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STRONG TEVIS CUP FINISH FOR MORGAN IN ARABIAN DOMINATED SPORT



At 5:02 a.m. July 29th Silver Valley Tate, a nine-year-old purebred gaited Morgan horse, crossed the finish line of the world's toughest endurance ride—the Tevis Cup.

“Tate” was the only purebred Morgan horse to compete against a predominately Arabian field this year in Tevis. Gaited Morgans are rarely seen competing in other endurance style events, especially in the Western States.

Owned by Mary and Dwight Hanson of Ithaca, Nebraska, and ridden by Sarah Rinne of Steinauer, Nebraska, Tate seemed to glide down the trail, passing point after point along the way and making the required time of 24 hours or less.

His rider, a seasoned distance rider through North American

Trail Ride Conference, veteran Marine and mother of four, had nothing but admiration for what Tate accomplished this late July.

When asked how Tate handled the trail, Sarah said, “He did great. He is such a willing horse. He would give you anything you asked of him and then keep on going. He did get tired after going through the canyons around 50 miles into the ride, but he perked back up and we got it done. It was an amazing experience.”

Distance riding success such as this rests on three things; a great horse, a great rider and a good dose of Lady Luck. All of these in the right ratio can lead to a finish in the granddaddy of all endurance rides: the Tevis Cup.

Riding a 100-mile point to point endurance race in the Sierra

By Erin Glassman

ABOVE: Sarah Rinne and Silver Valley Tate tackle Cougar Rock on the Tevis Trail (photo © Bill Gore of Gove/Baylor Photography).

THIS JUST IN Strong Tevis Cup Finish for Morgan in Arabian Dominated Sport

Nevada mountains in California, Tevis Cup participants are allowed only 24 hours to finish. Cut off times are strictly adhered to and rigorous veterinary protocols are in place to ensure safety of the horses. If all of these criteria were not enough to create difficult parameters, the terrain will complete the picture of harshness.

Now in its 63rd year, the event started on a trail rediscovered by members of the Native Sons of the Golden West. This group, a herd of horsemen history buffs, uncovered the old 1850s mining “highway” in the 1920s. Modern day stops along the route are former mining camps with names that ring of old, such as Deadwood and Last Chance.

Narrow footpaths wind around craggy granite and volcanic outcroppings that line the sheer drops of terrain surrounding the American River Canyon. The dim silvery light of the moon and a slight dome of glow stick light are the only illumination most riders have to finish the last third of the treacherous trail. The ride weekend rotates to catch timing most closely aligned with the full moon.

On an average year slightly more than 50 percent of riders complete the ride. This year, however, only 42.7 percent of the 149 starting teams finished and Tate and Sarah were among those few.

“Tremendous heat and an underrated smoke layer from the Carr fires most likely contributed to the lower than average completion rate,” stated head Tevis veterinarian Mike Peralez, DVM.

“Horses all in all are resilient, though, and all of their bodily systems are fit when they are conditioned to the level necessary to finish Tevis,” replied Peralez when asked if the conditions would have significant effect on the horses.

“They should bounce back very quickly,” he continued.

One must marvel that despite the added challenge this year Tate got the job done.

Mary and Dwight’s plans for Tate did not include Tevis originally. Owners of Morgans since 1977, the couple brought his mother home about a month before he was foaled.

“We wanted a baby sired by Caduceus Moses. He was a stallion well-known for his work ethic, good mind, and he was gaited—that’s what we were looking for. Caduceus had been leased to Missouri Morgans and we were able to buy Tate’s mother bred. He was going to be Dwight’s pleasure trail horse,” said Mary.

Although trained to drive, trail riding has been Tate’s primary discipline. Not long after he was four, however, Lady Luck led Tate to fall victim to a trailer accident.

“I was hauling Tate in our bumper pull near Yutan, Nebraska. We went over a really rough railroad crossing and I could feel the trailer swaying really hard back and forth. The force snapped the emergency brake cable and the safety chains followed suit,” recalled Dwight.

“When the dust settled, I looked back and there was no trailer behind the truck. When I went back to find it, it had turned over on its side on a large box culvert after shooting through two road signs and rolling down a hill. The emergency crew did not rush over because they thought they were going to find a dead horse. When I looked in, Tate was laying on his side. He was OK. In his driving training, Tate had been trained to lay on his side to help in potential carriage wrecks,” said Dwight.

“After a couple of failed attempts to get him up, he stayed quiet and laid there until we could right the trailer and get him out. Once we got him out he only had a few minor scratches and loaded directly into a friend’s trailer to get him home. Although he occasionally gets a little stiff on the side he landed on, he really came out well. Luck was on our side,” Dwight said.

After Tate recovered from the accident, Dwight rode him in their first competitive trail ride in northeastern Nebraska. “Mary volunteered me to ride since entries were low and she wanted to help ride management out. We finished the ride and he did OK!”

Time passed and Dwight and Mary continued to compete Tate in competitive trail rides where he did well, even winning coveted Sweepstakes Awards, the high combined horse and rider scores, on occasion.

In 2015 Mary was managing her first ride at Rock Creek Station, a historic Pony Express stop. Dwight did not want to ride, so Mary asked Sarah to compete him.

It was the first time she had ever ridden him. They took Sweepstakes together. Mary said, “Sarah and Tate just seemed to click.”

A photo was taken of the pair climbing up one of the canyons. All three of Tate’s humans agree that it was at this ride the idea of tackling Tevis with him was birthed.

The next two years were spent getting long slow distance through North American Trail Ride Conference, one of the sanctioning bodies for competitive trail rides in the United States.

Originally the intent was to compete the Tevis trail in 2017. Sarah and Tate did two 50-mile rides in Florida early in the year, in addition to their competitive trail ride schedule.

Once again Tate fell victim to Lady Luck and suffered a tendon injury mid-year.

“After we discovered his tendon problem, we took the rest of the year easy. We enlisted a multitude of therapies. We took it a lot easier on his training in 2018 and stuck with competitive trail—I think that made the difference recovering from the tendon issue,” Sarah recalled.

July 2018 arrived and it became time for Sarah and Tate to compete at Tevis. While on the ride tenuous moments arose for the team.

“The canyons were especially difficult. There was a time I felt I needed to back him off after getting through them because he seemed really tired,” Sarah said. “I dismounted and tailed him up for a while. When we reached the top, I gave him extra time at the water troughs at Devil’s Thumb. I was worried that it might be the end for us because it took him longer for his heart rate to come down. We spent extra time cooling in the water troughs”

“The time we spent was well worth it—the next vet check at Deadwood went well and we continued on, even though earlier I had thought we might possibly have to pull. The vet said most of the other horses were tired here too and what we were going through was normal,” said Sarah.

The rider’s state of mind affects the outcome of the ride; his or her sense of how a horse feels and what actions need to be taken to best help the horse can make or break a completion.

Sarah attributed her Marine training to her mental fortitude and success down the trail: “Tevis is a physically hard ride, but I’d

THIS JUST IN ~ Strong Tevis Cup Finish for Morgan in Arabian Dominated Sport

say it's even more mental! Having served in combat and struggling with my own demons from my service, I have learned a great deal of strategy in mind over matter. I can endure just about anything if I choose to do so. You learn to 'embrace the suck.' Tevis is a lot of that, as much as it is exhilarating."

In addition to the mental game, horse and rider relationship are also important in the ability to finish an endurance race.

Dr. Peralez attributed a lot of the success of Tate to his rider. "Sarah was very fit and managed him very well. This year's ride took great horsemanship to finish."

The bond the pair experiences supports Dr. Peralez's statement. "Tate and I have a solid partnership after more than 1,000 competitive miles and additional training miles—it's the kind of partnership where I can almost think it and he'll do it. He'll do anything and go anywhere for me. He's pretty special!" exclaimed Sarah.

When asked if Tate was special among his breed, Mary replied "Tate is special to all of us, but he's not special other than being a gaited Morgan, which has been an obscure part of the breed. Morgan horses are built to go all day long. I worked at a cattle facility once where the cowboys would bring in other breeds. After part of the day was done, they would have to switch out horses because the first had run out of fuel. I brought my Morgan along and we just kept going all day long."

Dwight agreed with Mary, "These horses are built to endure. They're built for versatility. They were bred to go work in the field all day long and then go pull the family carriage."

Gaited Morgan Horse Organization president Vali Suddarth speculates that having the extra "gears" a gaited horse carries may have helped Tate along the way.

"I think a horse having the ability to switch gaits like that would be an advantage in endurance," says Vali, who bred Tate at her Missouri Morgan Farm. "He has different muscle groups he can use and rest throughout the ride if he tires in one gait."

Is Tate, a gaited Morgan, an outlier for his breed? Would other Morgans succeed in the sport of endurance?

"There are more Morgans in the sport of endurance out East," Dwight explained. "They do well! It's part of how and what they're bred for. I think a lot of people with Morgans don't really know that the sport is out there and that their Morgans can and will do well. They can condition and be quite competitive. Tate placed in the top 10 at the second 50-mile ride he ever did. I think more could do Tevis."

Although finishing a 100-mile endurance race does enlist quite a bit of good luck and great ridership, Tate is living proof that the Morgan breed is a match for the challenge of the extreme distance and terrain Tevis provides and is an example of what the Morgan breed can do.

Blazing the trail ahead, perhaps Tate will be the horse that breaks into the untapped potential for other Morgans to explore their capabilities for going the distance.



Sarah and Tate, pre-ride check in at Robie Park (photo by Kimberly River).

For more information about competitive trail riding, endurance, and the Tevis Cup, visit www.natrc.org, www.aerc.org and www.teviscup.org. For more information about gaited Morgans visit www.gaitedmorgans.org. ■