

Northeast Region • 50/75/100 mile rides
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Vermont 100

BY SUE GREENALL

It's 3:50 a.m. when the music from "Chariots of Fire" breaks the quiet of the Vermont hills. Fog rolls past the spotlights as 250 runners file down to the starting line. Headlights bobbing, the mass creates a low thunder as 500 pairs of sneakered feet start down the trail at 4:00 a.m. As they disappear into the dawn, the 100-mile riders are preparing for their 5:00 a.m. start. They will catch the back of the run in the first five miles, crossing the Taftsville covered bridge and climbing "The Sound of Music" trail together.

At nine o'clock, the 75-mile riders start out over 18 miles of trail before they catch up with the 100-mile riders at Highbrook Farm, hold #2. And at 2:00 p.m., the 50-mile riders start on a 20-mile trail that will take them to Tuackenback, hold #4, where they meet up with the rest of the ride.

For the remainder of the race, all of the riders and runners will share the same trail, passing Margarita Ville (where you can grab a burger) and Polly's Diner (food served up with a smile) before negotiating "The Trail of the Bloodhound" and climbing to the tower on Blood Hill. The last half-mile is lit up with jug lanterns as it follows a wide wooded trail to the opening into the field and the finish line lit with torches and friendly faces.

Every ride has something special about it. The Tevis is the oldest running endurance ride; the Old Dominion is known for its spectacular and challenging trail. The Vermont 100 stands alone as being the last 100 mile endurance ride and ultramarathon for runners.

Historically, there were many rides that shared the trail with runners. In fact the entire sport of ultramarathoning started unofficially in 1974 with Gordy Ainsleigh when he showed up at the start of the Tevis without a horse. "Gordy," they said, "where's your horse?" "He's lame so I came to run it alone." And he did, finishing in 23 hours and 47 minutes. And from that a sport was born, with Western States, Old Dominion, The Big Horn and Vermont becoming rides that also hosted runs.

One by one the two sports split, leaving the Vermont 100 as the last. Steve and Dinah Rojek spent 15 years running the event from Smoke Rise Farm in South Woodstock, Vermont. Many of the ride traditions were started by the Rojeks, such as the playing of "Chariots of Fire" and shooting off fireworks at the start. The route closely followed the Green Mountain Horse Association 100-mile

competitive trail ride (held over three days), an event that will celebrate its 73rd year in 2008 (yes, older than the Tevis!). Rojek hospitality became well known from this ride, with veterinarians considering it an honor to be invited to officiate.

The concept of staggering the start of the 50-mile ride so that those riders finished with the 100s started with Steve Rojek. Actually, he wanted the whole ride to start at midnight and finish in the daylight but the logistics were overwhelming so this was the compromise.

The 75-mile ride was added in 2007. Amazingly, the three rides mesh together so well that the winners of all three distances cross the finish line within 15 minutes of each other. Needless to say, the finish timer has to be on her toes to determine who is riding what distance! Factor in the top runners coming in also and the finish line is far from a dull place.

The event is kicked off by a pasta feast for 1,000 people: riders, runners, crews, family, vets, doctors, volunteers and folks that just want to see it all happen. It is inspiring to see what those runners eat and drink—lots of beer, pasta and ice cream. Conversations

have created friendships between riders and runners who recognize each other from previous years. Both are fascinated with each other's sport, the runner amazed that it is possible to sit on a horse for 100 miles and the rider wondering what it must feel like to run 100 miles. They share stories and promise to check on each other after the event.

Both events have attracted the best in their sport and while most endurance riders consider this ride a challenging one, the runners actually think of it as "easy"! The ride record is 12 hours; the run record is 14 hours (the runners finish first as they don't have holds). The hard roads and long hills take their toll on the horses but the runners actually like that stuff! The runners will tell you that while "Vermont ain't flat" it's not the Rockies or the Himalayas. (Yes, they run there too.) Just like watching a top endurance horse sailing through a ride, seeing the front-runners go by is awe-inspiring. Since most of the riders and crew can't even run to their mailbox and back, it is even more awesome!

The runners are not the only ones on the trail; they have aid stations every five miles filled with goodies that their crews are only

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The first hold at the Vermont 100 is lit up in a blaze of sunshine and green grass.

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too willing to share with the riders. Imagine: Gatorade, water, PB&J sandwiches, oranges, bananas, grapes, power bars, gummy bears, M&Ms and, later into the night, coffee, burgers and anything “Polly’s Diner” can cook up. It is rather hard to feel alone on this trail, or lacking something to eat.

While the front-runners and riders finish just after dark, the majority of the race goes through the night. At 60 miles runners can pick up a pace runner to coach them along. Often the horses will fall right into place behind a pace runner and continue on happily. The runners have two divisions, the 24-hour completion buckle and the 30-hour completion certificate. Some of the runners actually stop and sleep, resuming their run at dawn in hopes of completing in the 30-hour division. Riders and runners alike stand at the finish line on Sunday at 9:55 a.m. to cheer the last runners through.

The support for such an event is huge. The riders reap the benefits of having ham radio contacts, police at road crossings and extensive medical crews. But the greatest support is from the community. People are lined up at intersections and roadsides cheering on the contestants from the early dawn until well into the night. Landowners feel privileged to have the trail run across their land and put out water for both horses and humans. With the proceeds of the race going to support the Vermont Association for Ski and Sports (VASS) which supports handicapped sports of all kinds in the state, the event is nothing but positive.

Four years ago the race had to make a hard decision when it moved to a new venue: keep the horses or not. It was the runners that wouldn’t give it up. Unanimously, they agreed to a venue that would allow for horses that will lead to the celebration of the 20th year of the event this year. The anniversary shirt will list the names of all of the past winners, runners and horses alike. Truly a statement that, at least for the Vermont 100, these two sports will continue on together.