

2009 AERC National Championships Set for September 11 & 13

Riders compete in 50- and 100-mile rides in Northern California this weekend.

September 11, 2009

Each year endurance riders from around the U.S. and Canada gather to compete for the American Endurance Ride Conference's top honors in the National Championship rides.

This year, tiny Greenville, California (population 1,150) will be the launching point for the 100-mile ride on September 11 and 50-mile ride on September 13. Midway between Redding and Reno, the Northern California location has all riders ask of a trail: elevation changes, gorgeous views, shallow creek crossings, and wildlife sightings.

"From the base camp at 3500 feet, riders will climb to 6040 feet on the first loop. There are a few good climbs, with the largest climb first thing in the morning," said Ride Manager Cassandra DiMaggio. "Besides a few rocky dry creek beds, the footing is really good. On areas with drop-offs, there is a wide road."

At the trail's highest point, riders will be rewarded with views of Lake Almanor and the whole of Indian Valley. While riding alongside Walker Lake, riders can watch freshwater pelicans dive for fish.

At the checkpoints, where the horses are examined by veterinarians before going on in the ride, DiMaggio plans to pamper both horses and riders. "We have food and water for the horses and we spoil the riders with drinks, candy and snacks." Later in the ride, the checkpoint closest to dinnertime will boast a barbecue dinner for ride participants.

DiMaggio has hosted the Patriot's Day rides at the same site for the past several years, and is looking forward to welcoming high-caliber riders to AERC's premier event. Riders and horses must meet a mileage requirement in order to be eligible for the ride, and there is no 25-mile distance for this event.

Among the top endurance riders vying for the 100-mile championship is Joyce Sousa of Hydesville, California, who has placed in the top 5 of two previous National Championships. Sousa's 16-year-old bay Arabian gelding, LV Integrity+ ("Ritz"), has already completed 24 100-mile rides in 10 years of competition.

"Ritz has done four one-day 100s this ride season," said Sousa. "I have to be careful not to overtrain for this ride. I basically concentrate on giving him plenty of rest and recovery time." On those four 100s, Ritz was first in two rides and second in two rides. His last competition was in mid-July so he should be rested and ready for a quick pace at the championship ride.

Participants in the 50-mile ride are probably breathing a sigh of relief that one of their top competitors is riding just for mileage and not to win. Two-time endurance world champion Becky Grand Hart, of San Juan Bautista, California, is bringing her new bay Arabian gelding, No Repeat, and will likely sponsor a junior rider through the ride.

"I'm looking forward to it," said Hart. "It looks like a beautiful trail." With 20,485 AERC miles to her credit, Hart enjoys both going for wins and riding along the lines of AERC's motto, "To finish is to win."

"Don't look for us in the winners' circle," said Hart. "We are still getting to know one another."

Hart, who serves as the U.S. chef d'equipe (team manager) for the U.S. endurance team, noted she will try to practice what she preaches to team members: no over-racing and adherence to another endurance adage, "never hurry, never tarry." "Mostly I am trying to make it through a 100 myself, enjoying the trail and the time with my horse."

Awards will be given to the top three riders in each of five weight divisions in both distances. Saddles will be presented to the best-conditioned horses in both events and to the first-place finisher in the 100. The 50-mile winner will win a handmade cedar chest, to which a local artist will add the winning horse's portrait. Winners of both rides will also receive a ton of feed, courtesy of Purina. Gail Hought of Hought Tack has donated a great many gift certificates.

The day between the rides will be filled with clinics and demonstrations, as well as the awards presentation for the 100-mile riders.



DiMaggio won't get a chance to ride the trails while she is busy managing. What she'll miss most is coming back down to base camp at night on the Manzanita Trail: "The single-track switchback winds around manzanita bushes, and it feels like you are on a roller coaster."

For more information about the 2009 AERC National Championships, visit www.patriotsdayride.com.

For more information about AERC or endurance riding, please contact the AERC office, located in Auburn, California, at 866-271-2372, email aerc@foothill.net, or visit www.aerc.org