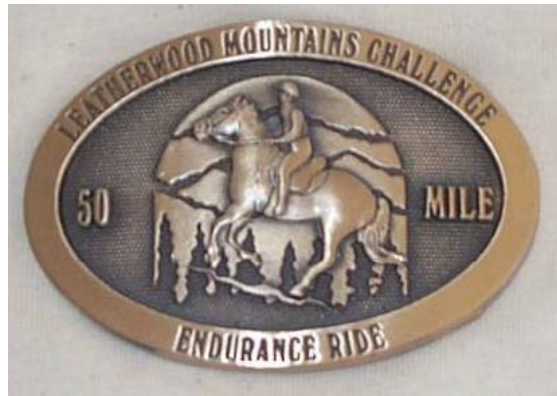


## A “TURTLE” GUIDE TO COMPLETING THE LEATHERWOOD MOUNTAINS CHALLENGE

“LEATHERWOOD - A deciduous shrub (*Dirca palustris*) of eastern North America, having tough flexible branches, pliable bark, and small yellow flowers.”

Leatherwood - Even the name makes you think of “Endurance”, flexibility, toughness...and beauty. Joan and I look forward to this ride each spring. I have attended every year except the first one. (I sent in my entry form too late) We had planned to go early and just hang out for a couple of days, but Joan couldn't get off work and there was NO way she was gonna miss this ride! Hmm...do you suppose it could be the baby back ribs at the restaurant?



Leatherwood has a history of hosting some inclement weather along with the ride. The first year I attended, it was cold, cloudy, and damp, with the fog in the valleys looking like lakes from the mountains above. Even then, it was beautiful. When the fog burned off, the valleys below were bright green with miniature cows sprinkled across them and the mountains “Blue Ridge Blue” in the distance. Last year, it sleeted Saturday night, and snowed all the way home, the worst year ever, but it was still a GREAT ride, Magic's first ride and the only year I didn't complete it.

We are 6 ½ hours from Leatherwood, traveling thru the Beautiful Nantahala Gorge, picking up I40 at Asheville, then over the Southern Divide in Pisgah National Forest. Spring came early to the mountains this year, and the roadsides and homes along the way were resplendent in their spring color. In the bright sunshine with the temperature around 70, the Bradford Pear, Forsythia, Redbuds, Pink Dogwoods, Jonquils, Daffodils and many other flowering trees in full bloom put on a spectacular show.

We stopped at Old Fort to give Magic a stretch and get an Apple Pie at McDonalds. Business was somewhat slow and all the girls were hanging out the take-out window looking at Magic, so we took him over to visit. He promptly stuck his head in the window, gave one of 'em a sloppy kiss and wanted to know if he could get a large salad, no dressing, heavy on the carrots!

We arrived at Leatherwood a little before noon, and were again astonished by spring flower show, the most beautiful we have ever seen it. Last year, Magic spent Saturday

night in his heavy blanket standing in his corral, which had turned into a lake from a heavy rainstorm. This year I reserved a stall for the first time and we were a little concerned that he would not eat and drink well there. However, he was assigned a nice 12 x12 stall under the eaves on the North side of the West Barn, there was a friendly guy on each side, he could stick his head out, and there were horses all around. He happily moved right in like he had lived there all his life. Every couple of hours, we took him for a walk to graze around the barns and paddocks. We were relieved that he was so relaxed and mellow. Seems Leatherwood affects both people AND horses that way! This is a tough ride for young horse with only 150 miles. Keeping close watch on Magic's condition, a lot of time out of the saddle, and a good ride plan would be essential to finish. I had started giving him electrolytes on Thursday in his feed and continued to provide electrolytes in small beet pulp slurries right up until the ride started. In addition, this would be the first ride in his new saddle, an RP Avant-Garde.



“Mahada Magic”

We got Magic settled in and since we didn't need a corral, parked the trailer off in a corner of a pasture out of the way, unpacked, picked up our ride packet, broke out the refreshments and kicked back in the sun of a beautiful spring day, surrounded by green grass, mountains and lots of horses!

Reflecting back on all the rides I have attended over the years, I began to mentally make a list of all the amenities I would like to have at the “ideal” Endurance Ride. What would be on your list? How about:

- A ridecamp nestled in a beautiful valley in the mountains with a creek running through it.
- Rustic restored buildings, sparkling clean barns and paddocks, with MANY large stalls.



- A butt-kicking trail. You must take care of your horse and know what you're doing. No wimps or whining allowed!
- Spectacular views on the trail.

- A first class restaurant within 100 yards of your trailer. (With some GREAT folks serving you)
- Great ride meals, with seconds. (How about Country Fried Steak AND Chicken Tenders, green beans, rice, salad, rolls, and banana pudding served hot from a gourmet restaurant next door and 5 kinds of drinks?)
- Hot showers.
- Water faucets scattered all over the place. No toting required!
- Camping area with power and water.
- Primitive corral camping in grass pastures.
- Sheltered indoor arena with sound and a chalkboard for the ride meeting.
- Some of the best Vets in the SE. The Head Vet is an Endurance Rider, trains here and knows the trails. (Don't know for sure, but I suspect the vets get treated like royalty here)
- The best timer in the SE (probably the world) - Nancy Gooch.
- Rental cabins (actually private homes) with spectacular views, some with pastures, rock fireplaces, and hot tubs.
- Superbly marked trail with ribbons and pie plates with directions, notes, and comments.
- Water tanks at the top of just about every climb.
- Bottled water for riders at every checkpoint.
- Horse Ambulance available for emergencies with radio communications.
- Spotters at checkpoints to keep you on trail, and riders scattered across the trail to monitor for emergencies.
- A community of horse people whom just love Endurance riders and turn out in bunches to watch and help.
- No Forest Service or BLM rules to deal with...100+ miles of trail across 4000 acres, all private property.
- A limit on the number of riders to prevent over crowding.
- A GREAT "hands on" ride manager Abbie Hanchey and Leatherwood owners Phil Rash and Phil Whitson.

In the future, I plan to talk with "Phil and Phil" about the lack of amenities at this ride. There is no rock fireplace with leather couches in the restaurant, there is no "room service"...ah, I mean "trailer service"...and the groom didn't show up Saturday morning to saddle my horse!!

Magic vetted in all A's late Friday evening. Joan prepped her crew area for Saturday, and we headed off to dinner and the ride meeting. After a great meal, Ride Manager Abbie Hanchey, Phil Rash, and Head Vet

Duane Barnett discussed the facilities, camp rules, trail layout, and vet parameters.



- Two loops back to camp, repeating the first one to get 50 miles.

- The “pink” loop - 16.5 miles through “JOETOWN”.
- The “yellow” loop – 17 miles along Elk Ridge and down into “BOB’S BRANCH”. This is a killer trail, with many elevation changes.
- Two vet checks with 50-minute holds and a 64 pulse criteria.
- Controlled start at 6:00 AM.



Phil Rash and Abbie Hanchey

I tracked down Becky Siler and her Moyle horse “Miles”, who would be riding with us. Becky, from Clermont, FL is in great demand as a ride photographer. I have dozens of her ride pictures decorating my walls and was looking forward to riding with her instead of seeing her hiding in the bushes with her camera! Becky is preparing for Tevis and needed some mountain training. (SE Rider Claude Brewer who has completed Tevis and Leatherwood feels that Leatherwood is more difficult to complete than Tevis) Allowing 2 hours for recovery and holds, we had 10 hours for the trail. Three hours per loop



Nancy, Becky and “Miles”

would give us an hour leeway. However, I knew the trail well and we would need to adjust.

The first (and the last) are easy compared to the second loop thru Bob’s Branch...lots of elevation changes there. We needed to make a little time on the first loop and ease off on the second one in order to save our horses for the last one.

Joan hustled off to feed Magic at 4:30 AM while I got dressed and sorted out my tack. It was a beautiful night with stars everywhere and a few black clouds drifting across the mountains to the west. We met Becky and Miles over in the arena to warm up at 5:30 AM. We decided it would be best to let Becky lead for the first loop, since Miles is an experienced horse, giving Magic time to settle down a little. He’s always responsive, but very “enthusiastic” at the start. Nancy Gooch’s “The Trail is Open” echoed through camp and we fell in somewhere around the “back of the middle” and headed up the mountain. As the day began to lighten, the sky was gray and overcast.

Things went pretty well and Miles held a good pace. Eventually I suggested Becky get off and give Miles a break on a long downhill. I dismounted, took the lead and trotted down the hill, switched over to tailing on the fly at the bottom and headed up the next hill. When I reached the top and looked back, no Becky in sight. Hmmm....seems going UP hills is a little harder than going down! They don’t have trails like this in Florida, right, Becky?

Becky is still leading about 4-5 miles out of camp. I’m keeping Magic off

Miles' butt, but staying close enough behind that we can talk. However, at the top of a little hill, Miles did an abrupt stop and Magic stepped on his left rear shoe, yanking it off. Becky didn't have an easyboot, but since the ground was soft we thought he would be OK until we reached camp. He showed no signs of being off. We did the first loop in 2 hrs and 41 minutes, just about a perfect pace. In camp, both horses were down immediately, but in the trot-out, Miles was off on the right front! Was it because of the lost shoe on the left rear? Did we go too fast for Miles on the downhills? Things like this happen...they have happened to ME...but it doesn't make you feel any better. I would have gladly given up my completion to have Becky finish! Dr. Ken Marcella looked at it and it appeared to be something below the pastern...strange... the next morning he trotted out just fine. Disappointed for Becky and feeling really down, Magic and I headed up the mountain alone on the tough second loop.

Trying to help Magic as much as possible, I ran most of the downhills and tailed the long climbs. He was tired, but hanging in there and very willing, drinking at every opportunity and grabbing a bite of grass now and then. I continued to give him electrolytes in his beet pulp slurry and small half doses of electrolyte paste every hour. We were out almost 4 hours. The heat and humidity was building and the sun was out as we completed the second loop. I don't remember there being more than 30 feet of flat ground in the entire loop! A's and one B in the Vet Check...CRI 60/64...looking good!

Out on the final loop at 2:31 in last place...3 ½ hours to finish it. We caught up with Tim Worden and rode with him for a few minutes. His horse "Telos Pocos Son" was behaving a little strange, and Tim decided to call it quits. A Leatherwood drag rider was right there to show him a shortcut back to camp and his horse was fine. We caught up with Mike Bostic and "Cougar" with about 8 miles to go and we rode together the rest of the ride, both of us on the ground a lot, finishing at 5:36. Mike is the perennial "Turtle" for Leatherwood. As we were trotting down the pavement toward the finish line, his horse spooked at the bridge and ran me off the road, so this year I got the Turtle award. Joan, Becky, Becky's sister Nancy, and a nice crowd were at the finish line cheering for the "tailenders". I needed that! Sixty-three started the 50-mile ride, 50 finished.



Mike Bostic and "Cougar" - 49<sup>th</sup> Place



The "Turtles" - Jim and "Magic"

Considering the trail, the riders and the Vets did a great job. I was out so long I was in the shower during the ride meeting. Afterwards, Joan finally got HER award...her favorite baby back ribs!

Magic had only a couple of B's all day and at the final vet check, you could here his gut rumbling without a stethoscope. He was just TIRED. Joan, worried about the little guy, got up at 2:00 AM to feed him again and take him for a walk. He's coming along and his new saddle was comfortable for me and his back was perfect! What a relief!

SERA has the scales at just about every ride. We write the weight in an unused spot on the Vet Card at each vet check to see what is happening as the ride progresses. At this ride, Magic's starting weight was 912. At the first check it was 838. He LOST 74 lbs. At the second check, it was 842...he had picked up 4 pounds. At the finish, it was 852, a gain of 10 lbs. Total loss during the ride was 60 lbs.

On our way to breakfast Sunday morning, we noticed that a trailer was backed up to the side of the hill near the restaurant and a rider was trying to load his horse...obviously he had been at it for some time, considering the condition of the ground around the rear of the trailer. The rider, Dr. Stith Gower, with his horse "Dancer" had driven all the way from Madison, Wisconsin to attend the ride. I offered to help and he gladly accepted...he was pretty frustrated at this point. I took Dancer a few feet from the trailer and spent 10 minutes teaching him to "go forward" with a dressage whip tap on the butt. A few minutes later he was walking calmly onto the trailer with a single tap. You never know how long it's going to take, but Dancer gave it up pretty easily!

After a great leisurely breakfast (they now have a breakfast buffet), we let Magic graze a few minutes, said our good byes and headed for home with a Leatherwood T-shirt for Joan and a Leatherwood Buckle for me. If only Becky could have finished, the ride would have been perfect!

Betsy Knight on Jureeba Kassan won the 50 and BC.

Linda Norton on Nautiki Ku won the 25 with Lize Sine on Magnificent taking BC.

Thanks to Phil Rash, Phil Whitson, Abbie Hanchey, our outstanding Vets, and the Residents of Leatherwood for another fantastic ride!

Jim, Joan, and "Mahada Magic"