



*Setting forth at dawn, a rider  
and horse have many a mile  
to tread by day's end.*

# TO Finish IS TO WIN

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## *On the Trail With Endurance Riders*

**T**wo horses canter by in the pouring rain. One rider is decked in yellow helmet, canary tights with matching vest and riding sneakers; his horse wears a brilliant yellow biothane bridle, martingale and saddle pad. The other rider is in well-worn jeans and a cowboy hat, and his horse has traditional western tack. They pass a horse and rider sauntering slowly down the trail. This rider is sedately dressed in breeches and jacket with a black helmet, but her reins are day-glo purple. Rain is dripping from her helmet and down her nose, but her grin is big and her voice is strong: "At least this keeps the horses cool!" Before the day is over, these competitors along with 50 others will have ridden 50 miles in a sport whose motto is TO FINISH IS TO WIN.

What contest? What sport? The Lizard Run? Sand Hills Stampede? Hallelujah? JD's ride? Turkey Trot?

Most South Carolinians know about thoroughbred racing and the Carolina Cup. Although few have heard of endurance rides, the names reflect the unconventional nature of this sport.

Unlike the hunting and horse show worlds, where riders' dress and horses' tack are specified in great detail—often based on traditions going far back in history—there are no prescribed dress or tack for endurance. One rider's clothing may differ wildly from another's—or even from one race to another. Brilliant colors or ragged T-shirts never seen in the dressage or hunter show ring are common. The only real concern for horse or rider is comfort and practicality (or maybe personal eccentricity). Saddles and bridles may be of the newest synthetics, of traditional leather, or a combination. "Good Lord! I never thought I would find myself wearing panty hose and riding in a plastic saddle," upholds David Lucas, owner of White Haven Plantation in Bishopville, about his synthetic saddle and Spandex riding tights.

"Highly individualistic" and "quirky" are two descriptions for endurance riders. Janet Wooten of Wagener says her husband Frank holds out for "weird." In a recent article in *Endurance News*, Wooten suggested many suffer from "H.E.D.D. (Human Equine Dementia Disorder)." What else can explain people



*Riders await their time to be called for the start of the Hallelujah Benefit for St. Jude's Hospital; the ride takes place near Camden. Opposite: JD Fountain, manager of the Carolina Ride, helps with a vet check.*

who ride in the rain, heat and cold, through bogs and whatever else is out there—for hours and hours—just for the fun of it?

Whatever the label, they all share a great love of horses. That's evident in the care and attention the animals receive. When one woman was told she acts like her horse is family, she indignantly replied, "My mare *is* like family—and more! She's my best friend, my therapist, my personal trainer and the fulfillment of my childhood dreams all rolled into one package. And to top it off, she never repeats anything I tell her!"

Endurance riders, some from as far as Canada, love South Carolina's trails, comparatively mild winter weather and southern hospitality. "Man, this weather is great," exclaimed a Michigan rider at JD Fountain's Carolina Ride. "Back home, riding is over for the winter. You lucky ##\*##\*s! You can ride all year long!" (The weather was not great from the locals' point of view: about 50 degrees, breezy, misty rain.)

**E**ndurance riding is a "race" in which horse and rider cover specific distances within a set number of hours. In American Endurance Ride Conference competition, finishing is quite an accomplishment because riders and horses complete distances of 50, 75 or 100 miles. (Most endurance events also

include a limited-distance ride of only 25 or 30 miles.) Each ride has a maximum time allowed for completion: 24 hours for the 100, 12 for the 50 and 6 for the 25. Few riders take the maximum time; most average between 5 and 12 miles an hour—not counting the mandatory rest periods at the vet checks.

Rides usually occur over a weekend, during which most riders camp with their horses. Vets check the horses before, throughout and after the ride. Horses must meet very strict standards on their condition in order to continue a ride. A horse-and-rider team will not win even if it finishes first unless the horse meets the heart rate and soundness criteria after the ride.

Endurance is a relatively new equine sport, but several South Carolina participants have combined lifetime completions of more than 17,000 endurance and limited-distance miles!

JD Fountain, a Lynchburg native and long-time endurance rider, manages the Carolina Ride, the oldest continuing endurance ride in South Carolina. Known as "JD's Ride," the event began in 1986 near Bethune but now happens near Chesterfield the Saturday after Thanksgiving. Fountain bred and trained King Ali Gold, the 2008 national champion in the 100-mile distance. Patsy Gowen, a New Yorker now living in Rock Hill, has ridden in and managed South Carolina rides

for more than 20 years. Dalzell resident Lucie Hancock competes, sponsors juniors, manages rides, wins national recognition and is rearing a new generation of riders and managers. Debbie McClary, who lives near Bishopville, is ranked in the top 10 in the nation in endurance.

Many out-of-state riders, including world champion Valerie Kanavy of Virginia, often come here to compete. Literally millions of miles have been ridden in a sport rarely noticed by those it doesn't involve.

Endurance is not reserved for the wealthy. A camping area will have large, expensive rigs and trailers with elaborate living quarters as well as beat-up trucks and tiny tents. Horses may be confined by portable corrals or electric tape corrals, or tied to trailers.

Any breed or type of equine can compete. "We could have zebras if they were domesticated," Lucie Hancock explains. "The predominant breeds are Arabians and Arabian crosses, but every type and breed, including mules, compete." Arabians excel because they've been bred for stamina.

All types of riders participate: students, lawyers, farmers, nurses, stay-at-home parents, full-time horse professionals. They may be as young as eight or great-grandparents. Nearly all of them groom, feed, train, condition and care for their own horses.

The goals they set for themselves and their horses vary widely. Some seek national rankings. Debbie McClary, a petite, pretty grandmother, is very competitive. A dental assistant at Lee County Correctional Institution, McClary has been national champion in her weight division and last year was in the top 10 in the nation on her horse Chase. Like most endurance riders, she does not depend on staff to train or care for her five horses. She and husband Mac, a recently retired school administrator, do the work themselves on their property at Red Hill, near Bishopville.

Leesville's Betty Sturkie is less competitive. She loves endurance because, at 65 with 30-plus years of competition, she isn't considered "over the hill." She doesn't ride for awards but enjoys "a glorified trail ride." The lavish outlay of food at some rides has impressed her—so much so that she tells friends, "Forget coming to ride! I'm coming to eat!"



Hancock has ridden very competitively in the past but now spends most of her training and competing time with "juniors," riders younger than 16 who must be accompanied by an adult. Most of her grandchildren are adult riders, so she sponsors other young riders. Far from feeling burdened, she thanks them for bringing her joy and keeping her young.

Look for amusing bumper stickers and horse decorations at endurance events. "If you think money can't buy happiness, you don't know where to buy a good horse," a common bumper sticker proclaims. Another: "Driver carries no cash—all spent on my horse." Yet another: "The only stock I buy has four legs."

Some demonstrate patriotism with symbols or even an American flag painted on the horse itself. Patsy Gowen's Arabian, PW September Hero, was born September 11, 2001, and named to honor her husband's friend Patrick W., who died in the Twin Towers. Gowen, manager of the Sand Hills Stampede near Patrick, explains the name every time she's congratulated on Hero's performance.



*Veterinary check-ups are required before, during and after a ride for every horse that participates.*

Some years ago, my husband and I entered the endurance world by riding in a few limited-distance rides. We were charmed by the combination of a weekend camp-out with our horses; seeing a diverse group of riders from all over the state, country and even Canada; and the beautiful trails we could ride. The enthusiasm, helpfulness and energy of the endurance riders amazed us. Although many are very competitive, they'll stop to advise a newcomer or give aid on the trail when there's a problem.

Our first ride experience—at the Hallelujah Benefit Ride, held at that time near Ridgeway—was typical. Friday we vetted in, set up camp in a field with scores of trailers, and socialized with other horses and riders.

Saturday morning at 8, we joined 50 others for the 25-mile ride. The 100-mile race had started at 6 a.m. and the 50 at 7. We were astonished to realize the first 50-milers would ride fast enough to finish at about the same time as some of the 25-mile riders.

As a nervous first-time rider, I was impressed with Dr. Ken Marcella's response when I asked him to recheck my horse. "Never, never worry about asking us [veterinarians] to check a horse. Never! There's no such thing as too trivial when you're worried about your buddy here. We are like the police: We'd rather check and be able to say this is nothing than to have to say you've got a serious problem."

Throughout the hours we spent on lovely trails, we passed and were passed by horses in the various races. For the most part, however, just the two of us walked, trotted and cantered our horses through woods and farmland as if there was no one else around—quite a contrast from the busy ride camp. We saw deer and wild turkeys, rode over hills, traveled through shady hardwood forests, waded a shallow creek and skirted fields as we followed ribbons that marked our trail.

After the ride, the management provided a huge barbecue before the awards ceremony. We returned to our trailer happy and tired—and proud of our horses. We had earned our completions, and we definitely felt like winners. ❖

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For more information about endurance riding, visit the American Endurance Ride Conference Web site at [www.aerc.org](http://www.aerc.org); click "Ride Calendar" for telephone numbers and e-mail addresses for ride managers; write to the American Endurance Ride Conference, P.O. Box 6027, Auburn, CA 95604, or call (866) 271-2372 or (530) 823-2260. For more information about endurance riding in the Southeast, visit the Southeast Endurance Riders Association Web site at [www.seraonline.org](http://www.seraonline.org).