blue has some wicked elevation gains to it and was the hardest for the two of us.

Gem was in no mood to fly at this point and I let her walk it out. We crept along at an astonishing 2.5 mph pace while I began to recall not peeing during the hold and regretting that immensely. By 2 miles in, Gem was still acting like she was about to die and couldn't possibly put one foot in front of the other any longer. It was around 1245 or 1 pm at this point and the day was heating up quickly.

Then we hit the hill from hell. This gravel hill never ended. It just kept going up and up and up. I would see a bend and what appeared to be the top, but once we reached it all I could see was more hill to climb. About a quarter of the way up, I felt a cold wet sensation in my nether regions. I had a split second panic attack that I had in fact, at age 34, peed my pants. It took a few moments to realize that my butt was also soaking wet and it was coming from the camelbak. Phew.

I stopped Gem and pulled it off to take a look. It had been refilled at the hold and I assumed the cap wasn't on right as it can be tricky. Nope. Everything looked good except there was freezing cold water everywhere. A few more minutes of climbing later and I couldn't take the freezing water any more so I dismounted to empty the bladder completely. Since I was on the ground, I took the time to pee as well and then hand walked Gem the rest of the 1 1/2 miles up the damn hill.

It was a real low point of the day. As we trudged along at a snails pace, I texted Dusty to let him know my issues. Gem was acting half dead and I was certain that my decision to let her run fast the first two loops was coming back to bite me. I swore to her that I would RO at the hold if she was still puny and if we ever made it.

At the top of the hill, I got back on and prepared for a slow, arduous walk along the remaining 14 miles of that loop with a big old pull at the end. Gem, however, wasn't ready to cash in the chips just yet and surprised me by jumping into a lovely 6 mph trot that ate away the miles.

As we were cruising along the lovely dirt footing, thankful to be rid of the gravel for a spell, it dawned on me that we were almost 40 miles in and Gem had not spooked a single time. She hadn't even taken notice of the sticks, logs, cows, sheep and deer we had passed on the trail. This was the most pleasant ride I had ever had on her. Apparently Gem just needs a 34 mile canter warm up before all rides.

We continued on solo, making good time now that she was no longer feeling sorry for herself and I no longer had a constant trickle of ice water down my butt crack. She laid down some lovely 8 and 9 mph miles as we climbed the hills and dodged along the ravines until blue eventually dumped us back onto the river road way upstream of where orange cut off. As we made the 90 degree left hand turn to on the river road, a couple of ladies doing the 55 came along behind us. I told them that they were welcome to pass us at any point, but they were happy to have someone else in the lead and Gem was not in the mood to be passed at this point.

We finished the remaining 10 or so miles in the lead at a wonderful 8 mph pace. Gem was bold, brave and having the time of her life. It offset the ridiculously slow initial miles nicely and we ended up coming into crew just shy of 3 hours after we had left.

I had texted Liz early on that I was majorly overheating. I had dressed completely inappropriately in three shirts and a vest and that coupled with my lack of water for 3 hours had led me to be extremely overheated. My face was bright red and I was light headed. She brought ice cold tea for me and agreed to trot Gem out.

Three minutes after arriving, Liz took Gem over to the vet where she had a CRI of 48/42 after 52 miles. It was really interesting to get to watch her trot out. I had never had anyone do that for me before and while Liz jogged Gem down the lane and back I had a chance to talk to the vet who was my favorite of the entire ride. I told him about my concerns with the early fast pace and why I had decided to let her go. He agreed with me 100% and told me that you have to ride the horse you have that day. Holding them back that much is just as bad as running them into the ground. He thought I was riding very smart and that made me ridiculously happy. He gave her As down the line and we headed off to the hold where I shoved my face with watermelon and mandarin oranges to get sugar and water in me. I was sleepy tired at this point, but felt great otherwise. I had no pain anywhere and had no thoughts of quitting.

**LOOP 4: 17.7 miles, red**

At 4:09 pm Gemmie and I headed out on the notoriously hard red loop. Ride management had warned everyone at the briefing that they put this loop when they do to make the 100 even harder. It is the most technical of all the loops.

Red starts off like the rest of the loops behind crewing but makes a right instead of a left immediately and avoids the long gravel stretch. I immediately fell in love with the loop and told Gem that it was just like our conditioning trails back home: single track and winding through the woods.

She started off characteristically sluggish and I let her walk it out until she was ready to trot around mile 1.5 or 2. She was then ready to give me her wonderful extended trot again even solo and was still being bold and brave. Unfortunately, the footing was awful. While the gravel was absent there were large hoof eating rocks and roots everywhere that created slow going for overly cautious me.

We picked our way along the trail, moving out when possible and the endurance motto of "never hurry, never tarry" ran through my mind a million times. Riding smart is the key to success in this sport and having banked a lot of time early in the ride, there was no need to rush it now and risk a lameness over

gnarly trail. We came to a very steep downhill section and I got off to hand walk Gem down it and give her a break. Liz had stuffed carrots in the pack and I spent the time hand feeding Gemmie as we walked down the hill in the late afternoon heat.

Gem was starving by this point too. She had eaten her hay and grain well throughout, but she was ravenous. Any blade of grass was cause for an immediate slamming of the brakes and a quick snatch. She couldn't get enough grass in her and I texted Liz to bring her nicker doodles to crew to shove in her face. She texted back a surprised "are you here already?" to which I replied no way, but wanted to give her a heads up.

Red dumps out on the same river road and just as I was turning back on the gravel road, two ladies on beautiful greys came up behind us and over took us. They were also doing the 100, the first for the junior rider but one of many for her sponsor. They were from Canada and were in the FEI division. Gem paced extremely well with their two horses and was happy to have company once again so we tucked in behind them.

We were going slower than I wanted to at this point, below 6 mph, and had I been alone I would have pushed her a bit more to get moving. As it was, the ladies ahead were taking it slowly and would walk all the up and down hills in the woods while making up time by moving out on the flats. Gem wasn't too thrilled with the walking and would have preferred to trot the entire time, but her stomach won out and she used this time to smartly stop and devour all the ferns and wood grasses while the ladies walked and then trot to catch up.

At one point I did mention that I would be passing soon to move out faster and they responded by moving out as well so we could all stay together for the loop.



photo by Becky Pearman



I was much better at texting updates to Liz and Dusty by this point in the ride. I gave a half way warning and then a 2 miles out warning which seemed to work really well. I also texted Dusty half way out one simple word: BACON. I had been really good at keeping my hydration up thus far, but felt like I needed more salt in me. The salt and protein from my favorite food would fit the bill nicely back in camp.

Once back in camp, we moved through the process of sponging and stripping tack quickly and Liz once again trotted Gem for me while I talked to the vet and watched. Gem's CRI was 48/48 and she once again had all As except for a B on skin tenting which I didn't care much about given the fact that she dunked her entire head into every single trough we came across. This red loop was pretty barren of water. No natural water on the trail and they only had two troughs out on the entire 17 mile loop with the last one being at mile 10.

This hold was only 40 minutes and it went by fast. Liz had gotten my message that Gem was craving grass and had spent the time completely moving my pen to make it very big and very full of fresh grass. It was amazing to see and Gem appreciated it greatly. It would be the last time I would see Dusty since it would be past bedtime when I came in next. Liz added glow sticks to my breast collar and let me borrow her head lamp as well which she taped to my helmet. I had worn mine at the start since it was dark, but hadn't taped it on. I have no clue when it happened, but when I came into the first hold it was gone.

I regretted sitting down, but the bacon was delicious and I dragged myself out of the chair and made the walk back down to the trail head. I didn't know if I would ride with anyone on this next loop and I was more than a little terrified of riding in the dark, but there wasn't much else to do. Gem looked just as fresh as she had that morning and had all As and amazing CRIs. In fact, at some point in the day, I believe after the second loop when we went near warp speed, Liz started calling Gem a FREAK. Everyone was highly impressed with my mare. I couldn't quit due to a little fear.

### **LOOP 5: 15.5 miles, white river**

I mounted back up at 8:12 pm and it was already getting pretty dark. I couldn't see anyone else getting ready to head out and so, with a major knot in my stomach, I asked Gem to walk out down the backside of crewing. White started the same way as all the other loops, but went straight out onto the river road and downstream.

I was on the main river road, trotting along nicely at 8 mph (yup, she was still happily chugging along at an effortless 8 mph this late in the game) when I caught back up to the two greys once again. They had left a few minutes before us and I had never been so relieved to see another rider in my life. I asked them if I could ride with them, explaining that I had never ridden in the dark before and that I was beyond terrified of the prospect. They were happy to have me along and off we went.

I can't tell you many details about this loop. It got dark. And then it got even darker. Thankfully, ride management kept us to the main river road which glowed eerily white in the darkening night. It was gravel and straight and flat and we made haste while we could.

I recall a guy catching up to us on his white horse at some point along this stretch and he was equally as happy for the company. He had been turtle all day long and hadn't ridden with anyone. The four of us made our way and eventually passed the Biltmore house before heading into the heavy woods.

If it had been dark on the open road, it was pitch black inside the woods. I hung on, told Gem she was my eye sight because I couldn't see anything and was thankful for the glowing white horses in front of me. The loop seemed to never end and we stayed in the woods for what felt like an eternity. All I could remember as we neared crew once again was the yawning depth of the dark woods and the fact that this night was a new moon. The sky was not providing any light for us.

Liz met me with Gem's cooler, feed, treats and hay. The hold was only 30 minutes and we would be spending it in the crew area that was nearly deserted. Gem vetted in with a CRI of 54/48 and had all As across the board. The vet remained impressed with her.

Jesse, the guy who joined us, had the same out time as I did, 11:55 pm, but we couldn't see the other two anywhere. Liz tried to get me to eat, but I had lost my appetite at that point. I managed some oranges while trying not to think about having to go back out into the increasingly dark night.

When the out time came near, we wandered over to the out timer. One lady was present, but said she couldn't release us and needed to find the lady who could. She had 1 minute. When the other lady was located and we were allowed off, Liz helped hold Gem and somehow managed to whack me upside the head with the metal end of my reins. Since my brain was already firing on only a few neurons, it didn't make much of a difference but did provide entertainment for those standing around watching, Thank god for helmets.

### **LOOP 6: 14.1 miles, white river**

Jesse was right beside me in crewing and we left very near to each other to repeat the same loop we had just done. Neither of us knew where the two ladies went and we kept looking through crewing as we walked back to the river road. Dessia quickly caught up to us a few minutes later. Unfortunately, her junior rider had been pulled for a sore back and cramp at the hold and it was now the three of us.

My mind was calmer this time around having not died the first loop in the dark and I was able to concentrate on the glow stick markers and the surroundings a bit more. We were traveling at 2 mph and had 6 hours to complete the 14 miles. At this rate we would be OT and my addled brain, which had stopped functioning around mile 74, started to race and I got grumpy for the first time all day. I remarked to my riding companions that we needed to move. They responded that we had plenty of time and that it was too dangerous to move out in the pitch black woods. I replied that we only had 6 hours and that our current pace would put us solidly over time.

Poor Jesse and Dessia were doing their best to calm me down. They had both completed this ride before and remembered the white river loop accurately. The first half was in the woods and was hilly, but the second half was all on open gravel road where you could easily make time. I didn't remember it that way. I remembered deep, dark woods.

I eventually shut up realizing that I had no choice. While Gem had still yet to spook on this ride and was actually braver in the dark than she ever was in the light, I was not. The thought of leaving my companions to head out faster alone was not appealing and so I took a deep breath, trusted my new friends and went with it.

The woods were even darker this time through and we made a few piloting errors trying to find the way between the glow sticks. Dessia's horse was sore on the down hills and so she was dismounting and hand walking down all slopes. I got off a few times, but felt it better to stay on Gem than add the stress of getting on and off multiple times. At one point we all realized at the exact same time that there were no glow sticks anymore and hadn't been for a while. We turned around and quickly found the turn we had missed and the fallen glow stick that was ground into the dirt and near impossible to see.

Once we hit the open road, we moved out again. Gem was happy to be trotting once again and even asked to canter, but I wasn't having any of that. She knew exactly where she was and where this trail led and wanted to be back in camp NOW. She even charged ahead and led for a long while making quick work of the gravel road heading home.

Three miles from the finish I began to get some serious vertigo. The world began to spin as I sat in the dark, not being able to see anything but the glow of the white horse in front of me. The other two did not use glow sticks on their horses and while I did, they didn't help in any way. I began to drink more water hoping that would help. If we were trotting or cantering, I was fine, but walking or standing still to try to figure out where we were was bad.

And then there it was. The finish line. None of us wanted to race in. We knew we were towards the end by attrition of all the others being pulled and there was no need to get anyone hurt at mile 99. Once the white tent and bright lights of the finish came into view all my vertigo left. We had done it. We had gone 100 miles and Gem was still pulling my arms out and crossing the finish at a 9 mph trot.

Liz met me at the finish as planned. The finish is 1.2 miles away from vetting and you have 20 minutes to cover that distance. The original plan had been to hand walk Gem in, but after talking with my new friends they said that was a bad idea. It was better to continue riding at a trot/walk cycle to keep them fresh and loose than get off and allow them to tighten up. I took their advice and we trotted the last mile in.

With a mixture of pure joy and longing for my bed, I watched as Liz trotted Gem out for me one last time. After 100 miles and 23 hours of work (18+ hours for actual ride time, can't recall the exact time) Gem vetted in with a CRI of 48/48 and all As across the board with perfect gut sounds in all quadrants. The vet was amazed. Liz called her a freak and I fought back tears of joy.

Gem walked the final steps back to her pen and was set up with water, hay, grain and her red light weight blanket for the night. After she was settled I crawled into the tent and fought the nagging feeling that I was still trotting away down the trail until sleep overcame me.



Photo by Liz Stout



Photo by Sara Borkosky

**Please be a contributor!!**

**If you don't see a story about your favorite ride it's because you didn't write one!**

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**Deadline for the next issue**

**August 10**

**Thank You, Nancy Sluys**

photo by Nancy Sluys

