

# My First Competitive Trail Challenge

by Laurie Renda, Cedar Rapids, IA

In September, River Valley Horse Camp, in Farmington, IA, hosted an American Competitive Trail Horse Association (ACTHA) *Competitive Trail Challenge (CTC)*, and an Extreme Cowboy Competition. The campground, which is adjacent to Shimek State Forest, boasts inviting accommodations - the people were very friendly and the grounds well kept. I had an electric campsite next to the river, with trees for some shade. For those staying longer, they have laundry facilities and a modern shower house. My horse was housed out of the elements in a covered roomy stall.

In a CTC, each of the 6-10 obstacles has a time limit, but you can take your time getting from judged obstacle to judged obstacle. Usually 6-10 miles in length, a CTC lasts 2-3 hours, making it much more relaxed than a Competitive Trail Ride (CTR), which can be 40 miles or more. There are three divisions to accommodate different skill levels. I rode in the pleasure division, geared for those who have not had more than three wins. The Open Division is for the more advanced riders, and there is also a Junior Rider Division.

I arrived Friday afternoon, got settled in, worked my horse in the arena, and got to know nearby campers. On Saturday morning I signed in for the ride and introduced myself to Susan Andersen, who was hosting the ride. I would never have guessed that this

was her first ACTHA event, as she was very organized and put on a very nice competition.

I was nervous about riding my green Tenuvian, "Mr. Big Stuff" (aka "Michael") out on the trail for the first time. Susan, sensing my tension, introduced me to Cyndi Ragland and her fiancé John Danford, from Olathe, KS, who took me under their wings and offered to let me ride along with them. After the riders' briefing, we took off in small groups of six riders spaced out about 15 minutes apart.

We had six varying obstacles spread out over several miles. With a log jump as the first obstacle, I was a little unsure of myself and chose to go around.

The next challenge was a water crossing. I have seen Michael cross water many times, swimming and pulling people with his tail. I have also seen crazy cowboys do back flips into the water off of his back while he stood patiently, so I was pretty confident at this obstacle. After I crossed the water with



Cyndi Ragland of Olathe, KS, performs the step up on Petey, during the Extreme Cowboy Competition portion of the weekend. - photo by Laurie Renda

To get to our next challenge, we first faced a small water crossing. I thought it would be a piece of cake to cross, since we had just done so well on the previous one. Cyndi warned me to be careful since it was a small stream, and Michael might try to jump it. Unfortunately, I tensed up, trying to hold back. Michael is very sensitive, and when I get nervous, he gets really scared, and then I get more scared, and we both fall to pieces. No matter what I did, my body language was telling Michael this was going to be bad, so he wasn't going through that water - no matter what! After about 20 minutes and some help from the other riders, we made it across safely.

Our next challenge was riding down a hill, doing a 360 degree turn, and then backing our horses up the hill. I chose not to back up the hill since my horse seemed to forget how to back that day. (Today, of course, he is backing like a big rig heading to the loading dock to get unloaded and head home.)

Elsewhere, we had to go down a steep hill, stop, and wait patiently. We did well on that. The next test was cantering in a straight line. Oops! Gaited horses don't



Laurie & "Mr. Big" (aka "Michael") listen intently at the briefing. - masey gracey photography

success, I stopped halfway up the hill to wait with Cyndi as she watched John cross. In hindsight, I should have kept going up the hill, as I stopped in an area that had been washed out and we had some trouble keeping our footing. My score subsequently got knocked down two points. I can see how having more experience is an advantage, as it would help me to make better choices.



John Danford of Olathe, KS, does the step down -Extreme Cowboy Competition-  
photo by Laurie Renda

canter!! So we headed down the path, gaiting like we knew where we were going, and actually scored well, in spite of not cantering.

The last obstacle was the log drag and then back to camp.

On the way back we had to cover some of the same terrain that we had trouble with before. Of course, it looked different, coming from the other direction, but by now I was relaxed so we didn't have any problems. I decided to try the log jump that I had gone around on the way out. We went over it beautifully. When there is no pressure, the challenges are much easier to perform and I had gained more confidence after riding for a bit.

In total, the ride took about two hours, which made for a nice distance.

We came back for lunch, door prizes and awards. I won, even though I placed dead last. You see, my goal was merely to make it on a trail ride with this sensitive horse. I wasn't even sure I would go on the ride, let alone complete it and do the majority of the challenges.

Later that night, we checked out the live band at the lodge and then sat around the campfire to finish off the evening.

I owe an extra thank you to Cyndi and John! They have been doing these rides most every weekend, and Cyndi is aiming for high point of the year. Without their guidance and not letting me give up, I might still be back at my second water crossing!

I would like to go on another ride and bond with my beautiful Mr Big Stuff and continue to gain confidence.

An Extreme Cowboy Competition was held the next morning. It was amazing to watch people of all ages do these more difficult obstacles at a much higher rate of speed. From opening gates, crossing a pond, walking across a teeter totter, jumping over a log, to running over a narrow bridge - they did it all, with skill and confidence. The judging of this timed event included how smoothly the rider and horse accomplished the obstacles together.

It seems this competition is a regular event at River Valley and they are trying to get monthly ACTHA rides organized for 2011.

For more information on the rides visit [www.ACTHA.us](http://www.ACTHA.us)