

Vicki Weiper & FireCracker



2013 AERC Decade Team



Photo © Jim Weiper

Rider's name: Vicki Weiper

Horse's name: FireCracker

Year of First Endurance Ride (first year in the decade): 2003

Region: MT

Current rider lifetime mileage? 3715

Endurance: 3290

Limited Distance: 425

Tell us about your horse. When/how did you come to get him/her?

Both of my Arab mares came up lame at the same time leaving me with no horse to ride. I decided that I'd look for a gelding that could get me started in endurance.

What is your horse's breeding? Full Arabian, Polish on the top (Sambor) and Russian on the bottom (Muscat)

Sex: Gelding

DOB: April, 1998

Horse height: Just a tad over 15 hands

Approximate weight: In condition, 900 lbs.; after a long winter like this year, 1000 lbs.

Color: Chestnut

Why did you decide to purchase this horse? I fell in love with his picture on the internet and then with his attitude, energy, huge trot and twerpy personality when I rode him.

Did you do endurance with any other horses before this horse? No

How many different horses have you ridden in this sport? 10

Do you participate in any other horse sports or activities? I trained/showed Quarter horses before switching to Arabians. I train horses for others, specializing in those with behavioral problems. I also condition horses for others.

How many years have you been involved with endurance? With horses in general? I've only been involved in endurance for 11 years but have been working with horses all my life.

What got you interested in endurance riding? What was it that kept you interested? I imagined getting into endurance when I bought my first Arab mare off the track but just didn't have the courage to try it until I got FireCracker. I was hooked after that first limited distance ride and decided that learning all I could to take care of and condition my horse sounded like a fun challenge. This is the perfect sport for someone who enjoys hour after hour in the saddle. It justifies what might seem like work to others.

How old was your horse when first started in endurance? FireCracker had completed a limited distance ride when I bought him at age 4 and together we completed our first 50 miler as soon as he turned 5. I'm not sure either one of us was ready but jumping in with all our energy was the best way to learn.

How many rides did you do your first three ride seasons? FireCracker and I attempted 23 rides, but only completed 19. As I indicated earlier, I had a learning curve on how to best take care of my horse. He wasn't very good at telling me he was in trouble.

What mileage distance did you start with? (25, 50, etc.) I did two limited distance rides (25 miles each) before moving up to 50's.

How long until you top tenned or raced (if you did)? FireCracker top tenned twice the first season. That's never been my focus, but I was more enamored by placings early on than I am now.

How much time off do you give between ride seasons? Living in Montana forces me to give all my horses several months off in the winter. Some winters are mild enough to allow easy trail riding occasionally starting in February. FireCracker seems to really enjoy having 2 or 3 months of rest and typically gets back in shape very quickly.

If you have done 100s, how much time off do you give after doing one? I've only completed two 100 milers but gave FireCracker 3 weeks off after each one. By the fourth week I started loosening him up with just a couple of short, easy trail rides.

If you have done multadays, how much time off do you give after doing one? Time off depends on how many days completed. I know the general rule is 1 day for every 10 miles ridden, but I tend to be very conservative and give more than that.

Do you use any special type of tack or shoeing with your horse? I just use regular rim shoes and a

treeless saddle. FireCracker can't seem to deal with treed saddles.

What kind of problems have you overcome with your horse? Oh geez, the problems were numerous in the beginning. He continually had a sore back no matter what type of saddle I tried. I believe I went through more than 7 or 8 different types of saddles. I finally taught him to collect up hills and stretch his back out coming down to help out in that area. Switching to a Bob Marshall saddle seemed to solve the problem most of the time. I also try my best to maintain good posture and proper posting technique but I'll admit that I get pretty tired by day 5 of a pioneer so I still get pretty sloppy. FireCracker's other major challenge was that he isn't a good drinker. He gets entirely too caught up in the competition and doesn't want to take of himself.

Describe the best ride you ever had on your horse. I would have to say the most memorable one was probably the first time we did the Big Horn 100 together. Our riding buddy pulled at the last vet check; he and I were devastated. We tried riding with some others but ended up alone in the dark. It was the most wonderful riding I've ever experienced. FireCracker got his second wind, the moon was full and bright, and we glided along through the desert with smiles on our faces. It was the first 100 for both of us and I had never dreamed he would actually be capable of finishing. He didn't possess most of the traits listed in the "what makes a good 100 miler" article in the Endurance News. I think the only item we had in common from that list was that he and I have been together for so long we now know what the other is thinking.

What was your most humbling experience? My first pull was very humbling; FireCracker had been extremely energetic and I never saw the metabolic problem coming. And to top it off, it happened at the ride I later co-managed with a friend, so I knew how tough the trail would be.

What lessons have you learned along the way that you feel are the most important? Oh my, but I have learned more than I could possibly list here. Most importantly, I figured out that while others may give very good advice, you absolutely **must** figure out what works best for your own horse. These amazing creatures are so different, even if they have the same breeding, and I've hardly ever been able to do the exact same thing for more than one. The other lesson that, even as an aging woman I'm still working on, is that you have to ride your own ride. That always sounds so easy, but it's very difficult to tell a friend (or in my case, even a stranger) that you need to go on or pull back when they have a different agenda. I have caught myself sacrificing my peace of mind or my horse's attitude when I don't adhere to this mantra, but I'm slowly getting better. Guess that's what age will do for you!

What advice would you give to new riders? Well, I must say that there is so much more information out there for newbies than there used to be. AERC has done a good job of recognizing how intimidating this sport can be and now provides direction for those who need it. I would say that finding a mentor in their area will give them the confidence needed to be successful. Even if the mentor is only available for phone or email conversations it will help a lot. They should also read as much as they can on the subject. And, most importantly, focus on taking care of your horse and don't take endurance so seriously that you forget to have fun.

Looking back, what do you feel you did right? I dedicated myself (and my very supportive husband) to researching how to address the various challenges of doing endurance on an overly competitive horse with some physical and mental limitations. Due to the extensive work in overcoming obstacles with FireCracker, I can successfully compete on other horses without "beating myself up" for not having appropriate knowledge or experience. I still absolutely adore FireCracker and what he's given to me but now realize how difficult it was to manage him during a competition.

What would you do differently? I think I should have done a better job of teaching FireCracker how to rate. I attempted this several times but gave up when he pulled my arms out of their sockets. Looking back, though, I believe he and I would have both benefited from leaving camp after everyone was gone.

What was your highest goal for your horse, and did you achieve it? I always wanted FireCracker to

complete a ride in first place and get BC. His competitiveness only existed when around a group or when he felt the presence of another horse. He wanted to lead the group in but typically did not want to leave them and definitely did not want to be passed. Dealing with this type of attitude usually meant that a first place finish would be very difficult to accomplish because he would blast until the others were out of sight then wanted to slow down so they could catch up. We did finally achieve this goal late in his career.

Describe your horse's personality? How is it like or unlike yours? Hmmmmmm.....my husband tells me that even though I'm a strong type A I'm very passive/aggressive. My goal in life has always been to treat others very courteously, especially on the trail, but if I feel threatened I can find very overt (but efficient) ways of dealing with it. Oh my, that does sound like FireCracker!!! If a rider consistently weaves back and forth on the trail to keep him from passing, he has been known to ride sideways up the side of a hill to get by.

What kinds of rides do you enjoy the most (50s, 100s, multidays, etc.)? I think my favorite depends on my mood. I absolutely love completing a 100 miler but really like the challenge of completing pioneers. I like going to 5 day rides so I can take two and ride each horse every other day. It gives them a rest and provides me with a completely different experience each day.

In what ways has endurance riding made a positive influence in your life? I like that doing endurance has forced me to become a better horseman. I feel that I've always known quite a lot about horses, but endurance opened my eyes to facets of caring for them that can only be learned through dedication and hard work.

Is there anything special about your nutrition program you attribute to your success? I'm not sure I consider it special, but beet pulp has been a wonder feed for my horses. Even those not competing in endurance have experienced the benefits of this super forage.

Are there any major changes you've made to your nutrition program (i.e., changed from one hay to another, added something special) that you feel made a noticeable improvement or solved a problem? I started out adding oil to my feed but have since switched to using Purina Ultium. This pelleted feed seems to have the right balance of minerals, vitamins and oil to keep their metabolism working correctly. I was forced to change hay when moving to Montana from the south. Cold climate hay is so very different in sugar content, so managing the grass and alfalfa took some practice. I used the beet pulp to offset some of the issues.

What kind of supplements (if any) do you use? During competition season, I add Platinum Performance and Mag Pro to rations and dole out pieces of Platinum Performance bars during a ride. Off season, everyone gets a scoop of Source added to their feed.

Do you give any kind of joint products? So far, Platinum Performance provides enough joint supplement for my horses' needs.

Describe your electrolyte protocol. Oh, the subject of electrolytes opens up a lot of controversy. I started endurance thinking that constant electrolyting was absolutely required. I shoved tubes of the concentrated stuff down FireCracker throughout every ride and complained that he drank even less when I did so. And to top it off, he still encountered metabolic issues. So, I did more research and realized that, for some horses, the concentrated paste is just too strong and may not be necessary. I now use electrolytes more sparingly with better results. I mix electrolyte powder in minute amounts with a syringe of water, followed by a syringe of pure water at each vet check. I use rather cheap powder that contains no sugar and that seems to have the correct amount of calcium, manganese and potassium for my horses.

How do you choose which rides to attend? Sometimes, choosing my rides is dependent on my finances. I'm lucky in that several rides are held within close proximity to my home, but I try to select some rides that have varying degrees of technicality. I love mountain/forest rides that are a little more difficult but not dangerous.

Do you go to many rides outside of your region? I haven't had the opportunity to go out of the mountain region for rides, but I did start out in the central region. I found that, even though we're all governed by the same body of rules, things are just a little different within each. The climate change between some regions can affect management of a difficult horse, so I guess I'm really comfortable staying within areas that my horses are adjusted to.

Name three people involved in the sport of endurance that you look up to, and why. One of the first things I did when I became interested in endurance was buy books written by Donna Snyder-Smith and Nancy Loving. Both of these experienced endurance women, through their willingness to share information, gave me exactly what I needed when I needed it. Their knowledge is priceless. The third person is Jeanetta Sturgeon, my first trail partner and best friend who has always inspired me to "keep on keeping on". She is now in the southwest region so we don't get to ride together near as often as I'd like, but I will forever be in awe of her riding skills and ability to persevere through challenges and downright extreme physical pain.

In choosing your next horse, what would you look for? I'm not usually drawn to horses that are built for endurance. I realize that one should look for long, lean muscles, short straight backs, strong loins, straight legs with dense bone, sloped pasterns, etc. For whatever reason, I still make emotional choices based on how I "feel" about a horse when I meet him/her. Personality usually makes more of an impression on me than it should. You know, things like a kind eye, a horse that likes interaction with humans, that nuzzles your hand or blows on your ear. To be truthful, though, that didn't even affect me on my latest purchase as my next prospect is a very serious, stoic young gelding who had been started for reining. He was so darn much fun when I took him for a test drive that I had to have him. So, I guess each person has to decide what their goals are and how much they want to listen to their gut. Who knows, your gut may be wrong, but when it's right it's always worth it.