

A Walking Horse Trail Ride¹

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As we open the doors to my stock trailer, two sets of large, soft eyes focus expectantly on me. I reach for Blue first. He turns quietly; I hand the lead rope to my friend, Jeff. I reach for Gus. He turns and carefully follows me off the trailer.

We remove blankets used as windbreakers from the chill of late October air during the 30-mile ride from home into the South Carolina mountains. They were brushed back at the barn, but a quick lick or two is made for good measure. Pads and saddles with breast collars and cruppers go easily, methodically into place. Horn bags with lunches are next. The snaffle bits go in last.

I step into the stirrup, ease into the saddle, and feel myself settle deeply into the very core of Gus. He anticipated my move, and in that special telepathy between horse and rider, he signals that all is okay.

Under a bluebird sky, in the cool mountain air, immersed in a sea of southern Appalachian fall colors, we ride these good Tennessee walking horses out onto a familiar trail. The sun is well above the horizon. Before we enter the woods, I note our exaggerated shadows that make us look like Titan kings on mythical, giant horses. Except for the shadow cast by my cowboy hat, we could be riding out of ancient Greek literature.

For millennia, poets and artists have dreamed of great horses with slightly raised heads, arched necks, tucked chins, proud front legs, and powerful hindquarters gathered under horse and rider. Last night, I dreamed of them, too. Today I live that dream as powerful long, smooth strides carry me through shades of sunshine and shadows.

Good flesh, crisp air, and the general goodness of autumn have the horses in an especially spirited step. A running walk is the gait of choice at the moment for Gus. A smooth-as-silk trot is Blue's predilection. But gentle rein pressure occasionally reminds them, "Not yet." Soon the trail turns on to an abandoned logging road that has a well-hardened, dry tread and is covered with grass. A few more walking strides to show good manners, then a light squeeze says "Now."

Thus begins a four-beat staccato beneath a "ring of muscles" that lifts and carries. A harmonic wave wells up through each rider and a wide smile can not be denied. Could have even Aladdin ridden this well? What prince would not have reveled in

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an opportunity for such poise? Did the one who coined “poetry in motion” see a Tennessee walking horse in a running walk or rack gait?

The trail will turn from the road in less than a half-mile. My right heel touches Gus and we roll into an easy canter known well in slow motion movies and to children on merry-go-rounds. In my mind, I call out, “Oh Grandma, I now remember so vividly the story of you and Dolly so long ago in the mountain meadow and the rocking chair ride. My picture of you in that sidesaddle is a wonder to me.”

The horses want more, but the turn is coming up, and we slow to a walk, then glide gently into the woods like dancers exiting a stage. The trail begins to climb the side of a ridge. As the grade picks up we lean forward in the saddles moving more weight forward and over great shoulders. In the steepest places, I grab a hank of mane and pull even farther forward. Wonderful front legs reach up and out then pull us forward as powerful hind legs, individually, rhythmically reach up, make contact with the trail tread, lift and push.

The trail levels out and we follow the topographical contour until we hear the rushing waters of a small mountain stream. The horses know this place well as the place of “pause that refreshes.” I slip the lead rope that runs from the saddle horn to the halter-bridle and give Gus plenty of slack in the reins to comfortably reach the shallow pool’s surface and drink deeply. Only a horseman can know the joy of feeling a good horse drink deeply from a pool of cold, clear, fresh water.

We cross the small pool and dismount for a breather. I tolerate a light head rub from Gus. He is relaxed. His head is at the height of my shoulder. Blue is in the same posture. Jeff strokes Blue’s nose. He really likes that.

Mounted again we head for the ridge top. The horses stay at their characteristic ground-covering walk. The sideslope becomes longer and longer until the bottom disappears and we are looking out across the tops of big trees that grow in the deep soils below. The horses take no heed of tree tops, birds, or squirrels that scamper through the maze. They are focused on the job at hand, and they do that job with such skill and grace.

By noon we top out on the ridge, and select a good place for viewing the landscape below. A highline is put into place, bits are slipped out of mouths, horses are tied and girths loosened.

Jeff and I find comfortable seats at the bases of trees. Unlike other restaurants located high in the sky, here we have no stuffy wait staff, no white linens, no silver, no worries of appropriate wordings or manner of appearance. Here we dine and relax, and drink deeply the wine of beauty in time and space. This bottle is one of a kind, and can never be duplicated, even though we may return here again and again.

Conversation moves to single well-spaced sentences and soon, with cowboy hat pulled down over my eyes I have slipped into a nap. Do I deserve such peaceful rest? The horses stand easy, resting, perhaps even napping, too.

Nap over, we take one last look over forests and farmlands below, and make our way to ready horses. Mounted again, we travel the ridge top for a short distance before we begin our descent and making our way back to the trailer.

Just as the trail breaks away from the ridge, I look across the large hollow to see a big red-tailed hawk seemingly flying directly out of the sideslope of the next ridge. In its talons is a writhing snake that had unwisely undertaken to bask on a high rock in the afternoon sun. As I wonder about the meanings of life and death, Gus gathers himself for the downgrade of the trail. Snakes and hawks mean nothing to him. The trail homeward is on his mind.

With feet firm in the stirrups, a good seat and a slightly forward lean according to Gus's needs, we move down the mountain. We cross another stream and the horses drink again, but only lightly this time. The current work is not as demanding, and besides, to them, we are headed home.

Careful placement of hooves prevents stumbles. Powerful limbs brake against slides. A light rein allows for constant adjustment of our center of gravity. Gus knows how to do it all so well.

Back at the trailer, horses are unsaddled, brushed, and blanketed. Loaded, they begin munching hay in the hay bags. We load ourselves into the truck and head back with a feeling that only a horseman traveling with horses securely in tow can know.

Back at the barn, horses are fed and returned to their pasture and pasture mates. We go to the front porch for a glass of wine as the day ends, and relax and talk easily about "Did you notice Gus (or Blue) when"?"