

## A Novice Learning From the Experts

By Nancy R. Skakel

I had the great good fortune to be able to attend the 2007 AERC National Championship 55 and 100 Mile Races at Oreana, Idaho. This was also an FEI sanctioned event, so some riders were hoping to complete for FEI qualification, while other riders were just competing for the AERC recognition. There were FEI officials from South Africa and Malaysia in attendance, as well as several FEI qualified US veterinarians. One competitor, Seiichi Hasumi, riding the Shagya-Arab Fayette de Cameo, came from Japan to compete.

John and Steph Teeter hosted the race at their remote ranch in southwestern Idaho. This is high desert plateau, very hot and arid, at the base of the Owyhee Mountain range. The facility is rustic but with all the amenities one could wish for. Ample space, plenty of water, catered meals, nice public bathrooms (NO porta-potties! except on trail). We even had Wi-Fi Internet and cell phone reception (if you stood on top of the log near the main gateway in front of the old mobile home, or climbed the hill...) The Teeters host as many as 10 or more endurance events at their ranch each year.

Ride camp was at 3000 feet elevation. The 55-mile race, held on Thursday, went to the top of Toy Mountain, about 6,500 feet high. The footing was largely packed sand, although some stretches were quite rocky. I arrived after the completion of that event, but I believe most of the 48 starters finished that ride. The horses I saw in camp looked good. One horse was pulled after tying up, but there were no other horses on fluids. As I watched the awards, I was impressed with the number of older people (older even than me!) who are still competing.

Friday was a day of rest, pre-rides, and seminars. A panel of farriers presented a very in-depth seminar on shoeing. Of particular interest was the enthusiasm for a unique innovation developed by the head staff farrier at UC Davis. This is an aluminum shoe wrapped in a bonded polyurethane compound. The other farriers seemed to be impressed with the ease of fitting and application, as well as the effectiveness of this design. The brand name is Sneakers by Equithotics .

The next seminar was a talk by US National Champion, John Crandell, on the topic of conditioning. He used a power point presentation with many graphs demonstrating that exercise first causes a loss of condition. The body then repairs and strengthens stressed tissues during a rest phase, and rapidly climbs to a plateau of fitness. This plateau is maintained for a period, and then drops off without further conditioning. Thus the goal in training is to 1) understand and recognize this wave of stress, loss, rebuilding, and strengthening, 2) plan your conditioning to coincide with the peaks and valleys of that graph. Of course, the difficulty is that muscle tissues (including cardiac) respond much more rapidly than bone, cartilage, and especially ligaments. The biomechanics can get quite complicated. The training plan for an individual horse must be flexible and targeted very specifically to that particular horse. The main point that he emphasized over and over is the benefit and necessity of the



Fayette de Cameo with Seiichi Hasumi  
Photo by Steve Bradley

rest periods to allow the horse's body to heal, repair, and strengthen. He said most people over train and do not allow enough rest for their competition mounts. He wants to see his horses playing and frolicking in their pastures. John answered many questions from the audience. I asked him what tools he used to assess his horses to make decisions for their training. He answered that the main thing is to know your horse. He uses heart monitors and good veterinary consults, but primarily he relies on his knowledge of and feeling for his horses, and close observation.

Next Stag Newman spoke about learning from mistakes. He used examples from his own long and distinguished career in endurance, to illustrate how to prepare for competitions, and how to strategize for a race. The main point I came away with from his talk is that it is most often the steady pace that does not over exert the horse and rider team has the best chance of not only completing, but finishing at the head of the pack.

Troy Ball also made an announcement about the foundation of a new organization called APEX (<http://www.apex.org>), A Partnership for Endurance Xcellence. This organization is dedicated to education for the improvement of the sport of endurance. They have assembled an impressive group of experts in the fields of endurance; competitors, ride organizers, officials, veterinarians, farriers, breeders, and others. This group is organizing educational programs, literature, clinics, a mentoring system, and other features to further educational opportunities within the endurance community.

Sadly, I missed the seminar on moving up that was held on Thursday afternoon. Friday evening Kathy Voyer hosted a wine and cheese hour, and presented her imported Shagya stallion, KS Rubin, in two dressage demonstrations. He was ridden to music from the movie, "Conan the Barbarian"; the Oriental flavor of the soft melody suited him well. There were a total of 7 Shagya owners and breeders attending the Championship, (one Shagya-Arabian competed). We handed out nearly all the brochures and fliers we brought with us, and talked to dozens of people interested in the Shagya breed. We had a nice display with banners, photos of the 2006 World Champion endurance horse, Hungares, sale fliers, stallion fliers, and breed brochures.

My main reason for traveling to Idaho was to see \*Rubin\* and to help support Kathy promoting the Shagya breed. I was able to help bathe and groom \*Rubin\* for his debut, and then to stay with him while he was tied to a trailer for an hour between his dressage demonstrations. He is a very compact horse with excellent Shagya type. His neck is very well placed and of adequate length. His withers could be better defined, but his topline is strong and well muscled. He has a good shoulder and powerful quarters; very good bone, good angles. His hooves are a bit small but appear to be of good quality. As always with the Shagyas, it is his heart and mind that win over his fans. His character is excellent, very good manners, willing, and eager to please. He is an excellent ambassador for our breed, and Kathy is doing a very good job to promote him and the Shagya horse.

I had volunteered to do any job to help with the competition. The morning of the race I was assigned to scribe for the vets, my first choice of duties! I rode out to the first vet check site with the South African FEI officials. I got a firsthand glimpse into the politics of the FEI organization and the international endurance competition community. They told me that South Africa has 260 FEI qualified endurance riders! This is a big sport in their country.

I was assigned to scribe for Dr. Balakrishna Polanaidoo, from Malaysia. Malaysia will host the World Equestrian Games in 2008. In November this year the King of Malaysia is hosting an FEI Trial Event, the Sultan's Cup Terengganu Endurance Challenge. There will be competitors from 16 countries riding

in this World Championship qualifying race. Dr. "Bala" and another Malaysian FEI official came to this AERC championship ride to support and promote international endurance competition.

How lucky I was in this assignment! Dr. Bala and I hit it off very well. He recognized that I am interested in learning as much as possible. He spent a lot of extra time explaining what he was looking for and finding in his assessments of the horses as they came through the vet checks. He answered hundreds of questions from me all day, and went out of his way to teach me. Between horses at the vet checks I was privileged to listen to the discussions among this international group of top American, Malaysian, and South African vets as they discussed endurance research projects, FEI rules, diseases and parasites peculiar to each of their countries, treatments, drugs, recent veterinary research findings, and interesting cases.

As the day progressed Dr. Bala and I became real friends. On the long car drives between vet check sites we discussed world and national politics, economy, environmental concerns, history, social, cultural, and religious differences, linguistics, and of course, horses. It was quite an honor to spend such a pleasant time with this educated and cultivated gentleman.

The vet checks are a very educational venue for someone new to the world of endurance riding. The horses are assessed for 14 criteria. First, their heart rate is taken – it has to be 64 or below to start their vet check time. The horse is then trotted in hand and without tack for 50 yds, and after one minute the heart rate is taken again. This is the Cardiac Rate Index, or CRI. The lower the heart rate is to begin with, and the less elevation in that rate after this brief exercise, the better the horse's rate of recovery. The vet then does a swift physical exam of the following points, and grades them from A to D, with A being excellent, B is showing stress, C is showing signs of distress, and D is elimination from the race.

- Mucus membranes – color, moisture, consistency of secretions
- Capillary refill – how quickly does the blood refill when a finger is pressed on the gums (an evaluation for dehydration)
- Jugular refill – the resiliency of the jugular vein indicates blood volume and cardiac efficiency
- Gut sounds – as dehydration and exhaustion advance the bowel becomes less active, critical for a horse
- Muscle tone – are they stiffening up or getting sore?
- Anal tone – a flaccid anus is a sign of severe exhaustion
- Back and withers – checking for soreness in this critical carrying portion of the anatomy
- Wounds – cuts or abrasions occurring during the ride
- Tack galls – spots rubbed raw by ill-fitting saddles, bridles, boots, etc.
- Gait – is there any sign of consistent lameness? This can be quite subtle
- Impulsion – is the horse moving with energy, or just dragging?

- Attitude – is the horse alert, interested, hungry, or dull?
- Over all impression

I am not (yet) an endurance rider, but I have studied conformation and movement for sport horse breed classes. It seems to me that the top finishers at this competition were for the most part of similar conformation and type. They tended to be leggy, lighter in frame and certainly lean in muscle mass, but harmonious and well balanced within their own type. They had well defined withers, backs that were not too long, and good length of hip and nice angles in the quarters. Many of the horses moved close either behind or in front, some to a significant degree. However, the top finishers moved more correctly, with a straighter flight of the foot. I did not see a lot of suspension, but freedom in the shoulders and an elastic trot typified the top horses. Nearly all of them moved well under themselves. I did not see many that trailed out behind.

There were some of the horses that seemed very thin and over conditioned to me. While Dr. Bala agreed, he seemed not to be so concerned that most of those horses would be able to finish \*if\* their riders paced them properly and took good care of them at the vet holds. There was one horse we expected to be pulled at each of the 8 vet checks, but she lasted until the 92-mile mark before being pulled. She had nothing left to draw on for the energy to continue. Many of the horses that were hollow over their topline at the beginning of the race were pulled before completion. The top finishers were lean but with their ribs well covered and not at all gaunt or sucked up. I thought often of John Crandell's admonition not to over condition and to allow the horses plenty of rest before a race.

The second vet check (VC) was at the 34-mile post. There were no holds or eliminations. As the riders headed back out on the trail, I watched their equitation. I must say, there was a very wide range of skill at sitting relaxed and in rhythm with the horse. Naturally, the front-runners appeared quite competent in the riding ability. A few of the riders were really pounding their poor horses' backs, or leaning so far forward to have all their weight on the forehand. This was something Stag Newman had mentioned in his talk – the need for endurance riders to take lessons to improve their riding competency.

The mountain loop ended at the third vet check at the base camp after 55 miles. One horse was pulled there and put on IV fluids. I spoke with the rider later. She had competed internationally with this horse. She told me the vets thought the horse was reacting to an electrolyte overload prior to the race. His kidneys had recognized an over abundance of potassium and gone into high gear to excrete that vital mineral salt just at the time that he was actually needing it more. A few liters of fluid and he was well recovered.

The fourth vet check at 75 miles came after 20 miles out across the desert. The afternoon temperatures climbed to around 100 degrees, but where the track dropped down into a couple of small box canyons the temperature was probably closer to 110 degrees. The track was generally fairly level and packed sand. It invited a faster pace, but the many rodent burrows caused the riders some concern. The vet check at mile 75 really started to witness the toll on horses and riders. The horses were tired, their gaits stiffer, their recoveries prolonged. Gut sounds were generally diminished, with a couple of horses getting C's, and B- was common. Skin turgor was down. The vets were giving a lot of B's and B-'s for mucous membranes, capillary refill, and even jugular refill. Tight and sore muscles showed on palpation and in the gaits, impulsion, and attitude.

I am an RN, and I was asked to check on a couple of the front running riders. They were close to heat exhaustion – light-headed, nauseous, cramping, rapid pulse. No significantly elevated temperatures or

delirium, but I lectured them on taking as good care of themselves as they did their horses. They were basically dehydrated, and it cost them time to recover themselves before they were ready to go on. Even those of us standing in the light shade at the vet checks noticed that although we had been drinking water all day, we had no urge to urinate. The fluids were evaporating out of us in the arid heat. Several of the riders had backpack water bags they sipped on constantly, but it wasn't quite enough. They needed electrolytes, too.

This vet check was in the bottom of a canyon, near the Snake River, on a private ranch. There was a mandatory 50-minute hold, and the ranch generously offered a lush field of tall grass for the horses to graze in while they rested. We anxiously watched as the horses slowly chewed the lovely grass. They were too tired to graze with much enthusiasm, but that green grass was the best possible tonic for a sluggish gut.

It was at this 75-mile VC that I was able to scribe for the vet checking Fayette de Cameo, Mr. Hasumi's Shagya-Arabian mare. (I am a Shagya breeder.) I remember that her CRI was 52 and 48; the best CRI I saw at that VC. She was in excellent condition. Mr. Hasumi was looking tired as he jogged her for the vets, but they were well rested and ready when they came back for the exit check. Three other horses were pulled at this VC for lameness. The first horses in were 6 hours ahead of the tail draggers.

During one of the lulls between groups of riders I had the opportunity to pick the brain of Stag Newman, recent president of AERC and one of our nation's top competitors. He was not riding in this race. I introduced myself as a complete newcomer to endurance, and he encouraged me to ask my most basic questions. He told me he rides in used dressage saddles. He said he does a fair amount of cross training with dressage to increase suppleness, responsiveness to the aides, and balance. He and John Crandle both recommended going easy on the speed and endurance training. Stag also told me that he posts most of the time at the trot. He will adopt a two-point cantering uphill, and stand a bit in the stirrups to trot downhill. He trains faster on the hills than he would ride in a race, and slower on the flat than he would ride in a race. Hill work and suppling arena work are the mainstays of his training program. Stag was so generous and not in the least condescending to my novice questions, and I had him to myself for some time. Truly, I was learning from the experts!

When half the riders had come through the 75-mile VC, Dr. Bala and I returned to the base camp to assist with the final vet checks. We were both feeling a bit weary by then, but at least Dr. Bala had jetlag to blame for his flagging energy. While we chatted with Dr. Bala's wife and some of the other officials taking a break, Dr. Bala brought out his laptop computer to show me what a "thumper" looks like. This is a horse that gets into a stress state that results in the irritation of the phrenic nerve, causing the diaphragm to contract in synchronous rhythm with the heart. The result is that the poor horse is breathing very rapidly and shallow. It can be quite a dangerous medical situation. Dr. Bala also showed me a presentation he had made on a research project of stomach ulcers in endurance horses. Half the horse he had endoscoped showed moderate to severe stomach ulcers. His theory was that overloading electrolytes contributed significantly to the development of stomach ulcers. He recommends frequent small doses rather than larger bolus doses of electrolytes.

This was the 92-mile VC. There was another 8-mile loop that returned to the ride camp. Sadly, a few horses were eliminated at this point, mainly for lameness. The vets felt sorry for the riders, but it is the vets' job to protect the welfare of the horses. Some of the horses came in looking rather marginal to be able to go on, but when they returned 40 minutes later for their exit exams, they were fit enough to go the last leg. Occasionally, when a vet feels his assessment of a horse's lameness is equivocal, he will ask for a vote. Then 3 vets watch the animal trot out and vote by secret ballot whether to pass or

eliminate the animal. This often elicited very interesting discussions among the vets after the rider was informed of the vote.

John Crandell riding \*Heraldic \*and Cheryll Dell riding \*Reason to Believe\* rode together as the leaders all day. They both completed with times of 9:19 hours. The tail draggers, including a mule, completed around 2 a.m. \*Heraldic \*and \*Reason \*both looked good in their completion exams, although \*Heraldic \*was a bit stiff and short in his gaits. This showed again the next morning at the Best of Condition exams, and \*Reason to Believe\* won the BC award, while John and \*Heraldic\* won the national championship title and second place BC. Except for the stiffness in his gaits, \*Heraldic's \*last vet exam was all A's.

Three other horses were presented for BC exams on Sunday morning. They were, in the order of their placing, \_\_\_\_\_ ? \_\_\_\_\_, Anne Hall with \*Bogus Thunder, \*and Seiichi Hasumi with \*Fayette de Cameo.\* All 5 of these horse looked fit, in good flesh, alert, and sound the morning after doing the 100-mile national championship race.

I was able to spend some time talking and just visiting with several FEI riders. One of the themes was the difficulty for an individual to pay for the effort and commitment it takes to achieve the international level of competition. Financial support from the USET and sponsors would help immensely. The other thing they wished for is a European base where they could come to ride and train, and gain international experience.

My friend Mary Lehman and I were camped in a great spot. In front of us were Anne Hall with the Polish Arabian \*Bogus Thunder, \*and Seiichi Hasumi with \*Fayette de Cameo\*, Shagya-Arabian.\* \*When we introduced ourselves as a Shagya breeders, Mr. Hasumi gave Mary and me pretty Oriental fans to cool us. John Crandell's rig with \*Heraldic \*was just to the east of us, and Carolyn Hock with \*GT Sando\* and Kathy Voyer were to the west of us. Behind us was Jeri Randle's friend, Dean Hoalst\* \*with his 20-year old thoroughbred ex-race horse, \*PK Whiskey.\* Mary helped Jeri crew for Dean and another friend of Jeri's who had arrived without a crew. Mary and I fell asleep each night talking about all the fun we were having and the things we had learned and observed during the day. I came to the event anticipating a fun and interesting weekend, but I got so much more than I had expected, learning from the experts.