

A CHAMPION'S STORY

"When I grow up, I'm going to..."

If she loves horses, every little girl has the same daydream. She'll find a wonderful young horse that's barely broke to ride. She'll use love and patience to establish a relationship, successfully handling the ups and downs of the first years



Kathleen Crandell and her Arabian gelding earned top honors at the Arabian Horse National Competitive Trail Championship.

under saddle. Later, when the handsome youngster is ready, she'll work out a conditioning program, follow it carefully, and then the girl and her equine partner will enter the biggest competition in the United States. Of course, in the daydream, the girl and her special horse always collect the gleaming trophy amidst the cheers of the crowd.

In real life, the dream sometimes comes true! But when Dr. Kathleen Crandell finished the Arabian Horse National Competitive Trail Championship on her ten-year-old gray gelding, she had no idea that she and her horse had won. In a daze after riding 65 miles in two days, Crandell wasn't paying close attention to the announcer's voice. She realized she had won only after her name had been repeated several times.

How could the winner of a competition be unaware of achieving victory? It's quite possible in a competitive trail event, which is nothing like a traditional horse race. With each entrant starting at a different time, riders may go for long stretches without seeing another contestant, and they have no way of knowing who has finished ahead of or behind them. In addition, the final standings are based on several criteria besides elapsed time.

"The score is made up of various elements," Crandell explained. "While speed is important, going at the fastest pace is not an advantage. To avoid penalty points, all riders in the championship event must finish the day's mileage within a narrow window of time. In this ride, if you complete the ride each day more quickly than six hours and fifteen minutes, or more slowly than six hours and forty-five minutes, you accumulate penalties. Finishing too far outside the optimum time results in disqualification."



The horse comes first

Even more important than speed is the horse's condition throughout all phases of the event. Before the competition starts, every horse is presented to a panel of veterinarians. The vets check vital signs such as pulse, temperature, and respiration to establish individual base levels. They also note each horse's hydration status, gut sounds, muscle tone, anal tone, and capillary refill time, all metabolic indicators of stress. Any signs of lameness or soreness in the legs are noted. Changes in the way a horse moves is an indication of fatigue, so animation and impulsion are carefully noted at the beginning, and any change between vet checks during the competition is penalized. Signs of an ill-fitting saddle or bridle are monitored throughout the competition, and the horse can even lose points for poor manners.

Throughout the competition, veterinarians are stationed at designated checkpoints where the horse's heart rate, vital signs, and soundness are monitored. If a horse is judged unfit to continue at any point, it is pulled from the competition. All of the above mentioned parameters are checked and scored at the end of each day. Each horse starts with a score of 100 points each day, and points are deducted as problems are encountered. The final score is the sum of the two days, with the highest score determining the winning horse.

To find that special mount

An Arabian gelding named Brown R Raemon was Crandell's partner in the competition. "Raemon started out as the horse nobody wanted," she laughed. "My in-laws bought him as a weanling from a breeder in Wyoming. In his early training, Raemon had a hard time simply learning to go forward. Even after he was solid at a walk and trot, it was a struggle to get him to canter. Fortunately, he was started using natural horsemanship methods, which helped him learn to move forward without resistance."

The gelding was also narrow-bodied and short-strided, traits that pushed him to the bottom of the list when other family members selected the horses they wanted to bring along.

Crandell thought to herself, "All right, if nobody else is going to ride him, I'll work with him." His first competitions were scheduled when he turned six, and she quickly discovered qualities no one else had seen. "Although Raemon can explode if he gets scared, most of the time he's very quiet to handle, tack up, and ride," she said. "You don't have to fight with him, and he is intuitive on the trail in choosing which gait is appropriate for the foot-



ing. Probably his best quality is his lovely trail canter. He can canter all day, which is much easier on him than covering the same amount of ground in an extended trot. His heart rate actually drops when he moves into a canter, and that helps his endurance by allowing him to use his energy in an economical manner."

In the company of champions

In June of 2004, Raemon was entered in the Region 15 competitive trail championship and was selected as the grand champion. Linda Crandell, Kathleen's mother-in-law, claimed the reserve champion spot with her mare L R Jasuur Melika, better known by her barn name, Melika. It was a logical step, the women agreed, to point their mounts toward the national championship competition a few months away.

"We had been riding several times a week to get ready for the regional championship, so we tried to continue that program," Crandell said. "I did have to make a few changes, though. Because the national race is held on two consecutive days, with the horses covering 32.5 miles each day, I added back-to-back rides on the weekends to be sure the horse would stay comfortable, both mentally and physically, with that schedule."

The 2004 Arabian Horse National Competitive Trail Championship was scheduled for a weekend in mid-October. While the weather was cooperative, the Ohio terrain was challenging. "Only the first and last one-half miles of the course were flat," Crandell said. "The rest was all ups and downs, most of them fairly steep, with water crossings at some of the low points." Knowing the course

would be a demanding one, Crandell was delighted when she moved back to Virginia during the summer and had wonderful mountain trails out her backdoor on which to train. Riding on weekends and at times when her children were in school, she was often joined by her husband or her mother-in-law for miles of training rides.

Putting science in the saddle

To produce a top athletic effort in a competitive trail event, a horse must be on an excellent nutritional program. Crandell, an equine nutritionist for Kentucky Equine Research (KER), had the credentials to design a feeding management plan that would allow her horse to train, compete, and recover well after the competition.

Building Raemon's ration around top-quality forage, Crandell boosted the horse's energy intake by adding Pennfield Feeds' EnduroEvent Ener-G, a low-starch concentrate designed for endurance horses. A majority of the energy in this feed comes from fat and fermentable fiber rather than starch, which is more abundant in traditional grain-based feeds. The formulation provides long-term sustainable energy and prevents rapid changes in blood sugar. In addition, the fiber provides a fluid and electrolyte reservoir that the horse can utilize during exercise.

She also used Pennfield's Grand Prix Granola, a fortified low-sugar blend of steam-flaked grains, leading up to and during the competition to increase the muscle and liver glycogen stores.

Horses performing extended exercise benefit from supplementation with selenium and vitamin E, antioxidants that support muscle function and aid in recovery. Raemon was given Myo-Guard and Elevate, products developed by KER for this purpose. The stresses of travel, unfamiliar surroundings, high-level competition, and an interrupted feeding schedule often put horses at risk for digestive upsets. Crandell used Neigh-Lox, an antacid designed by KER to protect the equine stomach against the development of gastric ulcers, to keep her horse healthy and comfortable throughout the busy weekend. Raemon was also encouraged to eat fresh green grass, the best defense against ulcers, as frequently as possible over the span of the competition.

You'd have to be there

After a week of planning, packing equipment, and transporting horses to the competition site, most entrants arrived in varying states of fatigue, and Crandell was no exception. She went to bed without setting an alarm clock, certain that she would wake up early in anticipation of the day's ride.

The next thing she heard was a voice saying, "Kathleen, are you awake? Your starting time is in twenty minutes!" A whirlwind of activity followed, with horse and rider getting to the line just as the starter droned, "Seven seconds, six, five...." On the trail at last, Crandell was able to relax and enjoy watching the miles roll by, but she still needed to follow a plan and keep track of time and pace.

"You want to reach a certain point in a certain amount of time," she said, "and pace is very important in order to keep the horse's heart rate within the most efficient range. Riding the same course on successive days is a big help, because on the first day you discover places that might be particularly hard for your horse, maybe because of footing or really steep sections. On the second day, you take those into account and plan to go a little faster on the easy stretches." Water is available at four-mile intervals so horses can get a drink and competitors can cool their horses by sponging them. In some events, food is provided for the riders; in this competition, each rider could carry water or food if they thought it was needed throughout the ride.

Tomorrow's daydream

What does the future look like, now that "the horse nobody wanted" has turned into a national champion? Raemon is now qualified for life to compete in the National Championships so this year's competition is definitely in the plans. With his quiet disposition, Raemon might spend some time as a child's competition mount. "My daughter is ready for a new horse, and she and Raemon might be a good fit," Crandell said. "I'll let them get to know each other and do a few competitions. If they seem to do really well together, I may get to watch them compete in this year's championship! Raemon is a very nice little horse. Who knows how far he might go?" 

