

# Fun in the Sun

March 3-5, 2006  
Dunnellon, Florida  
Southeast Region

Story and Photos by  
Genie Stewart-Spears

Kathy Brunjes sets out on Day 1 of the 2006 FITS ride.  
Photo © Genie Stewart-Spears, 618-658-5507.

The Fun In The Sun Ride (FITS) is quickly becoming a premier ride in the Southeast. This year, March 3 through 6,

the second running of the event in Florida, southwest of Ocala, was shortened from six days to three days. Nevertheless, it brought riders from 20 states and as far away as El Salvador, the UAE, and Sweden was also represented.

Although it rained days just prior, adding some mud to the sandy mix, the weather was perfect. Cool nights in the 40s and days in the upper 60s. "The weather was fantastic," said Gary Farmer, who rode all three days, using two horses. And he added, "The 30-plus acres for base camp allowed us to spread out and have larger pens than many rides have space for."

The event is unique because it caters to all level of riders: limited distance, one-day

50 and 100, pioneer and FEI. Friday and Saturday had 25-mile limited distances, and 50-mile rides which were also the first two days of the 155-mile three-day pioneer ride. Sunday did not have an LD ride but did offer a one-day 55, also the final pioneer distance, and an open and FEI one-day 100.

Altogether there were 126 riders, and many of them brought more than one horse so they could ride two and even three days. Friday's 50 started 38 riders and 33 finished. Brandi Bobst on Kredyt TU Wiking won, and Karen Cummings' horse First Knight earned best condition. The limited distance had 22 starters and 20 completed. David Caborn was first to finish on Flaming Fiero, who also earned best condition.

Saturday's 50-mile event had 30 starters and 19 completed. Vicki Hudson and Darolyn Butler-Dial shared the win. Vicki was riding DJB Ninety Proof +/, and Darolyn was on DJB K DeCielo, who earned best condition. The 25-mile limited-distance started 32 riders and 30 completed with Diane Ebel on Pam Weidel's horse, AF Big Bucks, finishing first. Laurie Pearson's horse Rohara Royale was best condition.

Sixteen riders left the start on Sunday's 55-miler and 11 completed. Farmers Diamond carried Gary Farmer to first place and was awarded best condition.

The one-day 100 had 30 starters of which 23 were cross-entered in the FEI division.

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Left: Gary Farmer and Farmers Diamond kick up a little sand on their way to a first place and BC in the 50 mile ride on the first day of the FITS ride. Center: Cris Lewis of Texas came to Florida to “meet new friends and ride new trails.” Right: The University of Florida and Dr. Mike Porter provided the FITS ride with this mobile medical unit. Staffed by Dr. Porter and two senior veterinary students, the unit contains a state-of-the-art laboratory, x-ray machine, pharmacy, and satellite communication with specialists at the university’s veterinary Hospital. Photo © Genie Stewart-Spears, 618-658-5507.

Half the total entries completed. Kathy Downs was first to finish on Pygmalion (Harley) in the AERC competition, and Gail Zeck was first place in the FEI. Steve Rojek’s horse Finch earned best condition in both the AERC and FEI divisions.

Chris Lewis from Texas was the first of only two riders to complete the pioneer ride. Lewis said, “Debbie Allen and Bernice Cruikshank had talked about this ride and how much fun it was last year. They offered to haul my horse here while I flew in. I had a blast. The trails are wonderful, and I love the scenery that was new to me. The management is great, and I love the polo shirts and caps in the bright Florida colors—it is all fun stuff.”

Riding Red, a 7-year-old American Saddlebred gelding, Sheila Shortland was the other rider to complete the pioneer ride. “My strategy was to take it slow. I try to do as much time on the ground as I physically can to give Red a break. You usually can’t go wrong doing long slow miles,” said Shortland. “The FITS Ride was our first pioneer completion. I was excited and very proud of Red. He vetted at the end of the third day with great scores and still had a good amount of energy.

“The trails at Goethe are beautiful and fun,” she added.

## A hot time on the trail

Held over mostly wooded and jeep trails that sometimes were sandy and occasionally muddy, the course wound through the Goethe State Forest. Although the terrain was flat, the trails were nonetheless a challenge. Kathy Brunjes reported “riding through fire” on Sunday during the 100-mile event.

“Loop 3 began with riding through knee-deep water,” she said, “and ended with Steve Rojek, Pam Karner and I riding our horses through fire.”

She went on to explain, “The Goethe State Forest had undergone a controlled burn and there were minor smoky patches that we had ridden through during the morning, but as we continued on the trail into the Tidewater vet check, we heard a strange noise ahead of us—not the rustling of palmettos or the noise that the wild pigs and armadillos make along the trail, but a crackling and whooshing noise. As we rounded a corner of the trail, ahead of us a fire blazed along the left side of the trail. A rather large pine tree was down and burning, along with the undergrowth.

“With no alternative because of the heavy undergrowth and palmettos on the right, we pushed forward,” continued Brunjes. “The fire was alongside us and the heat was intense. The horses rushed through with our urging; they didn’t hesitate or give us any problems. It was only a short distance, maybe the length of five or six horses,

where the fire and heat were so intense. As soon as all three horses were through, we all commented on the unexpected obstacles we encounter when doing these events. It’s funny how we consider things like this business as usual!”

Hundred-miler Vicki Stanislawski said she encountered mostly smoke, rather than fire, in the same area. Her horse carried her through zero visibility without hesitation. “Riding horses is all about giving and receiving, working as a team, trust, dependability and friendship,” she said.

Other than a little fire and smoke, the ride went smoothly. Friday night’s great barbecue dinner was free to everyone, and the Sunday 100 milers were fed dinner at a vet check as well as breakfast the next morning.

## FITS gaining a fan base

Sheik Madiya Hasher Al Maktoum from  
continued on next page

**Auburn Printers**

## fits ...

Dubai, who was the final rider to complete the FEI 100, stated, "I love this ride! I will do it every year."

Karen Cummings said, "It is a good place to ride because back home [in Indiana] no competition starts until April. This way we can get some good miles on the horses and get them in condition for the rides back home. It is a great place to get an early start."

Sponsors are a major strength for many rides. Animal Tacker, Running Bear, Ann Pfeiffer, Leather Therapy and Grover Equine donated prizes and were on hand to offer products and accessories. Kanavy Saddles donated a custom-made saddle to the winner of a drawing from the pool of riders.

Betty Baker had the lucky ticket. "It couldn't have been more timely because I've been using a synthetic saddle that is absolutely worn out. A year ago I had this horse fitted for a Kanavy saddle but I have two daughters in college. Two tuitions is a big bite out of my budget, plus the horse is going for the Worlds so we have a lot of responsibility there. I was putting my resources where they needed to go first. I am ecstatic about winning this saddle!" exclaimed Baker. "For someone who never

wins anything, it was like winning the lottery for me."

## Success stories

Endurance riding isn't always about winning. It is about the day-to-day personal accomplishments; for example, Cecilia Engquist, who rode MacProof to 10th place in the 50-miler on Friday and sixth place in the FEI 100 on Sunday—barefoot.

"He felt awesome," she said after her 50-mile ride. "He indicated he could go more, so I chose to ride him again. This was my first 100 miler and I aimed for a COC (certificate of completion) but MacProof wanted more," she said. "The vet at the finish was astonished how clean his legs were when we were done."

Cecilia is a Swedish citizen but lives in Texas where she met Darolyn Butler and started riding Darolyn's horses. About the FITS ride, she said, "I thought the ride was great! It was well arranged and the trails clearly marked.

## Helping to 'make it happen'

Ride manager Jan Stevens was supported by Valerie Kanavy, FITS founder; Gail and Mark Ransco, non-endurance riders whose abilities make management run smoothly; computer expert Jo Steele of New Hampshire; trail designer Connie Caudill; Robin Oscar, FEI Chief Steward; Susan Kasemeyer, technical delegate; timers Nancy Gooch and Jackie Mitchell; ride veterinarians Art King, Jim Baldwin, Anne Christopherson, Doug Shearer, Laura Wolfe, Julia Simonson and Mike Porter (with the MEDS Unit from the University of Florida); and a numerous hardworking volunteers.

I really appreciated the out-timers that not only told us when it was time to go but also made sure that we knew which loop to take and even where it was located. This was good for such a newbie as me who forgets these kind of details!"

It is all those little things that make a ride successful. Ride man-

ager Jan Stevens said it was a big time-saver for management by having advanced online registration. This cut out the mayhem that often occurs at the on-site registration. In addition, Jan often assigns tasks and says with a smile and sparkle in her eye, "Make it happen." And it does.

So if you want a change of scenery and to have some fun in the sun, consider putting the FITS ride on your calendar for next year. You'll see palm trees, palmetto bushes, perhaps an armadillo or two and maybe even an alligator watching you from a nearby swamp.

As Jan would say, "Make it happen!"

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