



1. J. Williams. 2. Lucy Hancock on HH Trinity, BC winners at the 50 mile ride. 3. 100-mile winners Jodi Rogers-Buttram and Petit Jets Aires show off their Biltmore awards. 4. Aboard WMA Rattler is Troy Ball, who finished her first 50-mile ride in 5:49, good for 15th place. All photos © Genie Stewart-Spears, 618-658-5507.

BILTMORE CHALLENGE

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Asheville, North Carolina
Southeast Region

BY GENIE STEWART-SPEARS

Endurance riders are fortunate to have so many wonderful trails to ride. In the upper Southeast Region, the Biltmore Challenge in Asheville, North Carolina, is one of the most enchanting rides that has drawn riders from all over the United States, Canada and other countries.

Even though it wasn't an FEI ride this

year, the May 20 ride brought 104 entries from 12 states. Twenty-three started the 100-miler and 81 set out on the 50-mile course.

The course is mountainous and weaves through a dense forest, along the French Broad River, and past manicured grounds and gardens, sometimes glimpsing the magnificent castle up on a hilltop.

Anne Ayala founded the ride in 1994 and

managed it through 2005 when she offered the ride to new management due to health issues. It wasn't until November 2005 that Cheryl Newman realized the ride might not happen if she didn't take over as ride manager. The traditional first weekend in May was not available and it was not feasible to sanction an FEI competition in conjunction with the 50- and 100-mile rides. But, the Arabian Horse Association (AHA) Region 12 100-mile championship was offered and had 10 purebred entries.

It was the first time managing a ride for Cheryl, but she and her husband Stagg did a marvelous job. Stagg, AERC's president, and Cheryl greeted riders as they arrived at base camp and were ever-present to answer questions. Much to everyone's pleasure, Anne Ayala was also helping, a sign that her health has greatly improved.

In a display of proverbial famous last words, "We've had a relatively dry spring and so we don't have muddy trails," said Cheryl Newman several days before the ride. "We have pretty dry trail conditions and there is relatively little to worry about on the trails."

But the night before the start, strong thunderstorms rolled through. Hundred-miler Lynne Kenelly said later, "We [Kenelly and Faith Connelly] laid in our beds and listened to the pounding rain, thunder and

lightning all night long. It was unsettling. The trail we had ridden on Friday had perfect footing and then the rain came that night. We almost didn't start. In fact, we went out 20 minutes late because we didn't want to saddle up in the rain."

Newman's earlier weather prediction was tempered with this caveat: "This is in the mountains and the weather is unpredictable. You can get some form of showers almost any afternoon and at the same time the National Weather Service isn't showing anything."

100 mile ride

The night prior to the ride, thunderstorms were strong and the 100-milers saddled up in the early morning darkness in a downpour with lightning and thunder. By the 6:00 a.m. start, the rain became a drizzle and then shortly ceased until late afternoon. There were at least two first-time 100-miler horse/rider teams braving the weather to hopefully be able to say they completed the Biltmore Ride.

Veteran rider Jodi Rogers-Buttram surprised herself by being first to finish in the 100-mile course on Petit Jets Aries with a ride time of 13:08. Her biggest disappointment, though, was when her 11-year-old daughter and riding partner, Joni, was eliminated from the competition at 50 miles. (Joni has earned the AHA youngest rider trophy in 2003 and 2004).

Karen Isaac and Steve Rojek completed one second apart with ride times of 14:23. Karen rode Shameless and Steve was riding Farley. Farley had the highest vet score and Jodi's horse, Petit Jets Aries, earned the best condition award.

Nicki Meuten and Darlene Krell were fourth and fifth place, one second apart. Meuten was riding Fury and Darlene rode Held In Trust. Their ride time was 15:04.

Two seconds later—and first to finish in the AHA championship—was Kathy Neunzig on PAR Snickety, in 15:04:15. This was their first 100-miler. "I was tired on the second-to-last loop and then it seemed like it took 10 years to finish the last loop," Neunzig laughed the next day.

Reserve in the AHA championship was Cheryl Van Deusen on DA Al Capone, in 16:50:54. Ebony Cassanova, owned by Cheryl but ridden by Neila Rueter, earned the AHA best condition award. Reuter completed one second behind Cheryl.

Despite more thunderstorms through

the night, 12 of the 23 riders completed. The final two riders, Jennifer Sapira on Alladin Weczera and Mary Farris on Mojo, both finished with a time of 19:18.

50 mile ride

Sally Mann, who has been featured in AHA advertisements cantering through a meadow with the Biltmore castle in the background, reigned over the 80 competitors in the 50-mile event. Riding Bella Atheena, Mann crossed the finish line in 5:00. (Mann, an internationally known photographer who has her work in galleries and museums throughout the world as well as seven books of her work published, was featured as America's Best Photographer in a 2001 Time magazine article.)

"I didn't exactly have a goal for the Biltmore except to help her to pace herself in such a way that her natural competitiveness didn't defeat us and, of course, to complete," explained Mann about Bella, who is an ex-racehorse from Cre-Run Racing Stable.

To avoid a struggle with Bella's racing competitiveness, Mann says she started out near the front of the riders. On the second loop she was running in about fifth place and left on the last loop first, two minutes ahead of two riders. With Bella moving relaxed and unchallenged, the pair gained six more minutes over the pursuing riders and crossed the finish line in a canter.

The next three riders weren't as sedate, as they asked their horses to dig in and race off across the open meadow to finish with ride times of 5:08, just seconds apart. Second place went to Rachel Neidich on Mirage, ahead of Sandy Thomson on Shamala and TJ Vore on Moon Cheyenne. Debbie Moore, the fifth rider to complete, chose not to race the three but rather trotted in on Comets Nugget nearly a minute later.

Lucy Hancock, more commonly heard being called "Grandma" by her many family members crewing for her, galloped in alone on HH Trinity (the pair were the AERC 2002 50-mile middleweight champions) with a ride time of 5:10.

HH Trinity earned BC and high vet score. Lucy said, "I basically had one goal for this ride—to have fun. And I achieved that. However, my goal for the year was to try to get a best condition somewhere. The fact that it was at Biltmore, and we also had highest vet score, makes it even more special."

Wesley Crowe, the first heavyweight rider to finish, was next on Koweta Bentley

with a ride time of 5:15. "I was really just trying to complete, something I haven't done in my last three attempts at the Biltmore ride," he said. And then added, "This was my tenth trip to the Biltmore to ride, and I have loved every one!"

He also stated, "While I'm very proud of my horse's top ten finish, completion was my main goal. I'm glad I didn't realize Mike Bailey (heavyweight) was as close as he was or I may not have reached my goal!"

Bailey completed seven minutes later on K-Zar Emmanuel for eighth place overall.

Two juniors started and completed the ride. Erin Champion finished in 24th place on GTS Biggy Boy and Josie McGhee was 48th on TM Cade.

The 60th and final rider to complete was Garrie Bates on Lucky Dallas Gold. Although Garrie is most recognizable on a mule than a horse, Dallas is a half-Arabian owned by a friend. The pair completed the course in 9:44. Marshall, Garrie's husband, jokingly stated, "Dallas is actually a mule, but his ears got frostbitten and we had to partially amputate them. And Garrie was having so much fun that she decided to ride an extra six miles!"

Doing well in difficult conditions

Head veterinarian was Jeannie Waldron, assisted by Ken Marcella, Doug Shearer, Trish Harrop, Art King and Ted Wright. Waldron said after the ride, "It was nice to have such experienced veterinarians to work with. And, although it was humid and the trail condition was muddy and slippery, I was very impressed that the horses handled it well and the riders were more careful than in the past. The horses that finished looked very good.

"It is a good example of what riders can do under difficult conditions," noted Waldron. "And a lot of these riders weren't that experienced. Some were first-time 100-milers, but they had good guidance and the more experienced riders on the trail helped them too."

Although the mountain terrain and weather can make the ride challenging, there is always a waiting list of riders wanting the privilege to compete on the famous Biltmore Estate. The ride is limited to 150 riders, and they must be pre-entered in order to pass through the security gates.

Kenelly summed it up: "Riding on the Biltmore Estate is a beautiful experience, even in the rain."