

Headed for the Patagonian hills

Wallowa County equestrian will participate in endurance race

By ANN BLOOM
For the Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — If enthusiasm had a scale from 1-10, then Brenda Johnson would be at about a 12.

Johnson is preparing for a 10-day endurance horse race, called the Gaucho Derby, that takes place in Argentinian Patagonia March 3-13. Participants ride for 311 miles, using seven different horses, relying on a map and a GPS tracker, and must finish in 10 days. There are no trails.

The race is a test of horse and rider endurance, navigation and survival skills.

Johnson is in an elite group. There were over more than applicants and only 35 were chosen to compete.

So why is she doing it? She laughs at the question. “Because I’m crazy!” she said.

She explains, more seriously, that she has always wanted to do it and is “just doing it to do it.”

There are riders from around the globe, including Europe, the United States, South Africa and Australia participating.

The experience is costing her a great deal of money — more than \$14,500. In addition, there is airfare, gear, food, a tent and sleeping bag. Specialized gear for the weather she will encounter all had to be purchased new. Since she will be going in March, and since Patagonia (located in South America) is in the Southern Hemisphere, its climate now will be close to Wallowa County’s September or October.

“It could be 20 or 70 degrees,” Johnson said. She also had to commit at least \$1,000 to charity just to enter, but has raised and donated \$1,500 to date.

Her chosen charities were Safe Harbors in Enterprise and Shotzy Sanc-



Brenda Johnson is set to compete in an endurance horse race called the Gaucho Derby in South America’s Patagonia from March 3-13, 2022.

tuary in Union County, an animal rescue and domestic violence organization. Donations are still being accepted, and Johnson asks anyone who wishes to support her challenge to donate to these charities. She spent a year training and preparing for the event, and appreciates the support and donations of local businesses and individuals who contributed to her endeavor.

A rare race to ride in

This is only the second race of its kind. The first was held in 2020, and the world shut down during the race due to the pandemic. The second race, which would have happened in 2021, was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

She said she was initially drawn to the race by the story of Bob Long, a 70-year-old Idaho man who won the Mongol Derby, which is 1,000 kilometers, or 622 miles.

“I thought the story was inspirational,” she said. And, she added, “I’ve always wanted to go to Patagonia.”

In addition to specialized gear, there is a strict weight restriction. Riders can only weigh 187 pounds. Supplies and gear — food, first aid kit, tent, saddlebags and sleeping bag — cannot exceed 22 pounds for 10 days, with 4-pound food-resupply bags strategically placed along the course.

“They are very strict

about weight,” she said. The body weight restriction also includes clothes and helmet.

The race has an extensive veterinary support system for the horses. Veterinarians are at horse stations every 40-60 kilometers to check the horses’ heart rates, respiration rates and to make sure they are not being pushed too hard. Each participant rides a total of seven different horses, said Johnson, but each horse is only ridden once.

The race supplies the horses. There are three types of horses used. A Criollo, “like our mustangs here,” she said. Arabians and Percheron crosses are also part of the mix. The



Brenda Johnson/Contributed Photos
Wallowa County resident Brenda Johnson prepares for the Gaucho Derby endurance horse race in March 2022.

MORE INFORMATION

To donate to Johnson’s charities, for Safe Harbors use the shelter’s website at www.wcsafeharbors.com. For Shotzy Sanctuary, checks may be mailed to 75506 Robinson Road, Elgin 97827, or by using PayPal at Shotzy08@live.com.

saddle is modified for the race to be light, “like a cross between a Western and English,” Johnson said. Riding can occur only between the hours of 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. Riders who violate this rule run the risk of penalty and possibly disqualification.

The terrain is difficult. Johnson said riders “have to figure out on your own the terrain, gates and fences,” and how to contend with them. In places, riders may have to backtrack, since there are no trails. It’s a point A to point B to point C type of race, beginning to end. There is also “lots of water. Water could be my deterrent — bogs and swamps,” she said.

It is also fire season there.

“You can’t have fires,” she said. If a person must start a fire, “it better be to save your life,” she said. There are medics available. “Horse and people are well taken care of,” she said.

The lay of the land

The terrain in Patagonia is a desert and steppe-like (terraced grass plateaus). It is bound on the west by the Andes.

“We’ll have various

sections of the race in the mountains. They said our max elevation will be around 8,000 feet,” Johnson said. The Colorado River is to the north, the Atlantic Ocean on the east and the Strait of Magellan to the South. The region south of the strait, the Tierra Del Fuego — which is divided between Argentina and Chile — is also often included.

It is desert and semi-desert terrain and treeless plains. The relatively flat tableland rises from an elevation near the coast of 300 feet to about 1,300 feet at the junction of two rivers, then to 3,000 feet at the base of the Andes. Another tableland region rises to an elevation of 5,000 feet and more. The area is also rich in volcanic activity.

Johnson is originally from Minnesota and had always wanted to live in the mountains. She’s lived in and loved Wallowa County since 2012. She has a graduate degree from Clemson University in South Carolina in aquatic ecotoxicology. She works as a farrier and a veterinary assistant at the Enterprise Animal Hospital. She is also a caretaker for a local ranch.

For more information on the race go to www.equestrianists.com.

“I also have a website: www.brendasadventure.com,” she said.

Johnson’s progress will be streamed in real time via her GPS. Riders will also give interviews along the way.

Truckers plan long drive of freedom

Freedom convoy travels through Eastern Oregon on way to D.C.

By ALEX WITTWER
EO Media Group

PENDLETON — A nationwide protest will travel through Eastern Oregon this week.

According to a flyer shared around social media, the American Freedom Convoy will make its way from Troutdale to Washington, D.C., stopping at the Arrowhead Travel Plaza, Pendleton, on Tuesday, March 1, for the night, before continuing on to the nation’s capital. The convoy will contain a mix of vehicles, and is not limited to semitrailers.

Local residents will be able to show their support for the convoy on March 2 as it crosses Union and Baker counties on Interstate 84.

Paul Veluscek, a strong supporter of the convoy from Creswell, said the spirit of the convoy is about



Trucks stuck at the Flying J Travel Plaza on Jan. 5, 2022. A nationwide protest called the American Freedom Convoy will make its way from Troutdale to Washington, D.C., starting Monday, March 1, 2022, and will pass through Eastern Oregon.

freedom, citing mask and vaccine mandates as the cause. The protest comes just after the Centers for Disease Control announced on Feb. 25 that it was lifting its recommendation for indoor mask mandates.

“It’s all peaceful. It’s all legal,” Veluscek said. “They pulled permits or rented huge areas, venues where they can park along the way of these routes. It’s almost a humanitarian effort. They’re saying when we get to D.C., let’s spread the love. Let’s try to take care

of people.”
Masks, vaccines and social distancing have been proven to be effective at curbing the spread of the virus, according to numerous scientific studies and virology experts.
Veluscek said he’s looking forward to the trip. “I wish it had happened earlier,” he said. “I just want to see people stand up and do something. It’s been too long.”
The convoy will pass through La Grande and Baker City before briefly

stopping in Boise and continuing on to Little America, Wyoming.

Joining the convoy will be country music singer Jessie Leigh, an Estacada native who was flying back from Nashville to join the protest, along with carrying a special American flag, given to her by a close friend, that she hopes will inspire people on the road.

“The goal and mission is to have this particular flag used for unity and to be touched by as many Americans as possible and to unify people,” she said. “Despite what side of the aisle, it doesn’t matter. We’re all Americans. We’re all human, and we all stand together. And for at least a moment, we can stand under the flag and sing a song together.”

Leigh said a break in her schedule allowed her to join the convoy.

“We have these open dates on the schedule and they reached out to ask if we would be the caretakers of the flag on this convoy,” she said.

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