

Tenacity

at Tevis

An American Quarter Horse has an

“enduring” love for his sport.

By Marsha Hayes

THE EQUINE STAGING AREA AT ROBIE PARK, JUST A FEW MILES from Lake Tahoe, Nevada, bustles with activity as 161 horses mill around, waiting to be examined by elite equine veterinarians.

Those who are found to be fit and healthy will embark the next morning on a 100-mile journey to Auburn, California. It's called the Tevis Cup. To some, it is a race to win. To others, it is a personal challenge to beat the clock and claim a Tevis completion award belt buckle.

To all, it is an experience of bonding with a horse and striving together to achieve something special at the most prestigious endurance race in America.

The 2013 event features mainly Arabians or Arabian crosses, but a smattering of other breeds are also represented, including one American Quarter Horse.

Hop On Dually is a 7-year-old Appendix gelding sired by Dually Pep by Peppy San Badger. He was bred, raised and trained by Gail and Eric Hought of McKinleyville, California, and it was 67-year-old Gail who planned to take him out at dawn that July 20, on what many equestrians consider the toughest 100 miles in the world.

Although “Hoppy” had not attempted Tevis before, Gail has three prized belt buckles from her successful rides in 1999, 2000 and 2001. So why return?

“Hoppy is a safe horse,” Gail says. “Hoppy is a horse who rides with me, not the other way around. I sure hope this is the right time, not a year too soon.”

Eric looks the part of a cowboy, sitting in his lawn chair under the awning covering the endurance tack they are selling at Robie Park. Check-in day for Tevis in this remote, 8,000-foot-altitude paradise is part street fair, part pre-ride party, part horse camp-out.

“I wanted a reiner,” Eric says of his initial plans for Hoppy. “I rode Hoppy for two and a half years, but it wasn't in the cards.”

Eric tilts his hat back, puts his barbecue sandwich down and continues: “Hoppy is very, very smart and very brave and very adventurous. He likes to go places.”

Those places do not, at present, include an arena.

“He is too hot for an arena,” Gail says. “On the trail, I can get

him to walk for maybe two miles, but then it's, ‘Let's go!’ ”

Knowing that a career in arena performance was not to be, “Eric made an executive decision,” Gail says. “He announced to me, ‘Hoppy is going to be an endurance horse.’ ”

And so the training began: two limited-distance 25-mile rides in 2010, followed by 360 miles in 2011 at distances between 50 and 55 miles. In 2012, Gail and Hoppy won first place in their division of the Western Region of the American Endurance Ride Conference. The 870 endurance miles Hoppy completed in 2012 also helped Gail snag the overall high-point endurance rider title for the California State Horsemen's Association.

As it turned out, it was a good career choice for the energetic gelding.

“Hoppy loves the trail,” Gail says. “I can feel what he is thinking. He likes to go exploring. He likes to know what is around the next bend.”

Gail usually covers ground at a trot, and although Hoppy has a nice lope, she admits, “You really need to warm him up to get a nice lope. After about 30 miles of trotting, he lopes really nice.”

People stop by the Houghts' tent to shop, talk horses and mull over everyone's chances the next day. Historically, Tevis has around a 50 percent completion rate.

To protect the horses, checkpoints are set up along the trail about every 10 to 15 miles. At each point, veterinarians check the horses' pulse, respiration and capillary refill rates, and they have the horses trot out for a soundness check.

The Red Star checkpoint at Mile 28.5 requires horses' heart rates to be 60 beats per minute before they can continue on. A fit horse will “pulse down” quickly and save precious time. But horses who are not able to meet any of the criteria or who show any signs of lameness are pulled, and volunteers trailer them back to the staging area.

Gail, like many endurance riders, trains with a heart rate monitor.

“I like to push Hoppy's rate up to about 140, then slow down until it falls to about 120 while working the trail,” she says.

“This horse is so smart, he has learned his own heart rate.