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Eric Hought was hoping he'd have a reining horse, but "Hoppy" had other plans. Endurance riding was his game.

He knows to not let his rate get too high. He knows what it feels like, and he will rate himself."

Gail's plans for Tevis center around Hoppy. Riders are worried about the forecasted heat, predicted to be 108 F in the three steep canyons that must be traversed and 102 at the finish line. With only two mandatory one-hour rest periods, one at Mile 36, and one at Mile 68, there is no way to avoid the heat.

"If Hoppy loses enthusiasm, I'll pull him myself," Gail says.

As Gail and Eric talk about their plans for the next day, Hoppy calmly munches hay from a hay bag tied to a tree at one end of his picket line. After about 15 minutes of eating, he slides his tether down to the other end of the picket line for a drink of water. His behavior is perfect form for a serious endurance horse. Hoppy is fueling up.

Eric decides to let the gelding stretch his legs, and he saddles him up with a 45-year-old saddle he made himself. Gail will ride in it at dawn the next day, but for now it's Eric at the helm. Almost imperceptibly, Eric directs Hoppy into neat turns, gait transitions and a sliding stop.

"He is just so willing," Eric says. "I use endurance riding as a tool. I believe the trail mentally prepares a horse to think. I believe the trail teaches work ethic. There are a lot of things out on the trail a horse doesn't see at home. The trail expands their experiences and makes them better horses."

The Houghts maintain a web page, with sections devoted to their wares, their horses and Eric's teaching philosophy. His section on preparing the endurance horse averages 10 to 15 hits a day.

With all preparations made, the team turns in for a short night's rest.

By 5:15 a.m., Gail and Hoppy are on course, climbing into the Granite Chief Wilderness, heading for the first watering point at Mile 13. Hoppy is very forward and eager to move

out swiftly.

"I got cautious," Gail says later. "The last thing I wanted to do was hurt him, so I backed off the trot. I knew he was young, but he was so brave, so safe. I just got pretty obsessed with not hurting him."

Her concern cost the pair precious time, and each checkpoint has a cutoff time. If you've taken too long to get there, your ride is over.

At Mile 20, the vet cautioned her: "Better speed up."

But it wasn't easy going.

"Those rocks were so bad. I didn't remember how bad they were," Gail says. "There were 6-inch-by-6-inch boulders! How do you trot over boulders?"

By the Red Star checkpoint at Mile 28.5, Hoppy was found to be in excellent condition, but the pair was over the time limit. Their adventure was over.

In the final analysis, 160 horses started the 2013 Tevis Cup, and 75 finished it, a completion rate of 47 percent. Twenty horses were pulled at Red Star for metabolic and lameness issues. Although a pull is a pull, no matter the reason, Gail trailered out a very healthy, happy horse.

Shortly after Tevis, Hoppy and Gail completed a tough 75-mile event in 13 hours and 30 minutes. The team went on to rack up four additional 50-mile events before Thanksgiving 2013.

Many endurance riders shy away from discussing future plans in fear of annoying the lameness gods and jinxing a good horse, but Gail and Eric say they are not ruling out a 2014 Tevis attempt.

"I'm working on my own condition, too," Gail says. But Gail and Eric's relationship with Hoppy is about more than accomplishing one specific event.

"I guess you can see the horses we like become part of the family. I am hoping Hoppy and his kin will last me the rest of my riding life," Gail says. 🐾