

From Enterprise to Patagonia and back

Local equestrian finds endurance race to be 'epic'

By ANN BLOOM
For the Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — It's called "the greatest test of horsemanship and wilderness skills on earth" for a reason. The Gaucho Derby, a 500-kilometer horse race done in 10 days in Patagonia, is a test of endurance, and determination on the part of both horse and rider.

Brenda Johnson, whose participation in the race was first reported in the Chieftain in February, qualified for the race, and left for Argentine Patagonia, South America, in late February for the race which was run in early March.

Johnson described her experience as, "epic." She said that was the only word she could think of to describe it. "It was literally epic. It is the best word to use," she said.

She described the terrain as very much resembling Wallowa County.

"Our mountains are big and beautiful," she said. "But those mountains were on a whole other level. So much wilder. It was humbling."

One thing she said that surprised her, in addition to the scope and scale of the scenery, was how important the other riders were.

"It was impossible to do it alone because of the intensity of the course and the terrain," she said. "Friendships were forged out of necessity and love."

Of the 34 original riders who started the competition, 28 riders crossed the finish line. Six competitors dropped out or were withheld during the race because of injury or other medical reasons.

"It was nothing like I thought it would be. I thought I'd pit myself against nature," she said. "In addition to navigating the terrain I was navigating a multicultural social landscape — it was an amazing human experience." However, she did have



Richard Dunwoody/Contributed Photo

Brenda Johnson rides one of her favorite horses during the Patagonia Gaucho Derby.

an opportunity to test herself against the ravages of nature when, during a severe windstorm, her tent collapsed, and she spent the night trying to keep it from blowing away. It was a night of little sleep.

"It was 3 a.m. and the wind was so bad, my tent polls snapped like twigs right through my rainfly," she said.

Thankfully, there was no rain, just wind she added.

Those riders and friendships became even more vital when Johnson was injured halfway through the ride. She was dismounting her horse, a mount she described as challenging, when the horse bucked and she, "face planted on a rock, and I broke my nose."

She said there was quite a bit of blood due to the fact she sustained a laceration in a vein in her nose and blood was pumping out.

"My race was over," she said. She could not continue without being checked and cleared

by a medic.

There were medic and vet check points at various stages along the race, which was fortunate, because within 20 minutes of Johnson reaching a medic at a vet checkpoint, a more serious accident occurred when another rider was kicked in the head by a horse. If it had not been for his helmet, the accident would have proven fatal.

A medic had already been called to ride out with her, but due to the seriousness of the other rider's injuries (he was knocked unconscious), a helicopter was called. Between the medic, a veterinarian, Johnson and some of the other riders, they provided first aid to the injured rider during the two hours they waited for the helicopter to arrive. Both Johnson and the injured rider were taken to El Calafate, Argentina, to a waiting ambulance.

Johnson was cleared by the doctor and the medic on the tarmac and, "the doctor sent

me on my way."

The next morning, the Argentine Army Helicopter crew flew the medic and Johnson into Sierra Nevada, a beautiful estancia (ranch) and one of the horse-change stations. She stayed in Sierra Nevada for a little over 24 hours and then reunited with the other riders. She said she was honored to cross the finish line with Kirsteen Thain, the rider from Hong Kong, whom she had ridden the entire race with prior to her accident as well as a group of riders from Africa, Mexico and France. The Gaucho Derby has participants from all over the world.

Johnson said that travel to the starting line went smoothly. Most people spoke English, and none of her flights were canceled, although she admits there was a moment of complete panic when the bag containing her stirrups, leathers and helmet was the very last bag coming off the plane when she landed in Patagonia.

"It was the one bag that could not be replaced," she said.

Besides the riders, there were about 50 crew members (medics, vets, etc.), and about 50 gauchos (Argentine cowboys) who handled the horses used in the ride. There were over 300 horses needed from start to finish.

Although the riders used maps and GPS trackers, there were times when they lost their way due to the terrain, lack of sleep and the emotional intensity of the ride.

"Oh, yeah. We got so lost," she said.

Recovering lost ground was time- and labor-intensive.

After the ride was over, she and a couple of riders spent several days traveling around Argentina sight-seeing, but more importantly using the time to process their experience and decompress from such an exhausting and intense experience. She still maintains contact with the people she met on the trip through social media.

Finally, given everything she experienced, would she do it again?

"If I could afford it? If someone paid for it? Would I do it again? In a heartbeat," she said.

Drought emergency declared for four counties

Chieftain staff

SALEM — Gov. Kate Brown declared Friday, May 13 a drought in Baker, Douglas, Wallowa and Wheeler counties through an executive order and directed state agencies to coordinate and prioritize assistance to the region, according to a press release.

The Wallowa County Board of Commissioners approved a drought declaration April 20. The action meant a letter was sent to the governor requesting action by state and federal agencies.

"Baker, Douglas, Wallowa and Wheeler counties are facing historic challenges from drought conditions that are creating hardships for the people, farms, ranches, communities and ecosystems of the region," Brown said in a statement accompanying the order. "I am committed to doing everything possible to make state resources available to provide immediate relief and assistance to water users."

As of May 9, the snow-water equivalent in the four counties was significantly lower than during a normal water year, and forecasted water conditions are not expected to improve. Drought, severe weather conditions and the upcoming fire season pose significant threats to the local economy, agriculture and livestock, natural resources and recreation in the counties.

The drought declaration unlocks a number of drought-related emergency tools for water users, including assistance to local users. Drought declarations also allow the Water Resources Department to expedite review processes and reduce fee schedules. Declarations are intended to be short-term emergency authorizations to address water supply challenges. More information is available at <https://tinyurl.com/DroughtWatch>.

Drought declarations typically go through a three-part process before securing a state drought declaration from the governor. The county commissions in each of the four counties first declared a drought emergency due to low snowpack, low precipitation, low streamflows and warmer-than-normal temperature, and a state drought declaration was requested. State officials subsequently met, and the Oregon Drought Readiness Council ultimately recommended that the governor issue a drought declaration to provide critical resources to confront current water conditions and future climatic forecasts.

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