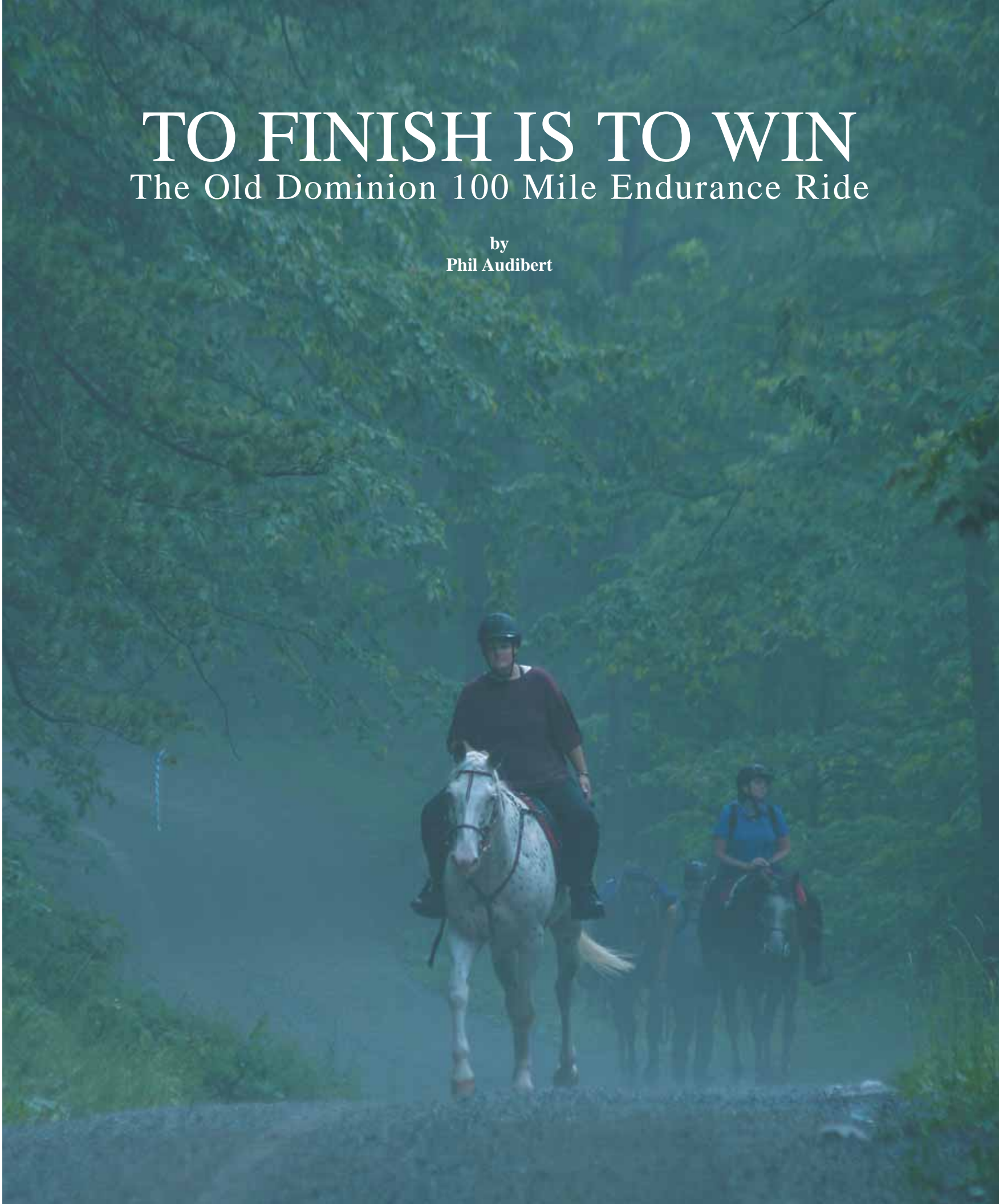


# TO FINISH IS TO WIN

The Old Dominion 100 Mile Endurance Ride

by  
Phil Audibert





Maple leaves on his helmet are a dead giveaway that Tom Paleczny & Raeme's Magician traveled from Canada to participate in this East Coast classic endurance ride. Photo by Susie Audibert

"It's a total amateur sport. We're all backyard-horse people. We don't have expensive horses. We do this for fun, and we do it for this." Bob Walsh points to his

simple pewter belt buckle. It says he's finished in the top ten in the grueling Old Dominion 100-Mile Endurance race, one of the two most prestigious endurance rides in

this country. In fact, he's finished in the top ten in this race several times. But unlike the big-money races in Dubai, for example, he's not flashing a brand-new Mercedes or a hefty purse, just a simple belt buckle.

The 34<sup>th</sup> running of this famous annual event was held this past June near Bryce Mountain in Shenandoah County, next to the West Virginia border. Unlike some endurance rides, this race does not go round and round endlessly on the same old loop trail. Instead it makes a 100-mile-long single circuit through the George Washington National Forest with a minimum of backtracking.

It means riding at night without getting lost. It means enduring oppressive heat and humidity punctuated by lightning, thunder and drenching downpours. It means climbing and descending an aggregate of 12,000-plus feet. And it means maintaining an ideal average speed of seven miles per hour, equivalent to a medium trot—for 14 and a half hours. Needless to say, sometimes you canter, sometimes you walk, sometimes you dismount and lead your horse.

It also means sometimes waking up in the middle of the trail with your horse contentedly grazing off to the side. "For

Competitors often dismount and walk to save their horses. Arabians are the preferred breed in endurance riding because they are light-muscle and thin-skinned: they cool down quickly. Photo by Phil Audibert



three years I did six rides that I never completed,” says one rider. “I fell off or passed out.” And he didn’t get any sympathy from the veterinarians, posted at various stages along the route. They could care less how exhausted the riders are; their only concern is the welfare of the horses.

Little wonder that towards the end of this race it becomes a team competition: all of the remaining riders versus that last hill, or that ticking clock, or the siren’s call for sleep. “You’re out on the trail and you have a problem, somebody’s not going to run over you just to get ahead of you,” points out Bob Walsh. “They’ll stop and wait with you. I’ve seen people give up first place to stop and help somebody.”

Little wonder the Old Dominion’s slogan is “To finish is to win.”

This past June, Bob Walsh did not compete in the Old Dominion. As president of the organization he was far too busy making sure it was running smoothly. The Old Dominion is actually three concurrent endurance rides: the famous 100-miler that shares top prestige honors with the Tevis in California, a 55-miler, and the Limited Distance 25-miler, which is really more of a training exercise than a race.

Scattered along the route are



**Andy Green and his sons Hunter and Forest arrive at the vet check for the 25-mile ride. The Green family went on to win the Limited Distance event in 4:03. Photo by Phil Audibert**

mandatory vet checks, and it is here that an endurance race can be won or lost. Bob Walsh explains that when riders reach a vet check, they are given a time slip. “From that time, they have 30 minutes by rule to have that horse’s heart beat down to 64 (beats per minute). If they can’t get that

done, they’re automatically out of the race.”

And so, instead of galloping up to the vet check, it is common to see riders leading their horses in. Some elite horses can drop their pulse down to the required resting rate in a scant two or three minutes.

#### Base camp





On the trail

Kelly Stoneburner and Maverick await their turn for an examination at the 25-mile ride mandatory vet check. Note the ever-present sponge for cooling the horse and the oral syringe for administering electrolytes. Photo by Susie Audibert



“The sooner you can get that horse’s heart rate down, and have it recorded, that’s when your hold time starts,” explains Walsh. The hold time, which, like the heart rate, is pre-set by the ride managers, is a mandatory rest stop, lasting as much as an hour. Horses and riders are encouraged to use this break to rehydrate and refuel. “The quicker you can get your hold time started, the quicker you can get back out on the trail.”

Vet check stations are busy places during an endurance ride. Docs listen intently to pulses and respiration. They carefully observe horses trotting to and fro to determine soundness. “Horses in this sport are not allowed to do 55-mile rides until they are over the age of five,” continues Bob Walsh, quoting a rule enacted by the national long distance riding governing body, the American Endurance Riding Conference (AERC). “That’s a rule the AERC has put in place to show we care about the horses.”

Still, accidents do happen. Sometimes riders fall and break something, and horses stumble and nick themselves. But the most serious injuries to horses are metabolic. At the vet checks, pit crews, armed with buckets of feed and water, anxiously await the arrival of their riders, who carry sponges and electrolytes with them. The old expression “you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink” holds true here. If the horse refuses water, they’ll douse him instead. “You’ve got to get water on them and the hot water off them to draw the heat out of the body,” explains Walsh. “That’s why you’ll see aggressive sponging.”

Ride manager Joe Seldon quotes a talk given the night before by Stagg Newman of the AERC. “There are two brains involved in this sport: there’s the smart brain and there’s the dumb brain. The rider’s got to be the smart brain because horses just do what they’re told. So it’s up to the riders to control the pace, and there are veterinarians all along the way to make sure the riders are doing that, or that something hasn’t happened that the rider doesn’t see.”

The Arabian is by far and away the preferred breed in endurance riding. You’ll see an occasional mule or a Morgan, but no cold- or warm-bloods here. The main reason Arabs dominate is they are light-



On the trail



muscled and thin-skinned; they can cool down quickly. Another reason is that they have one fewer vertebra than other horses and so are less prone to back problems.

The uninitiated might assume that because of the breed, this sport originated in Saudi Arabia. Nothing could be further from the truth. Endurance riding is home-grown in America; it started as a 300-mile five-day cavalry test in the grass desert of

Kansas. And so, ironically, the rich sheiks come to the U.S. to buy the best Arabian endurance horses to compete for the big money in Dubai.

Endurance rides can be a logistics nightmare. Teams of veterinarians and volunteers leapfrog from vet check to vet check. Drag riders must be organized and placed to bring up the rear. Horse vans must be dispatched to pick up eliminations and



**Endurance riding can be a lonely sport, although many stay in groups to help each other out. Riders encounter everything from broiling heat to chilling down-pours as they climb and descend an aggregate of 12,000-plus feet in the grueling 100-mile Old Dominion Endurance Ride. Photo by Susie Audibert**

injuries. And because cell-phone service is intermittent at best, radios are the only way to communicate. And then there are glitches like the tornado that swept through the week before and destroyed a section of carefully marked trail.

This year was made more complicated because it was all new territory. Organizers spent two years mapping and marking 100 miles of trail, locating vet checks, seeking landowner permissions and finding a centrally located base camp, thanks to Bryce Mountain Resort. Joe Seldon says the ride was forced to move because of development at the former site. "All of our trails were being built over; all the dirt roads we used were getting paved. It was going from country to exurban to suburban."

Asked if he has any yarns to spin about this sport, Seldon smiles and says,

"We may be the only endurance ride in the country, if not the world, to have a zebra come and compete." It was up to Seldon to take Bar Code's pulse, and "he was telling me he would like to bite me," says Seldon peering pointedly over his bifocals. Seldon drew the line at taking a rectal temperature. "I am not sticking a thermometer up the backside of no zebra," he protested. Not to worry. The zebra, being a nocturnal animal, fell asleep at the 9:30 AM vet check. "And that was it; he wasn't moving. He went to sleep. They finally got him on a trailer."

Down on trailer row at base camp, the tantalizing smells of dinner waft through the evening air. A few distant booms of thunder mix with the whinny of a horse and the laughter of its owner. It won't be long now before the 100-milers start trickling in through the gloaming. They've been at it since 5:30 AM. "I can't tell you

what the attraction is," muses Seldon. "I love the people. I love the horses. I love the sport."

Those sentiments are echoed by Walsh. "There are doctors, lawyers, truck drivers, farmers, all camped in that big camp down there. No airs about anybody. It's almost like a band of gypsies that pick up and move from ride to ride – one big family."

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