

## Gaiting To Auburn: The Advent of the Gaited Endurance Horse

Early morning, the sun has not even made its debut, mist is lifting from the dew-tipped grass, and the occasional whinny of a horse fills the nearly palpable energy of the encampment. Amid first light, horses quiver as their blankets are removed and grain is filled into their buckets. A faint scent of leather and brimming excitement hover in the crisp air. Anticipation swells of moving swiftly through forests and plunging through creeks, horse and rider moving as one through the elements of the great wide open, bonding over the thrill of even more miles logged. By the time each horse has passed its initial vet check and each rider's boot has stepped sturdily into each stirrup, carrots and granola bars secured away within saddle packs, the awaited moment has arrived. Bodies tense, breath curls into the clear, waxing sun light, and the signal sounds. The riders cue their expectant mounts, and an endurance ride has begun.

Even though, sadly, the film "Hidalgo" was on the whole fictitious, the birth of the unofficial endurance race was based on similar circumstances found in the Disney production. Westward expansion in the U.S. came to rely on the stamina and bravery of the horse for crossing hundreds of miles of wilderness.

The Pony Express depended on horses for urgent mail delivery. The U.S. Army Calvary could have not existed without their brave mounts. Because of horses, settlers were able to proceed west toward new lives and limitless possibilities. Out of necessity, endurance riding was becoming an American tradition.

In 1955, modern organized endurance riding had its true beginning. A 100-mile ride completed in under 24 hours, stretching from Nevada to Auburn, California along the Gold Rush trails, was known as the Western States Trail Ride. A man named Wendell Robie, along with a number of other riders, completed this ride, which soon became known as the Tevis Cup. To this day, the Tevis Cup is known as the most difficult 100-mile ride, challenging riders and horses to endure severe terrain, altitude changes, and 100-degree temperatures. Today, the American Endurance Ride Conference (AERC, established in 1972), recognizes over 700 rides each year and in 1978 the Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI) recognized endurance riding as an International Sport. Any breed can compete but among the popular choices are Arabians, Morgans, Fjords, Arab-crosses, and some Thoroughbreds. However, many gaited breeds, such as the Walker, Foxtrotter, and Paso Fino, are proving themselves on a par with some of their most talented competitors.

The allure of endurance riding for horse and rider is being in the great outdoors, enduring and enjoying a variety of challenges, and working toward self-betterment. According to AERC and FEI rules, the first horse and rider to cross the finish line after passing the vet check stations is the winner. The horse must finish, maintaining excellent health and condition. An award also always goes to the "Best Conditioned" horse. Even if a horse does not finish first but receives "Best Conditioned", this award is a great honor. The pure commune with nature and focus on quality horsemanship and conditioning was part of what initially brought Oregon rider, Paul Latiolais, to the sport. However, in his nine years of endurance riding, the thrill and art of conditioning his sturdy Paso Fino, Pete, for countless competitions, has become so much more.

Paul met Pete eleven years ago. He and his wife, both new to horses, had Quarter horses prior to switching Paso Finos. As Paul puts it, "We made every mistake in the book." After buying their first Paso Fino, a frightened and sensitive horse, Paul soon realized the dire need to improve his own horsemanship skills to understand these talented, sensitive horses. Unfortunately, with this first Paso, Paul hadn't acquired the tools yet to help this frightened horse, even though he had made progress with him. He ended up having to sell that horse.

Buying Pete, he knew he needed answers and wanted to start over in his horsemanship with this new horse. In 1999, he met a natural horsemanship trainer and began attending this trainer's clinics.

Soon, the trainer became Paul's mentor, introduced him to endurance riding, and the rest, as they say, is history. Endurance riding and Pete have not only enriched Paul's skills as a horseman, but have also shown him the invaluable bond that forms between a horse, his rider, and the elements that they together endure.

According to Latiolais, endurance riding is a very tough sport and having a mentor is absolutely necessary. The sport is so difficult, comprised of endless layers of learning, that competing successfully and safely can only be done with the help of someone with experience. Paul says, "When I stop learning, I will probably not do this sport anymore." What makes this sport so challenging, and at the same time so interesting (and probably addictive), is the training and conditioning that go into preparing for a ride, creating a horse and rider team that is not only well bonded but also hardy, safe, and nimble. The ideal

endurance team is created through hours in the saddle, a desire for constant improvement, and, yes, versatility training.

At this point, a run-down of the basic endurance ride set-up is helpful. First off, not all rides are considered endurance rides. A 25-mile ride is actually known as a limited distance ride or an LD and generally has a maximum time of 6 hours.. Any ride that runs longer, 50 miles and above, is considered an endurance ride, and is completed within a specific time limit. A 50-mile ride must be completed in under 12 hours, and a 100-mile ride must be completed under 24. A rider's pace is discretionary, but the ride must be completed within the maximum time.

Before each ride, horses are inspected by a veterinarian to ensure they meet necessary criteria that confirms they are "fit to continue" and complete the event. Vet checks (sometimes known as "vetgates") are set up throughout phases of the ride. Vet checks may be held on the course or back at base camp. Either way, the goal is to get the horse's heart rate to slow back down below the rate specified for the event, usually averaging at about 64 bpm, depending on terrain and weather. The veterinarians at these check points also look for dehydration, soundness, and respiration. Following the vet check, the horses are held for 30-45 minutes to be fed and watered. If the ride is longer, such as a 100-mile ride, the vet checks are stationed along the way, and often a ride crew comes along to supply the rider's gear, food, and water.

Concerning training and conditioning, Latiolais points out that most people mistakenly think a very forward horse is preferable for endurance. He says, "They need the impulsion, but if they're too forward, and you can't control them, they will overwork themselves going just 25 miles." The heart rate would be too high, and proper conditioning will be difficult. A horse needs to be willing to move, but must be trained to be balanced and precise, responding softly and obediently to the rider's aids. Just as in most disciplines, arena work is very beneficial to the endurance horse. In the arena, a rider can practice slow gait work, changing leads at a canter, lateral work, and collection. This training also strengthens a horse's muscular structure, enabling him to go longer distances. Versatility or cross-training is also imperative for ensuring your safety and the safety of others on the trail. An endurance ride is full of dangerous situations and natural obstacles that require careful negotiation. Just as important, a rider has to be in perfect control of the horse in a sport where energy levels fly high amid many horses riding quickly together in close proximity. However, out of the midst of all the training and striving toward the ultimate the goal, the Tevis Cup, Paul does not forget the true reward that he gains from the versatility work and challenges he faces with Pete. According to him, the greatest reward is "the connection with my horse. He means the world to me."

Latiolais has broken down conditioning and training into a logical and effective regime. If the first scheduled ride is 25 miles, a rider should begin six weeks beforehand. Riding should happen twice a week, and not on concurrent days, allowing at least one day of rest in between. One day is a shorter ride, but on the second day, the miles logged should increase until the fifth week, wherein the ride should cover at least 15 miles at a reasonable pace in an intermediate gait. This transfers to approximately four hours or less, including breaks, at about 5 miles an hour. For a 50 mile ride, the fifth week ride would be 20-25 miles within five hours. Once in full endurance riding season, the rides themselves count as conditioning and giving a horse a two week break after a 50-mile ride is imperative to not overwork the horse. Muscles need breaks to recuperate and build fibers. On a ride, also bear in mind that the horse should often be in gait, but walking is also necessary. Latiolais warns to always walk up hills. Racing uphill will run up a heart rate too steeply. However, endurance riding on a gaited horse has many benefits, including gaining time on others because a gaited horse can race downhill. A horse like an Arabian would hurt its joints by speeding down a slope.

A horse's conformation or type of gait is crucial to endurance riding success. Latiolais explains that "all breeds can do this, but not all horses within the breed can do it". For example, the larger a horse is, the less able to dissipate heat areas. A cold-blooded horse is less able to do anything farther than a LD ride. Gait-wise, a horse with a fast movements but no impulsion, such as a "Fino" horse, does not really go anywhere, and tires itself out easily. Fino is the specific gait a Paso Fino does where they practically move their feet in place, super fast. Pete, on the other hand, has a pleasure gait, a nicely balanced four-beat gait without high action. This is ideal. Ground-covering and rhythmic, without simply dissipating energy in an ineffective manner. Any horse is welcomed in endurance, and gaited horses are traditionally bred for stamina and sustainable gaits. Endurance riding is but another showcase for their unbounded potential.

For those interested in endurance, Latiolais has a few more tips. At the start of a ride, a rider needs small packs on the horse at all times and a heart rate monitor to make sure the horse is not overtired. A "butt-rug", a sheet that lays behind the saddle via cords, helps keep the horse's muscles warm once stopped. Muscles should never get cold, especially during high desert spring and early fall rides. Also, include plenty of water, carrots and apples. Paul actually feeds Pete carrots while IN GAIT. In addition, he carries four water bottles, two of which he uses to cool down the horse down by spraying them occasionally on the horse; a rider should never soak a horse because a layer of water will retain heat. Don't forget people snacks. Always carry electrolytes for the horse, which are essentially salt mixtures with apple flavor to refurbish the nearly 50 lbs of sweat lost on a ride. Helmets are essential and boots with heels are necessary. The most riding pants are either breeches or riding tights. Other tack qualifications, as well as other information, can be found at the AERC website.

From the U.S. Calvary brigade racing across the desolate, wild, Western land to the carefully prepared for finish lines of the modern day sport, endurance racing is an American tradition. As many others alongside Paul Latiolais are proving, gaited horses can contribute just as much or maybe even more to this tradition. In 2008, a Paso Fino named Cabo, ridden by Melissa Margetts, made it over the Tevis Cup finish line, marking history as the first Paso Fino to finish the great, grueling race. Paul aims to echo this dream this year, and hopefully many other gaited breeds in the future will follow suit. May these riders encourage others to hit the open trail, break away from civilization with that special steed, and become an even better team while enduring the footprints of the rough and ready riders that scaled and strained over unforgiving territory so many dust-filled years ago.