

BY RYAN T. BELL

BACKCOUNTRY INSIGHT

Amazing Race



MELINDA HUGHES

TWO HUNDRED HORSEMEN thunder down the California trail, riding by the light of an August moon. The sight of them would evoke images of *Hidalgo* or *The Man from Snowy River* if it weren't for the lycra riding pants, high-tailed Arabians and endurance saddles. But don't be fooled. This isn't your little sister's dressage competition. It's the Tevis Cup, also known as the Western States Trail Ride, backcountry's greatest endurance race.

"The Tevis Cup is a true test of backcountry horsemanship," says Tom Christofk, a race veteran. "It's a rugged trail that weaves in and out of forests, over rock faces, through canyons, and across rivers and streams. It's no ride through Central Park."

The 24-hour, 100-mile journey over the Sierra Nevada Mountains is part race,

part historical reenactment. In 1955, Tevis founder Wendell Robie wagered he could ride in one day from Lake Tahoe to Auburn, California. To pull off the feat, he departed at 5 a.m. under the full moon, rode through the day and late into the night. The next year, Robie did it again, this time with a group of friends, and the Western States Trail Ride was born. It has run every year since, with the exception of 2008, when the threat of a wildfire caused organizers to cancel, says Mike Pickett, ride director. But fire isn't the only trailside hazard.

"A horse fell off a cliff once," Christofk says. "Some riders were traveling a narrow trail in a steep canyon, where they encountered a rattlesnake. The lead rider spun around and bumped into the horse behind him. The rider bailed off in

time, but the horse fell down the canyon cliff and perished."

Rattlesnake encounters aside, the Western States Trail Ride prides itself on the welfare of its animals. Riders stop at a number of vet checks, including two mandatory one-hour rest stops. At the finish line, the first 10 horses to cross are judged for best physical condition, and the winner gets the esteemed Haggin Cup.

"The Haggin Cup is a testament to the horse," Christofk says. "My goal this year is to finish in the top 10 so my horse will qualify."

Christofk has finished in the top 10 three times, an impressive feat considering 50 percent of the 200 riders don't finish at all. Any rider that does make it is awarded the Western States Trail Ride buckle, a badge of courage in the endurance racing field. But to compete for the Tevis or Haggin Cup, you're in a race against the sun as much against the clock.

"My strategy is to get through Forest Hill [a dense section of trees] so I'm not riding through it in pitch black," Christofk says. "After that, moonlight is enough to get you to the finish line."

The Western States Trail Foundation, Tevis' parent organization, includes 800 volunteers who build trails, organize the race and raise funds for open-space projects to expand public-trail networks. In that light, Robie's 100-mile ride is the greatest thing that's happened to the backcountry between Lake Tahoe and Auburn. Not to mention it spawned one rip-roarin' race. 🐾

Ryan T. Bell is a Montana-based writer and backcountry guide. He authors the blog "Route 287" on-line at westernhorseman.com. To learn more about Tevis Cup, visit teviscup.org.