

A completion caps a remarkable day and a life goal on the Western States Trail Foundation's Tevis Cup Ride.

by Brenna Sullivan • photos: Gorel Baylor Photography

The Western States Trail Ride, informally known as the Tevis Cup, traverses 100 miles of the Sierra Nevada mountains every August during the full moon. Riders have 24 hours to reach Auburn Fairgrounds after traversing technical trail in the high country, heat in the canyons and the dark trail above the American River. The ride was started in 1955 by Wendell Robie on a bet that the horses of modern times were as tough as the horses of their grandparents' generation. The ride was the first to develop strict veterinary standards, birthed the modern sport of endurance and embodies the true spirit of "to finish is to win." Many endurance riders dream of completing Tevis; this was Brenna Sullivan's second attempt after pulling her TWH mare Sky at Deadwood in 2016 as a rider option. This year's ride began at 5:15 am August 5 and ended 5:15 am August 6.



August was upon us, and it was time to leave for Auburn. I reached the Fairgrounds on Thursday morning; the plan was to glue Sky's boots and head up to Soda Springs that afternoon to beat the heat. However, the temperature dropped and Sky was comfortable and eating in her stall so we spent the night there. I'm glad I made this decision; there were loud trains and some mishaps up at Soda Springs. I think Sky got better rest in Auburn that night. Plus, my glue-on job was terrible; I had to adjust and modify my original work and was fairly convinced that was going to a): lose all four boots and b): lame the horse. At that point, all I could do was shrug and hope for the best.

We left early for the journey up the mountains. My truck overheated part-way up which necessitated some time waiting on the side of the road. Luckily, I arrived in time to get a decent spot in the main parking lot where Sky would have some afternoon shade surrounded by a lot of

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horses. Even though we were squished in like sardines, I actually loved the Soda Springs ride camp. It was 77 degrees, there was green meadow grass, alpine flowers and no dust! I did a pre-ride to the vet-in area which was 1.4 miles down the road in Van Norden Meadows. I really can't imagine a more gorgeous backdrop to start our Tevis journey! We vetted in with Mike Witt, who gave Sky a 5 Body Conditioning Score and said she looked great. I also participated in the ultrasound study that looked at gut motility throughout the ride; the ladies told me Sky's hindgut looked good. As I rode her back to camp, I couldn't shake the bubbling gut feeling that we were going to finish this year.

My crew arrived after the rider meeting. After a walk around the vendors, a pre-ride massage for Sky from Davina, some packing and visiting with Lora (and an awesome dinner from Judy), we packed it in for the night as the full moon rose over the alpine meadow.

I didn't need my alarm and was up around 3 am. The start was a bit hectic; after waving bye to my crew at 4:30 am we made our way to Pen 2 in an epic "hurry up and wait" situation. By chance or design, five of us gaited riders managed to find each other in the dark and chaos. We pulled over to the side right by some poor person's RV and had a relaxed conference. Annette was sponsoring Jakob Gregory on Asali last minute, Lora rode up in the dark and rounding out our little group was John on Esmeralda.

The clock struck 5:15 and we were off! The two-mile controlled start actually did a good job of spreading people out. Lora and I let Merlin and Sky walk out, which was the perfect warm-up. We crossed the bridge and they turned us loose. To be honest, the first five miles or so was a blur; Sky was feeling very fresh and not very interested in listening to the human attached to her. But every so often, I remembered to look up and soak in the majestic beauty of Soda Springs around us.

We were deposited on a gravel road where the horses could finally settle and hit their stride. Lora and Merlin picked up a great pace and headed off with another group. I was caught by Annette, Jake and John with Lucy on Roo in the mix during those first 12 miles. I tried to keep Sky at a dull roar to conserve our energy for later. We came upon a little community who were out cheering us on about eight miles in. Sky drank profusely out of a creek there and I knew I should electrolyte her early and often. A lot easier said than done! I hopped off and had to manage pouring my electrolytes while she whirled around me. Some very kind soul came over to help me get sorted and we were back on trail.

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The climb up to Lyon Ridge mellowed Sky a bit and we arrived at the top with our game face on. She drank well again and we headed out towards Cougar Rock. I was in a lovely bubble; I passed back and forth with Chris, but there really wasn't a soul behind me as I approached Cougar Rock. This allowed us to gather ourselves and take our time going over. Sky, of course, sailed right over in her "on a mission" mode and we popped down Elephant's Trunk and into Red Star.

Lu met us at the vet check and helped me pulse Sky in. I had been anxiously checking my watch; we arrived a full hour past what I had budgeted. If we averaged the same speed on the next section it would take us a full three hours to get to Robinson; right at cut-off time. I had heard that Duncan Canyon was technical and wasn't sure how fast I would be able to go. I rushed through the vet-in, waved by to Lu and Davina and grabbed some hay on the go for Sky.

We jogged along while she ate and I hopped on a mile or so down the trail. We worked to pass a few long lines of horses who weren't travelling quite fast enough and commenced our furious attempt to beat cut-off at Robinson. The trail was technical going and as soon as we got behind a horse it disappeared in plumes of powdery dust. Thankfully, Sky stayed on her feet and avoided tripping on the hidden chunks of granite. We hit the bottom of the canyon and started our climb into Robinson. The weather was alternating between raining and muggy; I was worried that if I pushed her, we wouldn't pulse down, but if I didn't, we'd be overtime. I decided it was much better to arrive overtime with a recovered horse rather than the other way around, so I got off as we neared Robinson, loosened the cinch and walked it in.

Pucker Point, Last Chance & More Waypoints

Luckily, ride management had extended the cut-off by a half hour since the new trail took much longer than anticipated. I squeaked in right at noon; so I would have been fine regardless. I was met by Abigail and the rest of the crew, who helped me pull tack and get water on Sky. She pulsed in relatively quickly considering the climb and I wasted no time in getting into line and vetting through; reaching subsequent cut-offs ever on my mind.

Abigail had found the perfect spot for us; level and in the shade. Sky dug her nose in her food and didn't stop eating. I had a snack and re-grouped. I knew I had to bust a move to make the cut-off at Last Chance; the trail getting there is downhill, but it does involve slower going around Pucker Point.

We left Robinson with Kerry from Louisiana and her gorgeous Appy. Kerry and I calculated the speed we needed and took off at a healthy pace. Sky and Kerry's Appy hit a rhythm and we

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ticked off the miles relatively quickly alternating between trot/pace speed and canter. We blew through Dusty Corners after a quick drink and round of e-lytes and started on the trail to Pucker Point. Kerry set a good pace on the trail but was intimidated by the drop-offs. At that point, I was happy to walk so I could get Sky some recovery before Last Chance. Plus, it was nice to fully enjoy the gorgeous view around Pucker Point.

She pulsed decently at Last Chance but got a 'C' on one of her quadrants for gut sounds. Ideally, I would have stayed and let her eat, but we needed to keep moving to make the Deadwood cut-off and that first canyon is the worst. Luckily, on a tip all the way from Joyce, I had packed a little stuff backpack. I put an entire flake of alfalfa in this backpack and ran down the first canyon leading Sky. Sky was able to rip off pieces of hay off my back as we went, killing two birds with one stone.

We crossed Swinging Bridge and got some water on the other side. I dumped water on and made the commitment to tail up. At that point, we were blessed with some cool weather, but the humidity in the canyon was quite high. Sky started up the climb; I'm so thankful to have a forward horse who just put her head down and grinded up. I focused on breathing, relaxing and using her tail for support rather than have her actually pull me up. I don't think I fully appreciated that canyon until I did it on foot; it is tough! I also lost my first glue-on boot; the same rear one I lost last year on this climb. I had a spare to replace it up at Devil's Thumb.

We reached Devil's Thumb pretty drained. Sky and I made a beeline towards the far trough. She sucked in water and I dumped water all over me. Carrie got me some drinking water and we made haste to Deadwood. Sky looked tired, but still okay. At this point, I knew I needed to take a break and let her eat. We pulsed in and I just let her sit deep in chow for a good 10 minutes. Thankfully, her gut sounds had improved at this check and I vaulted on to try to beat cut-off to Chicken Hawk.

Emergency Down Below!

We were caught by Brian Reome who told me about the horse who had fallen off and his attempts to bring it back up on the trail. Brian hopped off his mule and started running down El Dorado canyon with me not far behind. As we reached the really scary, cliffy section a group of horses caught up behind us. I tried not to look down but was hit with the worst stomach drop when Brian called out "Emergency down below!!" A woman was clinging to a tree attempting to pull herself up the side.

Brian stopped for a moment considering what to do but there was positively no room to get off or maneuver, plus we had a long line of horses anxiously backed up on the cliff. We proceeded around the corner brainstorming what to do; the logical thing at this point was to try to get to the bottom and alert SOS. But this didn't sit right. Thankfully, people exist who take responsibility for their fellow man in the face of adversity. Brian is one of these people. He got to a wider spot and said, "We have to go back for her." There was no room really to do this; to have two-way horse traffic on that trail was inviting another disaster. The line of horses started passing him and he announced that he was tying off his mule to a tree and going back to get her.

I will never forget this; Brian is one of the good ones.

We got backed up as we tried to deal with her horse, who had traveled some way down the trail. There were ideas to tie him to a tree, but thankfully John Perry ponied the horse up to Michigan Bluff. Brian ended up hiking the rider out on his mule, making the long climb to Michigan Bluff on foot. At this point, I figured he would be overtime.

The climb up to Michigan Bluff for me was a low point. I was honestly feeling very guilty for leaving Brian to deal with that situation and Sky had lost enthusiasm. I didn't know how we were ever going to complete at this point with the big Foresthill cut-off looming and was having thoughts that maybe this trail was too much for my horse. I still had to at least try to get to Chicken Hawk, so we rolled through Michigan Bluff fairly quickly; only stopping so Sky could drink and Abigail could get her a few key bites of food and dump some water on her.

I knew I needed to make haste to Pieper Junction, but Sky told me fairly emphatically that she was only interested in walking. So we did that. It was a long drag up there considering the proximity and I kept anxiously checking my watch. We arrived and Lu met us with water and Gatorade. We immediately began cooling Sky. I was worried about how she would recover following the climb, but honestly she pulsed down pretty quickly. We passed vet, saw Annette and Jake and got some wind back in our sails a bit.

Watching The Clock

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I checked my watch. If Sky picked up some steam and wanted to go, we could still make Foresthill cut-off; the last canyon was small compared to the previous two. I started jogging down the trail for a bit to let Sky eat out of the backpack and then hopped on to try to catch Annette and Jake. Sky felt this change and picked right up; we raked down the canyon and pushed up the other side. We hit Bath Road with about 20 minutes to get to the top. It was still a bit close for comfort, so I let her put her head down and charge up the road; she knew where she was.

I hit the top of the road at 8:40; in a normal year this would have been 10 minutes overtime, but they had extended the cut-off to 8:45. Thank goodness. I still had to pulse her in 20 minutes so I could leave by the 10 pm cut-off. Lucy, Katherine, Aunt Lynn and Ashley helped me dump and scrape water off of her. Her pulse hung a bit while we cooled her, but once she dropped, she dropped fast. I was actually pleased with how she pulsed in considering how fast we had to come up the canyon to make the cut-off.

I got in the vet line with Lucy, who tried to talk me down from my fears that the horse looked tired. She assured me that Sky would pick back up after the hour rest and a good meal. The vet said her parameters looked good; I did have to trot out twice due to her unenthusiastic gait-a-lope in trot out and I had lost my other hind boot somewhere in Volcano Canyon. All could be fixed. We took her back to the trailer for our hour hold, where she dug into her food and napped. I had to put fresh clothes on, eat and dig out boots.

Thankfully Carol and Abigail carefully cleaned out the dirt and rocks that had accumulated in her boot gaiters and Lucy and Ashley affixed my glowsticks to the breastcollar. We saddled her up and walked to the out timer. She was walking quite fluidly and looked ready to go, so I felt much better.

We left Foresthill in the dark passing JayaMae, who told me I was right behind Annette and Jake. Sky felt rejuvenated; I worked to catch up with them and we passed through the town of Foresthill and headed down into the darkness of the California Loop. Sky was walking out good, but a bit tentative in the dark. Jake got ahead with Asali with the instructions to “get us to Francisco’s on time.” That he did. I couldn’t see a single thing except Annette’s outline in front of me (and the faint knowledge of a huge drop off to the American River on our left), but I just gave all trust to the horse and we absolutely flew down that trail.

I felt joy, elation and the total thrill of gliding down California Loop with three strong gaited

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horses. We were going to make Francisco's cut-off and did with time to spare. That was probably one of my favorite couple hours of riding ever!

Francisco's was a really fun vet check. It was lit up with food and all sorts of amazing, helpful volunteers. Jamie Kerr vetted Sky in and said she looked great. I let her eat for a bit while I waited for Annette and Jake and we were back on the trail to the river crossing. About a mile from Francisco's we caught a mother/daughter team I had recognized from earlier in the day. The mother asked us if anybody would sponsor her daughter until the finish. I volunteered and 17 year old Briana joined our little group, which was a total blast. The four of us crossed the American River (which was so refreshing and not any deeper than the horse's knees--a serious shout-out to the WSTF Board for making this happen). From there, we hit a wide, flat road to Lower Quarry. The horses picked up momentum and rolled right along in the dark under the full moon.

To my right I heard a rider approaching fast. I turned and was greeted by the sight of Brian Reome on his mule!!! I cheered! Annette asked him how the heck he made up all that time and he said simply, "I don't mess around." We all hit Lower Quarry in a huge pack. Briana's mom had decided to continue and caught us by the vet check. My short stint sponsoring was over and I was so happy to see them ride in together.

I saw Lu again at Lower Quarry who helped me get things situated for vet-in. Sky passed and I immediately headed over to the out-timer. Even though cut-offs had been extended through the vet checks, it wasn't extended to the finish. We needed to get to Auburn by 5:15. I thought Annette and Jake had already left so I hopped on my horse with the instructions to "Make haste, fine steed!"



Whooping & Hollering

Jennifer, Briana and her mom were with me as we crossed No Hands Bridge whooping and hollering! We got stuck in a big pack climbing Robie Point and Jen and I got a bit emotional at

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the amazing effort every single one of those horses had given throughout the day. It was truly humbling. I checked my watch and pulled Sky to a walk. We could walk in and finish and I didn't want to overdo it in the last three miles.

We crested the hill to the timed finish, got the obligatory drink of water at the trough and hand-walked down the hill to the Auburn Fairgrounds. I hopped on and did my victory lap fighting tears so I wouldn't be crying like a blubbering idiot trying to vet in my horse. We came under the banner at 4:59 to the welcome cheers of my fine crew!

Sky ate for about 15 minutes while we tried to let the vet line die down, but eventually I figured I better get it over with while her muscles were still warmed up. Abigail joined me in line with some hay for Sky and Dr. Susan Garlinghouse called me over to vet out. Everything looked good; slightly dehydrated and needed to eat, but considering we had just covered 100 miles of tough trail I was pleased. We got our completion; fit to continue!

The best news was that Lora and Merlin finished, Annette and Jake finished and our hero of the day Brian Reome finished on a mule who looked like he could have done more.

The ladies with the ultrasound study did the finish check and said she had great gut motility. More good news. We led her up to the barn, I wrapped her legs, took a shower and passed out!!

It took a village to get Sky and I through this ride from my crew and friends to the volunteers, vets and fellow riders. Mostly, thank you to the hard working individuals on the WSTF Board who made a top-notch event in a year with challenging conditions. Their dedication and hard work makes it possible for mere mortals like me to experience this "ride of a lifetime" 62 years after Wendell Robie first crossed these mountains. And, of course, all my gratitude to my fine horse. I knew from the first moment I sat on her that she was the one.