

Tevis 2012: Cloudy with a Chance of a Silver Lining

by Sharma Lynn Gaponoff



Sharma and Tahoe take on the challenge of Cougar Rock. (photograph by Bill Gore)

No matter how many times anyone does this Ride, each Tevis is a thrilling experience. The 2012 Tevis was no exception. For me and my horse Tahoe, this was our third Tevis start and happily, it turned out to be our second completion. Tevis 2012 seemed easier than our first Ride, Tevis 2010. This may be thanks to a couple more seasons of endurance rides under our belts and more familiarity with the Tevis Trail. It may also be thanks to my exceptional crew and an extraordinarily generous fellow rider, Barbara White.

By Friday, the day before the start of the Ride, the Tevis staging area at Robie Park was bustling with activity. At the Ride registration table, riders were chatting with old friends and making new friends. Rigs were rolling in throughout the day, the pre-Ride vetting began just before lunch, and the vendors were there displaying their wares—anything you might need in case you accidentally forgot something for you or your horse. I spent the main part of the day with my Robie Park crew organizing our campsite, vetting my horse in, doing a short 1-1/2 hour pre-ride, shopping and attending the mandatory rider meetings. I felt good, my horse felt good, and I knew we were ready. We had experienced

a great endurance season, completing one 50 mile ride per month and coming in Top Ten at most of them. In fact, we had done well enough that we earned a spot in Pen 1 for the start of the Tevis.

At Robie Park, all riders and crews were to attend the Ride meetings where Tevis Officials including the Head Veterinarian reviewed last minute information before the start. The most worrisome information to me was regarding the weather report. We were told the heat index forecast for the canyons was a staggering 140°F. The heat index is a measure of how the air temperature feels to the human body. It is calculated by combining the air temperature and relative humidity. When the relative humidity level is high, the air temperature feels warmer to the human body and we dehydrate more quickly. Dehydration is the greatest enemy of an endurance horse and rider. The ride officials also told us we could expect thundershowers Saturday night. It would be a Ride of weather extremes.

By 5:00 a.m. Saturday morning whirlpools of dust were kicked up as each horse/rider team entered their respective Pen and circled constantly (calming our nerves and getting the kinks out) until we were allowed to start the Ride. Al-

though we were in Pen 1, I didn't want to head out with the really fast riders, so I tried to be one of the last out of Pen 1. It didn't matter. We found ourselves with very fast horses anyway and it was hard for me to control Tahoe's exuberance and excitement. Seeing me struggle, I heard soothing words from my friend Andrew Gerhard riding behind Tahoe and me, coaching me through the first few miles until Tahoe settled into a race pace that I thought was safe for both of us.


Before I knew it we were crossing Highway 89 and heading into the Squaw Valley ski area. Tahoe and I found ourselves amongst the first 20 horses on the trail. Just as we entered Squaw Valley, I saw Jeremy Reynolds, the top rider of the 2011 Tevis. He had placed first, capturing the Tevis Cup, plus he and his horse "Marvel" had won the Haggin Cup. Jeremy was walking toward all of us riders with his horse in tow. Jeremy didn't look well, although his horse seemed to be fine. When I passed Jeremy, I noticed his face was red in spots and his lip was beginning to swell. Something had obviously happened and my heart went out to him—Jeremy is such an extraordinary horseman. I never did find out what happened to him, but there was a ride official close by, so I knew Jeremy and his horse would be looked after. I heard later that he had decided to pull from the Ride.

Tahoe and I continued on through High Camp, over Emigrant Pass, and actually zoomed through the "boulder bogs" because, miracle of miracles, they were essentially dry this year! We'd had a very poor rainy season, so the boulder bogs did not present the slippery mud and treacherous foot-

ing normally encountered during the Tevis.

We vetted through just fine at Lyon Ridge and then went up and over Cougar Rock, getting our iconic Tevis photo taken as we crested that famous landmark. Tahoe and I arrived at Robinson Flat, the first time since the start that we were able to meet with our crew. We vetted Tahoe in, then had an hour to rest and eat before my crew sent us on our way again. Our next challenge would be the "dreaded canyons." So far, the weather had been great, but by the time Tahoe and I left Robinson Flat, it was starting to heat up. At Dusty Corners and Last Chance, the wonderful Ride volunteers helped Tahoe and me through the vet check and gave us snacks—wishing us well through the canyons.

As Tahoe and I entered the first of the two "dreaded canyons" I braced myself for the oven-hot temperatures promised at the Ride meeting. I think these canyons are the toughest part of the ride because it is hot and muggy with no air movement. To get through them you descend into the first canyon along a trail with over 100 switchbacks and climb up just as many on the other side. Then you do the same thing again in the second canyon. As you ride into and out of these canyons, you cover close to 8,000 feet of elevation changes in only 11.5 miles. It felt hot to me in these canyons, but definitely not 140°F as was predicted. Even so, the Ride officials did tell us afterwards that it was one of the hottest Tevis Rides on record. Astonishingly, despite the heat, Tahoe breezed through both canyons doing much better than our first Tevis Ride in 2010.



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Tahoe and I were happy to see the town of Michigan Bluff, get through the vet check at Chicken Hawk/Volcano and extremely happy to see our crew ready and waiting at Foresthill. Here we had another hour hold, a chance to rest and eat dinner and for me to change from my daytime riding clothes in to my nighttime gear. My crew was great. They took care of Tahoe and me, attending to needs I didn't even know I had. They made me feel like a queen. As I was getting ready to head out, one of my crew said she'd put a protein drink in one of my water bottles, and promised it would help me through the fatigue that hits nearly all riders during the nighttime portion of the ride. I explained that I'd never had that protein drink before and didn't want to try anything new. She said not to worry, that I would be fine. Against my better judgment, I took the protein drink with me.

As Tahoe and I bid our crew adieu, we walked along the main street through the town of Foresthill toward the California Loop Trail. There were two riders in front of us and I recognized one of them to be Barbara White, the only person to have completed the Tevis an astounding 32 times. I couldn't believe my luck to have hooked up with such an amazing Tevis rider. As we continued our walk through town, a woman staggered out of a bar and approached our horses. She seemed to be in good spirits, but was a bit difficult to understand as she slurred advice to each of us. When she got to Tahoe and me, she exclaimed, "Wh-a-a-t-t a b-e-a-u-tiful horse ya have th-h-h-ere...(hiccup)!" She teetered along beside Tahoe assuring us that we'd "make it jus-s-s fine to Auburn, but don't choo fur-git to let your 'orse have a drink-


k-k along the way." She then proceeded to slap Tahoe on the rump for good luck. I was so happy Tahoe kept his cool and kept on walking, albeit a bit faster now.

In a few minutes, Barbara White, the other rider and Tahoe and I were entering the California Loop Trail. Daylight was rapidly fading. The California Loop Trail would be especially challenging because of the promised rain clouds. They hid both the moonlight and starlight. Once the sun had set, it was dark indeed, interrupted only when lightning struck in the distance, providing a brief glimpse of the forest before darkness enfolded us again.

A horse's night vision is generally exceptional which is important because they are prey animals and need to be able to see an escape route when being pursued by a predator. That is why they evolved with superior night vision. Horses have a layer in their retina called the *tapetum lucidum* that acts like millions of microscopic prisms enhancing visual sensitivity at low light levels. As long as there is ambient light, horses can see just fine at night. However, at the Tevis this year, because of the rain clouds, there was very little light for much of the nighttime portion of the ride. Fortunately, the gal riding with Barbara White had a flashlight and wasn't afraid to use it. In fact, she insisted. So, with this gal lighting the trail, Tahoe and I next in line, and Barbara White tucked in behind us, we flew down the California Loop Trail at a speed that felt faster to me than I'd ever gone in daylight.

In no time at all, we were at the rocky creek just before Francisco's and we all took time to water our horses. The

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... but it
wasn't the
horse's fault!

A rambling catchall
by Julie Suhr
with illustrations by Judith Ogus

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(Continued from page 28)

horses were all drinking fine when suddenly, I started to feel very, very dizzy. I was seeing stars. I knew that couldn't possibly be right because it had been raining and it was cloudy. On top of feeling dizzy, I felt sick to my stomach and everywhere else. I knew I was going to faint at any moment. We were mounted on our horses while they were drinking, and the last thing I wanted to do was fall off my horse and land on the rocks. Without saying anything, I slid down off Tahoe and fainted the instant I hit the ground. I awoke in a pillow-soft mound of foliage, wondering how I could possibly have made such a soft landing. Then I thought to myself, "I hope I'm not lying in a bed of poison oak!" Luckily Tahoe was still standing next to me. I staggered to my feet, grabbed his reins and told Barbara that I'd just fainted and couldn't get back on my horse. I was too dizzy and didn't feel good at all. At this point, two other

riders had caught up with us, and the gal with the flashlight left with them. Barbara said, "Sharma, I won't leave you." I was so amazed and grateful to have her help. She promised to stay with me as long as I needed her.

I didn't know why I'd gotten so sick. I was definitely having a *vagal response*. This meant my entire GI tract had declared mutiny. I'd broken out in a cold sweat and was completely drenched as a result. Barbara asked me what I wanted to do. I said I thought I could walk it off and began to stagger down the trail, hanging on to the reins because at that point it was Tahoe who kept me from falling down; he lifted me up with the reins every time I faltered. It was very dark, and Barbara couldn't see me in front of Tahoe, so she kept checking up on me verbally as I tried desperately to shake off the *vagal response*. She continued to encourage me to keep walking, not to worry, and patiently rode protectively behind Tahoe and me even when we were passed by other riders.

After about 10 minutes, I finally

thought I could remount somewhat safely. Barbara asked me what I thought had made me sick? I reasoned it was the protein drink I'd been given at Foresthill. I'd guzzled it down, and about 20 minutes later is when all hell broke loose in my intestines. I figured I was probably somewhat dehydrated, too and that must have added insult to injury. As we got within an eighth of a mile to the vet check at Francisco's, Barbara suggested that she ride ahead and alert the Tevis medical doctor that I was coming. I agreed that sounded like a good plan and thanked her profusely for sticking with me all this time and making sure I didn't get hurt. I was still a bit wobbly. Barbara rode on ahead and assured me she'd see Tahoe and me at the finish line. What an amazing woman she is. She was my guardian angel, for sure.

As soon as I arrived at Francisco's, the medical doctor ran up to Tahoe and me and said, "Are you the rider with the medical condition?" I acknowledged that I was and he immediately invited me to sit in the chair he had waiting for

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in the Atena Race Saddle (pictured above)
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me. He said, "Give your horse to this man and he'll vet him in for you. Now, let me see what's going on with you." He proceeded to take my pulse and blood pressure, commenting that my pulse was relatively high and my blood pressure was relatively low. I said I was sure I'd feel better if I could please use the restroom. He agreed, and off I went. When I returned, I felt a little better. He suggested I eat a sandwich and wanted me to drink at least four glasses of Gatorade. He promised he'd check back with me in about 45 minutes.

A wonderful Tevis volunteer brought me a peanut butter and honey sandwich and all the Gatorade I could drink. I immediately started feeling better, and soon felt completely normal. I could see Tahoe happily munching on hay, carrots and mash as I waited for the doctor to return. The doctor soon came back and agreed that I looked much better and said if I promised to take it easy, he thought it was safe for me to continue. I promised, then grabbed my horse and my vet card and as soon as Tahoe and I were out of sight, we went like a bat out of hell to try and make up

for lost time as we headed to the river crossing and then Lower Quarry, the last vet check before the finish line. As I rode out from Francisco's, I silently repeated my thanks to Barbara White. I knew that, without her help, Tahoe and I would not be heading toward the finish line this evening.

After fording the American River and arriving at Lower Quarry, I proceeded immediately to the P&R folks knowing that Tahoe had pulsed down to criteria, which they confirmed. I then went to the vets and handed my vet card to the secretary. As she read my vet card, she looked startled and handed it to the veterinarian. He said, "What are you doing here?" I thought that was an odd question, and replied simply, "I'm vetting in." He said, "You can't. Your horse was pulled at Francisco's." I argued that Tahoe had passed his vet check at Francisco's with flying colors, that I'd gotten sick, but Tahoe was fine, and the medical doctor had advised I could continue the Ride as long as I took it easy. The vet insisted I couldn't continue because my ride card said we'd been pulled. I asked what number was

on the ride card, and we soon realized that I had been carrying the wrong ride card since Francisco's. The volunteer who had vetted Tahoe in had inadvertently handed me someone else's ride card. I could feel my heart pounding. I was terrified I'd be pulled because of a mix up in ride cards. After the vet had communicated somehow with the folks at Francisco's he vetted Tahoe and gave me a new vet card and assured me that the Tevis officials would reconcile both vet cards and I could continue on to the finish line. Whew! I was back on the trail in a flash, heart still pounding.

As Tahoe and I did our "victory lap" around McCann Stadium, my wonderful crew was there, cheering us on. They saw Tahoe successfully through the vet check. It had been quite an eventful Tevis, and I was ever so grateful that Tahoe and I received our completion.

Two lessons learned: 1) Don't drink anything that you haven't tried before on your conditioning or endurance rides. 2) Hope that, if and when you need one, a guardian angel will appear, and count your blessings when one does. ★



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