

Julie Barnfather & Peek-A-Boo



2003 AERC Decade Team

Rider's name: Julie Barnfather

Horse's Name: Peek-A-Boo - 2675 Miles, 45 ride completions

First AERC ride: 1991

Region: NW

Stats: Polish Arab Gelding, approx 14.2 hands, 930 lbs, Grey, dob 4/4/86, shoe size 1

I purchased him from a friend, who then became a mentor. In 1992 I just happened to re-connect with an old friend, Chheng Biv. At the time I knew nothing about endurance riding, didn't have a horse of my own, but had been riding all my life and was currently helping friends with exercising (trail riding) their horses. I went to visit Chheng, and he, as usual, had way too many horses. One in particular was a 7 year old Arab Stallion that he decided would be a perfect horse for me. He made me an offer I couldn't refuse, with one string attached. If I bought him, I had to try him in endurance. "Peek" had done one 50 mile ride the year before, and he was well broke, and very well behaved for a stallion. I agreed and bought him.

Since then, (for the last 11 years) he has been primarily my only endurance horse. I have ridden other horses, but only occasionally when I rode my husband's horse for one reason or another.

Other horse sports: We've done a few other things over the years, Ride and Tie, Team Penning, a Fox Hunt at the local hunt club, and a little dressage, but primarily just endurance and recreational riding.

Years with horses: All my life pretty much off and on, but 11 years (since 1992) doing endurance.

Initially, as I mentioned, I was sort of forced to try it to get this horse. The requirement was that I start out with a 50 miler (no 25's -- Chheng didn't believe in starting horses with limited distance if you wanted them to be a long distance horse ñ and for the most part I agree). So my first ride was the Wacky Woolley ride in the fall of 1992, about 6 weeks after I had purchased Peek. I had been training about 3 days a week in the local hills to prepare. I ended up 2nd place and got B.C. (Not what I would recommend now for a first ride goal) I was hooked. Initially I loved the adrenaline rush and just being out riding the trails ñ seeing new country. What's kept me in it is the people, the camaraderie, and also the challenge.

How Old: Peek was seven when I bought him. I think he was broke at about 4 or 5 and he did his first 50 miler at 6.

How many rides: First year, just the one 50 since it was the end of the season. 2nd and 3rd year about 250 miles all 50's, so about 5 rides.

Mileage started with: 50s

When top ten'd: Immediately. Actually for the first few years, pretty much all my finishes were in the top ten. Mostly because I didn't know what I was doing. As I got smarter, I actually slowed down. I think most horses only have so many speed miles in them. You can burn them up early; when they're young and full of energy, or you can stop and ask yourself how long do you really want this horse to be able to compete. If you want a long career with a horse, and to rack up a lot of miles together, you have to be

careful with the speed. That's not to say you can't top ten. I've done that on a lot of rides where we've just kept a consistent pace and not wasted any time at the vet checks. But it does mean riding to your own horse's abilities and no one else's. Speed is relative. Some horse's natural pace is faster than others. If you're wondering whether you're going too fast, ask yourself if you think your horse can maintain this pace not just for the next hour or two, but for the next several years.

Ride Seasons: My last ride is usually in September, and then I'll take Oct through January off, but still ride for pleasure, just not as often and not intense. Starting about Feb 1st, I'll get back into conditioning mode, but at that time of year, I can really only ride once a week since I work full time and it's dark when I get home. First ride is usually about April 1st, and since I have had limited conditioning, I don't go real fast. I'll use my first couple of endurance rides as additional conditioning.

100s: We've done 5 or 6 hundreds together, including Tevis. The training really depends on the terrain of the ride I'm shooting for and what my goals are, but in general, I'll train hard up to about two weeks before, and then taper off. So that means riding three days a week allowing for at least one rest day in between workouts, and usually involves two shorter, higher speed workouts (7 to 10 miles) and one longer (20 to 25 miles) workout with as many hills as I can find.

Multi-days: Haven't really done these.

Tack: English/Dressage style saddle (Smith Worthington) with neoprene girth, biothane and now Zilco combination headstall and breast collar. Skito Pad (really like this for long distance) custom made to my saddle. I have pommel bags to carry electrolytes & stuff, and a cante bag to carry Easyboots & extras.

Shoes: I use Kurkhart (sp?) steel shoes, nothing special, just a nice thick shoe with good support. Over the long haul I think having a good shoe that provides heel support is more important than the weight factor. For the most part I don't use pads, but I do for really rocky rides, especially if it's a 100 miler. For Tevis I used pads on all four with dental impression. I only use Easyboots as a spare tire.

Problems encountered: As far as shoeing, really just issues with pads. Once you put them on, especially here on the "wet" side of Washington, your horse's feet will get soft so you're more vulnerable to bruising. And I've had some problems with sand getting in under the pads.

Injury: Never really had any severe injuries, fortunately. Peek did have a minor colic episode after the end of a 75 mile ride that was pretty traumatic at the time. After having an awesome day, about an hour after the ride he started looking uncomfortable, and didn't want to eat or drink. In the end, we put him on fluids at the ride site and he never did anything more than look uncomfortable, but it took him all night before he got perky and was interested in eating again. This was about 6 years ago and since then, the vets have gone from using little 1 liter bags with a small catheter to 5 liter bags with practically a garden hose to get those fluids in much faster. I think this makes a big difference in how fast horses can come around.

How I worked through it: At the time, I was devastated. I was training for Tevis, which was to be my next ride. I had never had anything like this happen. I didn't see any signs at all. He had had a terrific ride, got great vet scores all day, and came in strong. It was a tough 75 miler (Chinook Challenge for those of you who know) but he was conditioned for it. So the "why did this happen?" question really threw me for a loop. I also felt completely humiliated that everyone in camp knew that my horse was on fluids all night. I came to the horrifying realization that there isn't always a direct cause and effect, and that sometimes things just happen, even if you don't override. It also taught me to never automatically blame the rider when you see a horse crashing at a ride. I spent the next couple of months tormenting myself going through every step of the ride and my schedule leading up to it to try and find a cause. I consulted with various vets, trying to find clues, studied bloodwork, etc. I cancelled my trip to Tevis, since it was only 6

weeks away, and in the end, I came up with a few things that may have contributed to the event, that I hung my hat on, but I'll never really know. (I think it may have been fermented beet pulp that gave him a stomachache) By the way, I'm really glad I cancelled the trip to Tevis that year. It took me three years to get to the point where I could schedule it again, but I learned so much in those three years, that I think really contributed to my experience.

Best Ride: Tevis, (three years later) no question. He was "on" all day. It's an incredible event. I loved the scenery and the history of the ride. I loved that we were travelling across country to a destination (point to point). I had an awesome crew. Leaving Foresthill just before dusk, trotting through town with crowds cheering from the street was a feeling I'll never forget. And bettered only by the last couple miles of trail - - trotting across No Hands Bridge, winding up the last few sections of trail with both of us knowing that the finish was just around the corner. The excitement of cantering up to the finish line with plenty of horse left was the best. Icing on the cake was finding out we came in 16th place.

Worst Day and Most Humbling: See above story, colic episode.

Lessons learned: There's a lot. One of the best things I did was start running. About 6 years ago, my good friend, Sandy, got me involved in Triathlons. (We've also done a couple of Ride & Tie's together) The Tri's led to a half marathon and full marathon. I decided to do the Portland Marathon in the fall of 2002 to help with training for Tevis the next year. I figured my training for and running 26 miles was like my horse getting ready for a 100. And it's really true. I started training with a heart monitor, running three days a week, etc. What I learned was how it felt to really condition and train myself and what changes my body went through. It also gave me a better understanding of how terrain and footing affects performance. It's made me a much better trainer for my horse. I now really know how important consistency is in relation to intensity training, and what it takes to build up slowly, and what it feels like when you overdo it. It's one thing to read about it and another completely to actually hit the trail and do it.

I've also learned that I don't always have time to train as much as I'd like, so if I haven't trained enough, I either cancel a ride or go much much slower. In the early season, I'll use the first few rides as conditioning rides. But if life takes over, I just can't go to as many endurance rides. When I look back at my ride times over the last 11 years, I see that I started out real fast, then slowed down, then have been sporadic ever since, which just coincides with whatever is going on in my life. If I have a big goal that I've committed to (like Tevis) I make time to train so I feel comfortable going faster.

Horse Living Space: We have our horses (my husband Jeff has one too) at home on 3 acres. We have a paddock that they live in with stalls that they can choose to go into or not depending on the weather. We have three different small pastures that we let them out in to graze but being on only 3 acres; we have to manage them carefully. The paddock is mostly gravel to keep the mud out (3/8" minus) that was probably one of the best investments on our property. I think we're incredibly lucky that our horses can have 24 hour turnout. I think it makes a big difference, especially in this sport.

Horse early childhood: Don't really know other than the fact that he was a stallion until after I bought him, so he didn't get to hang out with anyone until he came home with me.

Strengths/Weaknesses: Peek is a well mannered, good natured even tempered horse, and he's very consistent and takes care of himself. From just about day one, I could get him to trot out at the beginning of a fifty, no matter what else was going on. He's really good at keeping a consistent pace and he gets along with everybody. He's also super sound. In 11 years, I've never had any lameness other than a stone bruise. His weakness is that he's not real fast so he's not going to win a gallop to the finish, and he doesn't have a very low heart rate or super fast recoveries, so I have to manage coming into vet checks carefully. I've never been able to fly into a vet check and have his heart rate drop like a rock. It's always a challenge to pinpoint exactly how far out to slow down the trot, drop to a walk and come in right at criteria. But that's part of the strategy, and fun of it.

New rider advice: Know your horse, especially before you try to push the envelope if you ever do. Take

it slow until you know your horse is ready both physically and mentally. That means bones and tendons, not just heart rate recoveries. Your horse will “feel” ready way before bones and tendons really are. You also need to keep in mind that horses are unpredictable, and you never really are in complete control. Heed any subtle sign that something isn’t quite right. Especially during an endurance ride. Gut instincts are usually right. Also pay attention to your horse’s maturity level and how he/she handles stress. I think people underestimate the impact on their horses of going to a “big” ride versus training with a small group, or even the difference of going to smaller local rides, versus big international rides. Your horses can sense the tension in the air, and they will have a response to it.

Looking back: We all make mistakes, and I’m no different. The important thing is whether we learn from them. As for what I’d do different: Not try to win my first ride is a good one. And in those first few years, when you really don’t have enough experience, always err on the side of caution, even if it means getting off and walking for several miles, or pulling your horse for no other reason than something just doesn’t seem right.

Highest goal: I guess I’m still working on it. I’d like Peek to get his 3,000 miles (we’re close) and continue happily down the trail. Doing well at Tevis was a great goal; qualifying for Pan Am this year was too. But really every time we come across the finish line with the feeling that we both had a great ride and worked as a team all day is a winner.

Kinds of rides: I like pretty much all the distances for different reasons. I like 50’s because there’s plenty of time to socialize afterwards (before everyone’s in bed) and watch the rest of the riders come in. I like 75’s because it provides the opportunity for more strategy and teamwork, and you’ll still probably get in before dinner, and get a chance to see people. I like the 100’s because it’s a whole different thing, and I actually love to ride in the dark. I drop the reins and wait for the roller coaster to start. Wheeee! As for multi-days, that’s on the list. I just haven’t had much opportunity to take that much time off work, but would love to do the Outlaw Trail, or the Oywhew rides.

Electrolytes: I give about twice as much, twice as often as when I started this sport. Of course it depends on a lot of factors (e.g. terrain, temperature etc.) but usually I plan on a dose (two film canisters) about every one to two hours. I also mix my electrolytes with Pro-Bi and Maalox, sometimes applesauce too. I think it makes it a lot easier on Peek’s stomach. It’s not so bad on the 50’s but once you get up to 75’s and 100’s, your giving a lot of doses of stomach irritating ingredients.

Nutrition: I think every horse’s needs are different, but it all starts with good quality hay (of course I started this sport with alfalfa and now feed grass ñ usually Timothy) a basic vitamin supplement, and some sort of grain supplement if you’re doing longer distances. I feed LMF Showtime G for my grain and vitamins. I don’t feed any grain during a ride. Too risky. I don’t think a lot of horses can handle it.

Choosing my next horse: It’s hard to think about that one. Peek’s 17 now, so I have to in some degree, but he’s got lots of miles left. Soundness and Personality are the top two qualities I look for. Everything else comes into play but after that. We spend a lot of time with our horses, so we’d better like them, and this sport takes a really sound horse to do well over the long haul. Speed would be nice, but not at the expense of soundness.

Three people in endurance that I look up to:

Sue Summers for always putting her horses welfare first, for constantly challenging herself by picking unlikely candidates for endurance, and for religiously sticking to a training regimen year after year, and riding smart. Also for always being willing to help out anyone in need ñ new riders, ride managers whatever it takes.

Dennis Summers for recognizing that his wife wasn’t crazy after all, that this sport really can be fun. For getting his butt out of the saddle and running on the ground early on in his endurance career and using that strategy to both his and his horse’s advantage. (How many times have we all said, I really should get off and walk up this hill?) Dennis runs up. For not only sticking to a strict, well planned training regimen,

but recognizing when a horse is having an off day, and not hesitating to change strategy. Dennis has become a master at figuring out what his horses need, and doing what it takes to finish a ride with a healthy horse, even if it means slowing way down. I respect that.

Both Sue and Dennis have horses with TONS of miles on them, still going down the trail sound. It's easy to win a few rides, get lucky with a "flash in the pan" but takes a lot more work to keep a horse going sound year after year.

Ramona Thacker for her strength of character, friendly attitude, and sportsmanship. Not to mention that she's whipping my butt on the miles she racks up every year. I can only hope that I still have the energy and willing attitude.

My heroes in this sport aren't those that are always winning rides. It seems that those faces are usually accompanied by a different horse every year or two that got them there. There are exceptions, of course, and many more people that I respect in this sport for various reasons. But mostly I have a lot of respect for people who are consistently successful with the same horse year after year, and then after a long career with a horse, seem to be able to do it again with another. And do it by training and riding smart, with utmost sportsmanship and welfare of the horse. Oh, and not taking things too seriously! This really is supposed to be fun. Not just a competition.