

# 'Companionable

Standardbreds trade tracks for trails in endurance riding

story by **Emily Real**

**I**N THE ARABIAN-dominated sport of endurance riding, Standardbreds are perhaps not the first breed that comes to riders' minds when making the decision of what horse they want to take them on 25-, 50- or 100-mile rides through rough terrain.

How could a horse bred for being driven one mile at a time on the racetrack also be trained to be ridden for so many miles on the trail?

For the uninitiated, that seems like a valid concern, but in reality, not only is it possible for Standardbreds to be trained for endurance riding, they can actually become quite successful at it. Even though the sport is still largely dominated by Arabian horses, Standardbreds are becoming an increasingly popular choice for endurance riders.



# Sensibility'



**WE DID IT!** / Molly Smith on her Standardbred Checkyouout (left) celebrates with Casey Hockman on Rebel after completing a 12-mile introductory ride at the Dunns Creek Winter Gallop in Florida this past January.

## 'Companionable Sensibility'



**GREAT MILEAGE** / Above: The Outlaw & the Virgin held in Red Canyon, Utah, offers spectacular scenery for endurance riding. **Opposite:** Aarene Storms and her pacing mare, Fiddle (registered as Naked Willow), have been part of the endurance riding community for 11 years.



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“Some people who don’t know the breed believe that ‘Standies’ are too hot for endurance competition,” said Aarene Storms, endurance rider, blogger, and author of *Endurance 101*. “But the reality is just the opposite.”

Storms has been doing endurance rides with her Dal Reo Hop Sing mare registered as Naked Willow—now affectionately called “Fiddle”—for the past 11 years. Fiddle began her career as an aspiring pacer, but when that didn’t pan out, she was put up for adoption by Greener Pastures, an adoption agency in British Columbia.

“My first horse ever was a Standard-

bred and she and I learned [endurance] together,” Storms said. “When she retired, I borrowed an Arabian gelding from a friend and rode him in endurance races for eight years and for more than 2,000 miles, but I missed a Standardbred’s companionable sensibility.”

So, Storms called Greener Pastures and got Fiddle. Over the course of their 11-year career in endurance riding, Fiddle and Storms have traversed thousands of miles, and even won the USTA’s High Mileage Standardbred Award in 2015, given to the Standardbred with the most registered miles ridden in that year’s riding season.

“I’ve ridden lots of non-Standies in my life, but I’m never as comfortable with other breeds,” Storms said. “My ideal endurance mount is sane, sensible, and sure-footed, with a good work ethic and minimal silliness—and all that stuff adds up to a Standardbred.”

**O**ften, as is the case with Fiddle, endurance riding is a sport that Standardbreds get into after harness racing.

Endurance rider and inaugural winner of the USTA High Mileage Standardbred Award, Patricia Clark, also chose a former Standardbred pacer as her



endurance mount.

Clark's horse, "Eli," was registered as East Meets West, a Western Paradise gelding trained by Archie McNeil. Clark said that, even though Eli is "royally bred through and through," he proved to be less than profitable on the race-track, earning \$6,707 in purses in 21 starts.

So, he was chosen to go to the New

## What Is Endurance Riding and How Can I Get Involved?

Endurance rides are trail races that are 50, 75, or 100 miles in length, and take place all over the United States. Introductory 12- and 25-mile limited-distance rides give novice endurance riders and horses a chance to gain experience at a ride.

Endurance riding is especially popular in the western U.S., because of the amount of wide, open spaces and beautiful trails. The AERC (American Endurance Riding Conference) sanctions rides, and participants are then eligible to win awards like the annual

USTA High Mileage Standardbred Award.

There's also a large community following non-sanctioned endurance rides, where there are fewer awards and prizes to win, and the competition isn't as intense. But whether sanctioned or unsanctioned, one of the biggest draws to endurance riding is the sense of community, not only between horse and rider, but between competitors as well.

Endurance riding requires a horse-and-rider team to cover the course in one day. The 50-mile courses need to be completed in 12

hours or less, and the 100-mile courses need to be done in 24 hours or less. Throughout the course, there are a series of checkpoints where the horse has to be evaluated by a veterinarian and be cleared to continue. All teams who complete the course within the allotted time are declared "winners" because of these vet checks, and all "winners" receive points and prizes. The first horse-and-rider team to cross the finish line, however, gets more points than others. The rankings of endurance riders are largely based on the number of miles horse-and-rider teams accumulate over the course of their careers.

If you and your horse want to get involved in endurance riding, the first thing to do is register through the AERC website at

**READY TO GO / Below:** Endurance participants set up camp outside Asheville, N.C., for the Biltmore Challenge last year. **Opposite:** Patricia Clark found her pacing gelding, Eli (registered as East Meets West), through the New Vocations Racehorse Adoption Program.



## USTA Supports Endurance Riding

Since 2011, the USTA has recognized the High Mileage Standardbred competing in sanctioned American Endurance Ride Conference (AERC) rides. The award is given to the Standardbred that has the most miles ridden during the current ride season (Dec. 1-Nov. 30).

The Standardbred Distance Championship not only adds to the USTA's portfolio of recognition for off-the-track Standardbreds, but also aims to contribute to providing a great network of Standardbred endurance riders.

Since 1996, the Standardbred Equine Program has worked with owners of off-the-track Standardbreds to educate the general public about the many disciplines Standardbreds excel at once they are retired from racing.

For more information about the SEP at the USTA, visit [lifeafterracing.ustrotting.com](http://lifeafterracing.ustrotting.com), or send email inquiries to [sep@ustrotting.com](mailto:sep@ustrotting.com).

Vocations Racehorse Adoption Program to find a new career.

"I saw a short video clip on YouTube of Eli under saddle and knew I had to have him," Clark said. "I notified Dot Morgan, the director of New Vocations, and Eli was mine within four hours of having been put up for adoption. His quality, his regal air, and his athleticism illustrated all of the attributes I was

seeking in an endurance prospect."

Storms said that the Standardbred's strong work ethic, strong feet, consistent trot, physical versatility, and flexibility with being handled by many different people make them ideal for endurance riding, where versatility, strength, and a cool temperament are a must.

"In a sport like endurance, where the trust between rider and horse is vi-

tally important over miles of rough terrain, a smart and sensible horse is highly valued," Storms said. "I only wish more people knew about them, and I'm doing my best to spread the gospel."

While Storms has mainly stuck to riding Standardbreds throughout the course of her career, Clark has ridden many different breeds of horses.

"I have always ridden a variety

**aerc.org.** You can register either as a Junior (15 years or younger), Young (15-21 years old) or Senior rider (21-plus years old), and this will determine which division you'll be able to race in. Senior riders are further divided into weight categories: Featherweight (160 lbs. or less), Lightweight (161-185 lbs.), Middleweight (186-210 lbs.) and Heavyweight (211 lbs. and up).

To register for a ride, contact race management of the specific ride well before the start date. Ride management will give you an application and more information about the specific ride. It's important to preregister, because some rides have an entry limit or preregistration deadline, so if you just show up, you might not be able to participate.

Before race day, make sure you check your

paperwork and ensure that everything is up to date; some states require a health certificate and proof of a negative Coggins test, and some require brand registration.

More information about endurance riding, Standardbred endurance recognition programs, and requirements and entry information for the distance championships can also be found on the USTA's Life After Racing endurance page at [lifeafterracing.ustrotting.com/endurance.cfm](http://lifeafterracing.ustrotting.com/endurance.cfm).

**GOOD START /** Penny Markle and her Standardbred Alacritous participated in a 25-mile ride this past April at Spring Fling in South Carolina.



**JOB WELL DONE** / *Below:* Participants return at dusk after putting in a 50-mile ride at Broxton Bridge Plantation in South Carolina last year. *Opposite:* A rider and mount cool out at day's end after taking part in this year's Spring Fling.



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of breeds, but it is the Standardbred that has captured my imagination and heart,” Clark said. “I also have an Arabian and he is actually Eli’s backup horse. In [endurance], it is very odd that the Arabian is a backup, but [Eli’s] strength, power, and intelligence are beyond compare.”

Clark said that Eli, a bulky racehorse who used to trip over the smallest knolls on the trail, can now go through tight, single-track trails with little effort.

“[Standardbreds] are very different from other breeds, as they seem to have so many gears in the transmission and so much speed when you ask for it,” Clark said. “Eli will work at whatever speed I ask of him with very little discussion.”

**E**ndurance rider and 2016 USTA High Mileage Standardbred Award winner Jen Moore said that she actually got into endurance riding in the first place as she was trying to find out what to do with her newly adopted Standardbred registered as Sidney Rain, nicknamed “Sid.”

“I was looking for a sport with a good community, and the people in endurance are probably the most welcoming,” Moore said. “There’s a great

community in endurance, and Sid loved it—we’d power trot through trees and I could just feel how alive he was.”

Moore said she’d argue that not only are Standardbreds just a decent option for endurance riding, but the breed is also actually bred for it.

“They were bred for [endurance],” Moore said. “The ideal Standardbred can trot all day long. They’re strong, smart, sane, and sensible—it’s not like you’re trying to control this rocket under you, and we’re starting to see them more and more [in endurance].”

Aside from their mounts’ physical aptitude, intelligence, and good temperament, perhaps the most meaningful thing to endurance riders, regardless of breed, is the bond that they share with their horse as they traverse thousands of miles of trails together.

“As we trotted through the dark at the Alabama Yellowhammer 75-mile ride, I was never more proud of my partnership with this grand animal,” Clark said. “Our connection is beyond anything I’ve ever experienced with a horse.” **HB**

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