

Ultrarunning's Endurance Ride Roots

Davy Crockett
ultracrockett@gmail.com



Western States Trail Ride

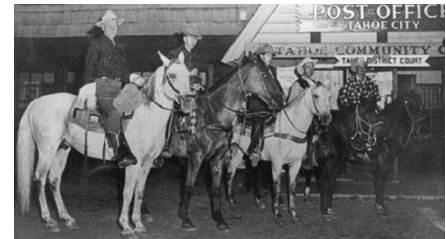
The early trail 100-mile races, including Western States 100, Old Dominion 100, and Vermont 100, all have their roots in horse endurance rides. The parallels from those rides to trail 100-mile ultras are many. Much of the experience and practices of those rides became part of trail 100 mile runs that were established in the 1970s and '80s.



Wendell Robie

In 1955 Wendell Robie, a successful businessman and outdoorsman from Auburn, California had a discussion with an associate about whether a horseback rider could cover 100 miles in a day. He got riled up about it and vowed to prove it could be done. He wanted to conduct the ride on a trail he had particular interest in, a historic trail used by miners in the 1800s between the California gold fields and the silver mines in Virginia City, Nevada. Wendell named the trail, "The Western States Trail." It went through little old gold towns between Lake Tahoe and Auburn, California, crossing over the crest of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Wendell made plans, established a committee, and worked to get support from the city of Auburn. A stated purpose of the ride was "to determine if Western horses are bred today as tough as those of the Pony Express era."

The inaugural ride was set for August, 1955. There were two 100-mile events, a three-day ride (with 125 riders) and a 24-hour ride (with five riders). On August 7, at 5:00 a.m. the five riders, including Wendell, were ready for the 24-hour ride at Tahoe City. To honor the spirit of the 1860-61 Pony Express, Wendell carried a mail pouch to be delivered to Auburn. A siren sounded and the riders were off to travel on a trail few had traversed in more than 100 years. The riders proceeded to Squaw Valley and climbed up the steep, rocky trail to Emigrant Pass. Wendell took the lead as they continue down, on the long ride.



First Ride 1955

A newspaper reported, "Robie set a mile-challenging pace at the beginning of the ride with horses travelling at either a show or fast trot. There was very little walking, mostly uphill, and no galloping. The men dismounted and led their horses approximately 25 miles. This to save their horses but accounted for some sore man muscles." (Nevada State Journal, 8/14/1955).

As they crossed the upper regions of the Middle Fork of the American River, Richard Highfill's horse slipped on a granite slab and went down, injuring its shoulder. When they arrived at Robinson's Flat (about mile 33), a veterinarian checked the horse and determined that it couldn't continue on, so Highfill dropped out. Five staff members from the University of California School of Veterinary Medicine examined all of the horses at given points.

The remaining four riders continued on. When the trail became very difficult, they dismounted and led their horses ahead. On sharp inclines they would follow behind, holding their horses' tails, letting the horse pull them up the slope. Nick Mansfield, of Reno, was one of the riders. He said, "Wendell was confident, and he had his mind set. He very definitely knew he was going to make it." When they arrived at Michigan Bluff (about mile 60) around dusk, the vets declared the horses fit to continue. The other two riders, Sewell and Patrick were exhausted and had to be coaxed to continue on. At some point after Foresthill, they were surprised to meet a young man running on the trail, Harold Jay. He said he would run and guide them the rest of the way with a flashlight. Nick and Wendell reached the finish first and Nick invited Wendell to cross in first cross the finish line. They arrived at 4:05 a.m. in 22:45 and had covered the last 40 miles in the dark. Wendell handed the mail pouch to a police officer and then rode his horse one more mile to his home on Robie Point. Harold Jay asked Nick what he was going to do. Nick replied, "I'm going to lay down in a stable and go to sleep." Harold insisted that Nick go home with him. "When he showed me to my room I was dead asleep almost before I could get into bed."

Letters of congratulation came in from all over to Wendell. Nick Mansfield expressed his opinion that their successful ride proved that the horse "still has what it takes to go places. In past years a ride of this nature might have been expected for a horse, but today, because we keep our horses in the pasture too much, we think the picture has changed." Wendell made plans to establish an annual event and wrote dozens of letters to individuals and riding groups inviting their members to enter the ride.



Wendell riding in later years

In 1956 Nick Mansfield added a 50-mile Pony Express Ride leg from Reno to Tahoe City. Riders then changed horses to participate in the Western States Trail Ride for a total of 150 miles in two days. Real mail was carried to be delivered to Auburn for 15 cents plus postage.

Each year the list of riders grew along with many spectators. The historic town of Michigan Bluff became a "party site" attracting politicians and celebrities. For many years the ride started in Tahoe City on the shoreline of Lake Tahoe. Riders and families would camp out all along the pristine shoreline preparing for the ride.

The Western States Trail Ride was not the first 100-mile ride competition but it was the toughest. The Green Mountain Horse Association's 100-Mile Trail Ride, a three-day ride in Woodstock, Vermont was established in 1936.

Originally the ride was named "100 Miles One Day Western States Pony Express Ride." Starting in 1959, the ride was renamed "The Tevis Cup," when Will Tevis, a San Francisco businessman, introduced a perpetual trophy that would be awarded to the winner each year. The trophy was named after his grandfather, Lloyd Tevis, who was president of Wells Fargo and Co. from 1872-1892. Over the years the ride was called "Western States Trail Ride" or nicknamed "The Tevis Ride."



By 1960, the ride was the premier annual riding event in the country with 42 starters. Movie star, Clark Gable was one of the judges that year. A 78-year-old woman finished that year.

In order to compete in the Ride, horses had to pass a veterinary physical prior to the start, and at least four other inspection stations at Robinson Flat, Michigan Bluff, Ponderosa Bridge, and the middle fork of the American River. The first three stations included one-hour mandatory stops for rest. Other check-points were eventually established along the way for timers and

recorders. In order to win the Tevis Cup, the horse must be “absolutely sound” at the finish, otherwise the Cup was awarded to the next finisher. Sterling Silver belt buckles were awarded those who finished in under 24 hours (total time) with fit horses.

Unlike other endurance sports in those early years, women were very prominent in these rides and were pretty much equal competitors with the men. In 1961, the winner was a woman, Drucilla Barner. She set a course record of 16:02, which included 13:02 riding time, subtracting three mandatory one-hour rest stops. The riding times started to be saved as course records. That year at Michigan Bluff, Wendell Robie’s horse was ruled lame by Dr. Richard Barsaleau. A vet assistant warned Barsaleau, “You don’t pull a horse ridden by Wendell Robie.” But Barsaleau stuck to his guns and initially Wendell was furious, but later admitted that the veterinarian was right.



Carl Bechdolt would start the riders at 5 a.m.



Pre-race medical check in 1960 at Lake Tahoe

The ride wasn’t without controversy. In 1961, past presidents of the California State Horsemen’s Association called for an end to the Tevis Cup Trail Ride. They said the ride was “pointless and inhumane, and endangers both horses and riders.” Wendell defended the ride against all critics. “Most persons have no idea of the capabilities of the western horse. He is a working horse, built for stamina, bred for endurance and capable of feats far beyond the ordinary casual riding done today.” (Reno Gazette-Journal, 7/27/1961). Armed Humane Society officers would even come to veterinary check points. Wendell said, “Let them take a look at these well-conditioned horses and then they can go back to picking up stray dogs and cats.” (Wilson, Challenging the Mountains, 184)

In 1962 the winner was disqualified because his horse was judged “lame” at the finish. The second and third place horses finished in a “dead heat.” The horse that was the best condition after the finish was awarded the Tevis Cup. A 14-year-old boy finished that year. There was a weight rule. Rider, saddle, and tack had to weigh at least 150 pounds, later changed to the Olympic standard of 165 pounds. The age minimum was 12 years old at that time.



Riders arriving at Emigrant Monument

Getting lost was a problem. In 1963 a rider failed to arrive at the first check station and deputy sheriffs were sent out to search. The rider was eventually found and was hospitalized because of exposure and dehydration.

To counter concerns about the treatment of horses, for several years during the 1960s a minimum finish time was established of 17 hours total time. You could not finish faster than 17 hours. Horses did suffer at times and “gave out.” Joseph “Bud” Dardi once had to walk his horse eight miles to Michigan Bluff to drop out. With the heat, horses would collapse at times and vets would need to ride in to administer IVs.



Neil and Salalah

In 1964, a 17-year-old in high school boy won the Tevis Cup on an Arabian mare, Salalah in 14:34 riding time, 17:34 total time. There were 53 starters that year. It was his third year in the ride. He said, “I feel great, ready to go after a victory again next year.” Also that year, Nick Mansfield on Buffalo Bill finished their tenth Western States Trail Ride. Nick received his 10th silver buckle and was awarded a special cup for reaching 1,000 miles. Buffalo Bill received a silver brow band. Buffalo Bill was originally purchased for \$12.50 after being left in a Reno pasture by an unknown former owner.



Nick and Buffalo Bill

Starting in 1964 because of the increased number of horses, groups were established for staggered starts, two minutes apart. That year they also started to award the Haggin Cup for the horse among the top-ten that finished in the best condition. In 1965 the 17-hour minimum time was abolished and the first rider, Eddie Johnson, set a course record of 11:38 riding time. He crossed the finish line in about 15 hours. With the success of the Western States Trail Ride, other rides patterned after it, started popping up all over the country including on in Kettle Moraine Forest, the Colorama Endurance Ride in Wisconsin. Western States was referred to as “the toughest marathon horse ride in the world.” In 1968 a new record of 11:18 riding time was set by Bud Dardi on Pancho.



Nervous horses crossing No Hands Bridge

Over the years, only about half of the riders finished each year. There are various reasons: 1. Going out too fast, getting caught up into the racing aspect. 2. Going too slow and missing cutoffs. 3. Not enough night-riding experience. 4. Not enough rider or crew experience. 5. Horse or rider not fit enough. 6. Various accidents. Those who succeeded the best, participated in previous rides in a crew, or as a volunteer.

The American River crossing was challenging at times. “We had to cross the American River which was so deep in spots that if you missed the ford markings you would have to swim.” Many riders trained on the course so their horse was familiar with the course. One rider mentioned, “When Dolly and I reached a spot near the end of the trail which we had ridden before, she knew she was going home. It was almost like she was smelling the oats. She really whipped out of there.”



Tragically, over the years, horses have died falling off of the cliffs. Others have slipped, survived, and returned another year to complete. Some died of heart attacks. It was rare and was a freak accident when it occurred. No rider has ever lost their life but there have been serious injuries and broken backs. Only the fastest riders finished before dusk. Riding at night was a highlight of the entire experience because the temperatures cooled and the horses had renewed energy. Flashlights were carried but usually not used because the horses could see much better than their human riders. As they trusted their horses, they avoided dangerous situations. Horses would frequently lose shoes. In

1970 “easy boots” were invented and carried along to slip over the horses’ hoof so they could continue on.

By 1970, the ride was very popular and included international entries. That year there were 200 entries and 169 passed pre-race veterinarian tests, declared as physically fit for the ride. That year the start was moved to Squaw Valley. Ninety-three finished within 24 hours and received 100-mile belt buckles. Eventually a 250 rider cap was established.

In 1971, Gordy Ainsleigh rode in the Ride with his horse, 8-year-old, Rebel. He started in the 14th group. There were four inspection checkpoints, Robinson Flat (one hour), Devil’s Thumb (half hour), Michigan Bluff (1 hour), and Echo Hills (1 hour). Many times Gordy would run ahead of his horse. He finished at Auburn, the fairgrounds stadium, in 19:37, about five hours after the cup winner. There were another 76 riders and horses that did not finish for various reasons: Lamé horse, thrown off horse, lost horse shoe, disqualified (switched rider), fatigue, horse pulse too high, missed cutoff, and rider quit.

In 1972 Hal Hall, age 17 finished for the first time on his Arabian horse, El Karbaj. Hal first attempted the ride in 1969 but was in way over his head. In those early days there was no training manual or tips published. They learned from their failures and successes. Hal tried again in 1971, kept up with the leaders, but his horse became injured by mile 60 and he was pulled. In 1972 he was determined to do well and finished in 2nd place, but he won the Haggin Cup. Hal would go on to finish Western States Trail Ride 30 times in 38 attempts, and won the Tevis Cup three times. Gordy again finished in 1972, ten minutes quicker.



Hal Hall and El Karbaj on Cougar Rock in 1974

Fridays before the race, were both stressful and exciting days for the riders. They would arrive at Squaw Valley and get their horses all ready and have them inspected by the veterinarians. Each year many horses would not pass the examinations. Being passed off to start was a huge initial victory. Friday evenings were exciting. The rider meeting was held with all the last-minute instructions. That evening also was the social event of the year for the riders. It was like a big reunion when they could exchange ideas, tips, and get educated. It also was a big party with dancing and a lot of drinking, making it tough for some to feel ready in the morning for the start.

The crew job was huge and became essential to do well in the ride. Crews needed to be in the right places at the right times with the right things needed. Crew planning at times would start weeks in advance of the ride. Crews played a crucial part in taking care of both the rider and the horse at certain checkpoints. They needed to have the right feed ready, cool down the horse by pouring water over it, and massaging its legs to make sure it didn't stiffen up. The horse needed enough time to stop and eat. The riders at times didn't take care of themselves enough and also needed to fed and cooled down.



The first seven to finish the 100-mile Western States Trail Ride on foot.

The 1972 Ride was very historic. Wendell Robie allowed twenty soldiers from Fort Riley Kansas to come and test their endurance ability to be the first to try to cover the course on foot. Their goal was to complete it in less than 48 hours. They started a day before the riders and was guided by experienced rider and runner, Jim Larimer. The soldiers marched in fatigues and boots, carrying canteens but no food. At each Ride checkpoint they were crewed by soldiers from a local Army base and fed with Meals Ready to Eat (MREs). They certainly were not ready for the altitude, heat, and climbs. Many soldiers dropped out along the way but

seven were successful in making it all the way to the finish. Six finished with a time of 44:54 and another soldier finished in 46:49. At the awards banquet that evening, they were presented with many awards including a trophy for the first finishers prepared by Wendell Robie. See [Western States 100 on Foot: The Forgotten First Finishers](#) to read details of their historic march.

In 1973, Gordy Ainsleigh rode again, but only made it to Robinson Flat (mile 30), which took him seven hours. His horse was lame and couldn't continue. He intended to ride again in 1974, but procrastinated finding another horse. Remembering the soldier's march in 1972 Dru Barner, Wendell Robie's assistant, suggested and encouraged Gordy to cover the course on foot, to try and finish it in under 24-hours. She said to him, "We're all wondering when you're going to leave the horse behind and just do it on foot." In the previous years when Gordy would ride, he would run much of the course anyway, leading or following his horse. Gordy also had previously run the Castle Rock 50-mile ride on foot in the Santa Cruz Mountains so it wouldn't be the first time he attempt to run a ride's course. Just seven weeks earlier, he teamed up to win the 42-mile Levi Ride & Tie Race with Jim Larimer of Auburn and Jim's Arabian horse, Smoke in Klamath Falls, Oregon. For "Ride & Ties," two runners/riders and one horse, race to reach a finish line together. One person rides ahead, ties off the horse so it could eat and rest, and then runs ahead. The other runner catches up, rides the horse and continues the leap frogging to the finish. It took very skilled and fit runners and riders to win these competitions.



Gordy and Jim, with Smoke

Gordy decided to run the 1974 Western States Trail Ride. In 1972 his running coach expressed the belief that no one could run that trail in under 24 hours. Gordy believed otherwise. To train, Gordy would get a ride to Michigan Bluffs and then run to Auburn. He did that four times in six weeks. In preparation, a few days before, he rode his dirt bike to various points on the course, and dropped off Gatorade that he would need during the run. On race morning, Gordy had a head start on the horses and tried to stay ahead of most of them for the first 30 miles or so to Robinson Flat. With all the single track trails in that section he didn't want to be delayed by stepping off the trail to let horses go by, so he ran faster than planned. The horses then passed him as he slowed, but he passed them again as they slowed and took their rest stops. A kind timing crew gave Gordy canned peaches at Last Chance and at Devil's Thumb he was really struggling in the 107 degree heat. He had decided to quit because he was so drained and felt so weak. His sister was stopped there with a lame horse and recognized that Gordy was dehydrated and suffering from hyponatremia. She revived him with salt and water. Thirty minutes later, he was on his way again. From Michigan Bluff on, he "panhandled" for food and liquids from plenty of people on the course. He stopped at one point to help some riders with a horse that had collapsed in the river. With 20 miles to go, he asked for a guide rider to help pace him to the finish. Many people were curious and betting on whether he could finish by 24 hours. As the finish came closer, he had been passed by the majority of the horses and was running amidst the riders and horses struggling to make the 24-hour cutoff in time.

At the finish, at McCann Stadium on the Gold Country Fairgrounds in Auburn, Hal Hall, had finished six hours earlier and was the winner of the Tevis Cup that year. He was a friend of Gordy's and had gotten up several times during the night to walk his horse, in order to make sure it didn't stiffen up. Hal went back to rest and asked someone to wake him up to witness Gordy's finish. Around 4:30 a.m., exciting news arrived that Gordy was close to the finish. Gordy entered the stadium, did a somersault before the finish line, and crossed with a time of 23:42. There were lots of cheers and congratulations. (Note: In those early years the course had not yet been accurately measured until the mid-80s when more miles were added. That year the course was actually close to 90 miles.) Gordy became the eighth to cover the course on foot and the first to break 24 hours. For the next 44 years was credited as being the first to cover the course on foot during the Ride until the story of the soldier's march was uncovered and told in 2018.

During the next two years, two other runners attempted to be the next finishers. Ken Shirk finished in 24:30. For the 1977 Ride, Wendell Robie decided it was time to add a 100-mile run too. It was informally organized that year with Gordy as race director and with Mo Livermore and Curt Sproul as the race managers helping with the leader runners. Shannon Weil, an experienced finisher of the ride, was invited

to help with the run and she was delighted. The four horse inspection stations were utilized as aid station and the veterinarians would check the runners as they came through.

1977 was the only year when the Run was held concurrently with the Ride. Shannon rode along on her horse monitoring the runners and rode the final 40 miles with the winner, Andy Gonzales, who set the course record in 22:57. Shannon also kept the official results by hand. Two runners finished in 28 hours and that helped to consider extending the final time the next year to 30 hours.

Runner	Time	Finish
1. Andy Gonzales	22:57	X
2. [Name]	[Time]	X
3. [Name]	[Time]	X
4. [Name]	[Time]	X
5. [Name]	[Time]	X
6. [Name]	[Time]	X
7. [Name]	[Time]	X
8. [Name]	[Time]	X
9. [Name]	[Time]	X
10. [Name]	[Time]	X
11. [Name]	[Time]	X
12. [Name]	[Time]	X
13. [Name]	[Time]	X
14. [Name]	[Time]	X
15. [Name]	[Time]	X
16. [Name]	[Time]	X
17. [Name]	[Time]	X
18. [Name]	[Time]	X
19. [Name]	[Time]	X
20. [Name]	[Time]	X
21. [Name]	[Time]	X
22. [Name]	[Time]	X
23. [Name]	[Time]	X
24. [Name]	[Time]	X
25. [Name]	[Time]	X
26. [Name]	[Time]	X
27. [Name]	[Time]	X
28. [Name]	[Time]	X
29. [Name]	[Time]	X
30. [Name]	[Time]	X
31. [Name]	[Time]	X
32. [Name]	[Time]	X
33. [Name]	[Time]	X
34. [Name]	[Time]	X
35. [Name]	[Time]	X
36. [Name]	[Time]	X
37. [Name]	[Time]	X
38. [Name]	[Time]	X
39. [Name]	[Time]	X
40. [Name]	[Time]	X
41. [Name]	[Time]	X
42. [Name]	[Time]	X
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47. [Name]	[Time]	X
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59. [Name]	[Time]	X
60. [Name]	[Time]	X
61. [Name]	[Time]	X
62. [Name]	[Time]	X
63. [Name]	[Time]	X
64. [Name]	[Time]	X
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87. [Name]	[Time]	X
88. [Name]	[Time]	X
89. [Name]	[Time]	X
90. [Name]	[Time]	X
91. [Name]	[Time]	X
92. [Name]	[Time]	X
93. [Name]	[Time]	X
94. [Name]	[Time]	X
95. [Name]	[Time]	X
96. [Name]	[Time]	X
97. [Name]	[Time]	X
98. [Name]	[Time]	X
99. [Name]	[Time]	X
100. [Name]	[Time]	X

Shannon's hand-written 1977 results

Planning for the 1978 Run got serious. The Western States Endurance Run Board of Governors was formally organized by Wendell and the key participants were horse endurance riders, Shannon Weil, Mo Livermore, Curt Sproul, Phil Gardiner, Gordy Ainsleigh, and Jim Larimer. Because of the difficulty experienced in 1977 with both runners and horses on the same trail, especially with single-track sections, the run was moved to the month before. Shannon worked at Robie's bank and made calls to get the word out and fielded calls from interested runners. Marketing for the run was mostly by word-of-mouth. In a 1978 Runner's World magazine, an advertisement was included that read: "Western States 100-mile Endurance Run. An experience only for ultramarathon veterans. Course: rugged, uncertified over mountains, through streams, with snakes and bears. All entries must pass physical exam. No one under 18. 30-hour time limit." The entry fee was \$10. (Hattiesburg American, 7/30/1978). Belt buckles were given to those who finished in under 24 hours.

Weather was good in 1978 but there was snow in the high country to run over. There were 63 starters (including five women) and 30 finishers, 15 under 24 hours. There were 21 aid stations, including six medical checkpoints.



Runner Frank Bozanich stopped to get his vital signs checked at one of six medical checkpoints during 1979 Western States 100

Runners had their vital signs checked, including blood pressure. If their weight went down 10%, they were pulled out of the race. A few willing runners even submitted to rectal temperatures readings in a little canvass privacy enclosure. Doctor Robert Lind, an emergency doctor from Roseville Hospital was enlisted by Wendell Robie in 1974 to help with the riders. Shannon Weil wrote, "Lind was extremely popular with the nurses and other staff doctors and when he told them of his experience, everyone wanted to join him the following year. He had dozens of medically trained people show up for the Western States Endurance Run. They pretty much organized themselves and came armed with first aid kits, stethoscopes, and loads of experience. Many stayed with the Run for 20-25 years or more. Bob Lind was also in charge of weighing the runners and bought a plethora of high-quality scales to be at the aid stations." Over the years Dr. Lind would receive high credit for an increasing high finish rate for the runners and he contributed significantly in understanding the effects of ultrarunning on the body. After Wendell Robie passed away, Lind performed the starter duties of firing off the shotgun at the start.



Doctor Bob Lind

In 1978 Andy Gonzales won for the second year with 18:50. At the finish, Shannon Weil said that the finishers looked "brutalized," but the race that year was a huge success. Wendell Robie was ecstatic and told Shannon that they had "caught a bear by the tail." He knew the race would become a very big deal. Shannon proclaimed that with both the ride and the run, that Auburn was "the endurance capital of the world." The Run did take off. Other race organizers soon called Shannon, including Old Dominion and Wasatch Front, to pick her brain about organizing and conducting trail 100s.

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In 1979, Western States was off and running with 143 starters and 96 finishers. Runners still had not figured out how much to carry. Bill Minturn carried two quarts of water with him. Bill recalled taking a wrong turn following footprints to a log cabin where an old prospector sat behind a barbed-wire fence and yelled, "Get out of here! You're not supposed to be in here." Vandals removed yellow trail ribbons and many runners got lost during the night that year. With all the interest, a lottery had to be introduced in 1981.

Both the Western States Ride and Run continued on through the years, as both became the most prestigious 100-mile endurance rides and runs in the country.

Vermont Trail Ride



In 1936, at Woodstock, Vermont, the Green Mountain Horse Association 100 Mile Ride was established as a "three-day grueling test." For the first year, 18 of the 20 riders and horses finished. The goal of this competition was to finish as close to 17 hours without going under. On the first two days you needed to cover 40-mile loops between 7-8 hours. For each minute over seven hours, the rider loses a point. If they went over eight hours, they were disqualified. On the third day they rode a 20-mile loop that needed to be completed no faster than three hours. Points were given for both time and horse condition each day. At the start of each day, the riders were staggered 30 seconds apart. Finishers were given ribbons. Different weight classes were established for awards. The event was limited to 65 riders and held on Labor Day weekend each year.

This wasn't a race, but rather a test of the horse's condition and stamina. The format evolved from the U.S. Army Cavalry's test rides of 300 miles. The first of those was held in 1919 on a course in Massachusetts. The cavalry covered 60 miles on each of five days at a rate of 17 miles per hour. This ride in Vermont required about six miles per hour. Dr. Earle Johnson, the first president of the Green Mountain Horse Association, then located in Rutland, Vermont, had been very interested in these 300-mile rides used by breeders to determine the best type of horse to use for endurance and stamina. This gave him the idea of starting the 100-mile ride in Vermont.

For the first year, 1936, the event was actually 80 miles in two days. The horses were not conditioned properly and the organization of the competition was a learning exercise. In 1937 the competition was extended to 100 miles in three days.

At Woodstock, in the early years, the horses were put up in stalls at the Woodstock Inn Stables, one of the largest in the East. When full, it was "a sight seldom seen in this horseless-carriage day. The old-time residents will go to sleep dreaming of days when the horse was 'king' and the 'swanky' city people came to Woodstock in their carriages and coaches." (The Burlington Free Press, 8/31/1939). At the Inn stables there were still a large number of coaches, sleighs, barges, buggies and wagons in the hay-loft. It was a big event for the town in the 1930s and 1940s. Horse shows were held, classes taught, and shorter pleasure rides conducted. In later years the start was moved to South Woodstock.





The course consisted of two different marked 40-mile loops and a 20-mile loop on old wagon trails around Woodstock that cut across hills and mountains where the oxen used to travel, and were still better for the ox than the automobile. Many of the roads were impassable for cars. A large number of people would come out to watch the horses go by. During the ride, judges were “whisked about” in jeeps to appear in surprise locations to judge the condition of the horses. After the third day all the horses were stabled and then closely examined by the judges and veterinarians.



A 1939 new article explained, “The majority of the riders who enter are amateurs. They usually have favorite mounts, and each considers his own to be the toughest and best horse in his locality. He thinks that one hundred miles would be just a work-out for his horse or else he wants to ascertain how much of a ride it really is.”



What was the typical training? “Any horse that is usably sound and of decent conformation between the ages of five and fifteen, and who has been worked regularly for a month or so previous to the ride should be able to give a good account of himself when ridden by an average rider. Conditioning can be accomplished by daily work of 10-12 miles. The rider will benefit from this as much as the horse.” (Burlington Free Press, 8/10/1939).

There were other very early 100-mile rides. In 1935 there was a 100-mile ride put on by the Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies. In 1938, in Illinois, 72 riders participated in a three-day 100-mile ride in the Cook Country forest preserves. The first two days they rode 40 miles in seven hours. It was sponsored by the Town and Country Equestrian association and Horse and Mule Association of America “in an attempt to learn more about the condition of horses and riders on long journeys.” A 100-mile ride with about 50 riders was held in 1939 near Des Moines, Iowa with the same three-day pattern at the Vermont Ride. Another ride was held in Oklahoma named the “Hoss Ride.” Great Falls Montana got into the game in 1941 with its three-day Montana 100-mile ride “to stimulate interest in horseback riding on trails and cross-country in Montana.”



In 1941 two divisions were incorporated, lightweight, and heavyweight. In later years a junior division was created for riders age 12-17.



Under age 14 finishers in Washshoe Horseman 100-Mile Ride

In 1946 the first 100-Mile three-day ride was held in California, in Guerneville. In 1950 the Florida 100 was established in Umatilla patterned after the Vermont Trail Ride. In 1952 a three-day Washshoe Junior Horseman 100-mile ride was established in Nevada/California for junior riders, guided by adults. It was held in Sierra Nevada above Reno, Nevada went over mountain passes. In 1956 the youngest finisher was eight years old.

In 1958, seventy-three riders took part in the Vermont Trail Ride and twenty-nine finished. A 50-mile “pleasure” ride was also conducted with 106 riders. Those riders did 20 miles each of the first two days and ten miles that last day. The course in the 1960s went from South Woodstock, through Reading, Cavendish, and back. The 20-mile loop went through Hartland and back. The cutoff for the 40-mile loops was made quicker, 6.5 to 7 hours, and the 20-mile loop from 2.5 to 3 hours. The field was limited to 75 riders. They went over hard and soft roads, up steep hills, over rocky stream beds, and down gullies.



1957 Winner Jeannie Krause



In 1963, 74 riders and horses participated in the 100-mile ride from about 15 states.

“The day before the Ride actually begins, there is a thorough inspection of all entries. Horses are weighted, measured, and examined from head to hoof by the three judges, at least one of whom is always a veterinarian. Blemishes, scars, old saddle sores, and other imperfections are noted to be compared at daily inspections with the condition of the horse after each day’s mileage. Temperature, pulse, and respiration are taken, and each horse is trotted up and down a tarred strip so that the judges can detect any unsoundnesses or eccentricities of movement.” (Bennington Banner, 8/17/1974).

In 1974 two ladies described their experience. “We conditioned both ourselves and the horses thoroughly, riding about four days a week to prepare.” A heavy rainfall fell the second day. “We were in terrible straits that second day since we were bone weary the first day. The rain made it very rough, up and down the mountains. The footing was uncertain along much of the trail, and the mountains were so high in some instances that you virtually disappeared in the mist on the summits.” 80 riders started that year and 40 finished.

Many times, judges hid along the course to observe. One person commented, “I served as a recording secretary for one of the judges one year, and we sat unobtrusively behind some trees to observe the horses climbing a steep woodland hill. Most of the horses saw us long before their riders did, betraying the fact merely by pricking their ears; many of the riders, intent on the hill, never saw us at all!”

Pacing the horse properly during the run was very important. “The pros of the game can feel when their horses are tiring; they know when the time comes to quit or ruin a good horse. But they also know lots of little tricks of the trade to make their horses look their best in front of the judges. They use the best flat places to let their horses make time and they arrange their journey so that their horses can walk downhill whenever possible. They anticipate where the judges are lurking, and try to infect their horses with enthusiasm – ‘Look what fun we’re having, no problems at all!’ A good horseman can make a tired horse look less tired, but a poor horseman can make even a potential winner look like death warmed over.”

By 1974 there were about six other rides using the same format and rules used by the Vermont Ride. A “100-Mile Circuit Challenge Cup” was awarded to the rider with the most points competing in three of the rides. Usually there were 10-15 riders and horses competing for this cup. In addition to the Tevis Ride in California, there were annual competitions in Britain and Australia sponsored by Arab horse clubs.

One successful veteran of 27 100-mile rides shared her training. “Her conditioning program consists of daily rides, rarely over eight miles, over hard roads, gravel roads, trails, and grass. An hour and a half to two hours is her usual time, tightening up on speed the last month. She keeps a record of respiration and heartbeat, so that she can tell if her horse is training normally.”

Weather had a great effect on these rides. Lucille Kenyon of Florida, a veteran of more than 75 100-Mile rides said, “When it rains, the horses stay cool, but riders become chafed from wetness and sore up

their horses' backs by sitting crooked. Lameness can occur in slippery going. But in hard dryness, the shoulders take the pounding and can quickly get stiff from the continual concussion. In cool weather, riders and horses are fresh and go out too fast; they look cool at the day's end, and are thereby cooled out too quickly, since riders are fooled by lack of the usual signs. Result, stiff horses at night check, plus dehydrated horses if there has been a wind. Very hot weather demands so much in the hills of Vermont; dehydration, fatigue, heavy breathing, fast pulses, poor work on the hills, and many dropouts are common."

On the 50th anniversary of the 100-mile ride, in 1986, there were 85 starters. The route wound through South Woodstock, Woodstock, Pomfret, Reading and back. There was a high dropout rate that year. Landowners in the area had generously allowed the association to keep up wooden and metal trail markers year round. Confidence markers were painted on round can-tops, nailed to trees. The directional signs were different colors for the three different days.



In 1989, the Vermont 100 Mile Endurance Ride and Run was established, using many of the same roads and trails established by the original Green Mountain Horse Association 100 Mile Ride. A concurrent 100-mile trail race was conducted with a one-day 100-mile ride. While this was a different event than the original 100-mile ride, they share the same tradition and local Vermont heritage, originating from the same town.

In 2017, The Green Mountain Horse Association 100 Mile Ride is still held on Labor Day weekend and is in its 81st year.



Old Dominion 100-Mile Endurance Ride



Alex Bigler, who had been a member of the Board of Directors of the Western States Trail Ride, moved to Northern Virginia and brought a desire to organize a similar run. Others went west to participate in the ride. A group was eventually gathered together a group to discuss the creation of a Virginia endurance ride. The group incorporated an organization under the name "Old Dominion 100 Mile Endurance Ride" with Alex as president.

In 1974 the Old Dominion 100-Mile Endurance Ride was established patterned after the Western States Trail Ride in California. The ride began and ended in Leesburg, Virginia and went through land with historic significance, traveled by George Washington and later the Mosby's Raiders during the Civil War. It circled and climbed the Blue Ridge Mountains, crossed the Appalachian Trail, and descended to Calmes Neck. It then traveled through many rural villages before returning to Leesburg.

The ride in the early years had a cavalry theme, awarding a Cavalry Award for the rider and horse that rode the ride with the least outside assistance. For the first few years, there was no award for the first to finish, instead they focused on "To finish is to win." For the first ride in 1974, it rained all day. But the ride was still successful in the tough conditions.



Alex Bigler

That year, Don Cromer, a veterinarian from Churchville, Virginia, rode his black stallion, Mack in the ride. He said, “We trained for four months and rode 78 miles a week. We used the back roads and different farm trails but there was just no way to really be prepared for what faced us at Leesburg.” Don wanted to start in the last group because Mack was slightly unsettled among all the horses. “It looked like the start of a posse when the first group broke from the starting line. They were going at a full gallop. But I wanted to pace myself at eight miles an hour. They had 10-minute stop breaks and then three, one-hour forced stops. The horses were checked and their breathing checked to see if they could continue. You just didn’t know where the check points were, and when you passed them, the checker would call back by radio and a pin was moved along the route so that a rider’s position was kept up to date.”



Don Cromer, with Mack



Riders in 1975 Old Dominion Ride

Don continued, “The ride was through rough mountain country, some of which was very steep. It included numerous water crossings and logs across the trail. But Mack never once quit on me. He was always willing to go one. It was tough following the trail at times, especially after dark. A lot of it went across private land and a number of markers were knocked down by cattle. You had to be on your toes to keep on the right trail. Don finished in 23:40, total time. There were 24 finishers among the 51 starters that year. (The News Leader, Staunton, Virginia, 6/26/1975).

The Bicentennial year, 1976, was the biggest year with 56 starters and 41 finishers. In 1977, a one-day Empire 100 Mile Endurance Ride started in Krumville, New York, in the high Catskills, which included 13,000 feet of climbing along the way. Another 100-miler started in 1978, in Fayetteville, North Carolina, the Tar Heel Ride.

In 1979 at Old Dominion, a concurrent 100-mile endurance run was added by Pat and Wayne Botts. For the inaugural run, 45 runners started and only two had experience finishing a 100-mile race. The run began at 4:15 a.m. Ray Krolewicz led most of the race but sprained his ankle while running and talking to a pretty girl on a horse. Peter Monahan won in 17:56. There were 18 finishers that year in under 24 hours.



In the early 1980s the course was changed because of land development and the resulting course was more difficult. It moved to the Massanutten and Blue Ridge Mountains with seven significant climbs. In 1982 because of heavy rain, the trail portions of the course were really muddy so more road sections were used. The horses suffered because of all the pavement and really chewed up trail portions making it miserable for



the runners. In the 1990s, because of the difficulty accommodating both riders and an increasing field of runners on the same day, the running race eventually moved to another day. In 2017 the Old Dominion Endurance Ride continues to be held.

Roots for Ultrarunning

Today’s ultrarunners should feel indebted to the endurance riders for paving the way toward the establishment of trail 100-mile races. A common kinship is felt between the two sister sports. Road 100-milers existed for many years before these trail 100-mile races were established, but they were on roads, tracks, and loops. ([Read also *Swift Endurance Legends*](#)). The trail 100s inherited many of the same procedures of aid stations, course markings, trail work, crews, medical checks, and of course the belt buckle award. Many thanks goes to the riders and to the late Wendell Robie.