



My First Competitive Trail Ride

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Competitive trail ride? That was my exact thought as Jennifer, my riding instructor, handed me a hot pink flyer. "BACK COUNTRY HORSEMAN'S CHALLENGE" it read in huge bold letters. "Come test your trail riding skills and compete for prizes, including saddles, gift certificates and more!"

"Sounds cool," I told her, not even realizing how a trail ride could be a competition. I had ridden with friends on little trails in the woodlands of Washington State many times before, but it was always for fun.

"Here, Katherine," Jennifer handed my mom a registration form. "Fill this out and you and Alex will be set to ride."

My mother quickly filled out the form, registering us both for the ride. "Okay, Jen," she told my instructor, while handing her the paper. "See you next Saturday!"

Jennifer waved goodbye as she walked into the little yellow farmhouse. My mother and I made our way to our blue mini-van. All I could think of was what next Saturday would be like, competing on the Maple Valley trails. I was so sidetracked, I almost forgot to buckle my seat belt.

"Wake up, honey," my mom said as she shook me gently. "Get dressed, grab your helmet and boots and get in the car so we can meet Jen and the horses there."

I popped right out of bed, pulled on a pair of Wranglers, a red t-shirt, socks, and a navy blue hoodie. Pulling my boots on and securing my helmet, we drove out early that morning to meet Jen and the others at the trail head.

Right after parking near the old stock trailer, I rushed over to hug Rusty, the palomino Quarab I leased. She munched away at the carrot in my hand while I started grooming her. After a quick tack-up, I met my mom, Jen, and some of her friends at the start of the trail. Mounting, I took a look at the trail ahead. Steep hills crumbling with rocks were surrounded by pine tree branches ready to grab at you. Being only nine years old, I began to feel nervous.

Since I was the youngest in the group, I was sandwiched in the middle. I watched the horses and riders ahead of me try to tackle the first rocky slope. Horses started slipping and losing their footing. One horse lost a shoe and had to quit the ride. When it was my turn, I closed my eyes and made a silent request to Rusty that we would get to the top safely. Before I knew it, we were over the steep hills and onto flat ground. I gave Rusty a big pat and thanked her.

After that, my confidence level rose as Rusty and I tackled ponds, rivers, bridges, downhill

plunges and spooky forests. We came to a creek where the other horses took unexpected leaps to cross it. Rusty just casually waltzed through it as if she crossed creeks all the time. When our group's leading horses started acting up, Rusty and I were put in the front because we were the dependable ones.

Every mile there was a station where you drew a poker chip from a bag. They all had numbers on them from one to ten. Whatever number you drew was multiplied by five and added to your score. I pulled many six's, eight's, nine's and ten's from the bag, and I had high hopes to win the beautifully made silver accented saddle.

Reaching the finish line unharmed was so rewarding that I couldn't keep an ear-to-ear grin off my face! Once done un-tacking, grooming and tying the horses to the trailer, we got some lunch at the barbecue for the participants.

After we had our fill of hot dogs, chips and sodas, it came time for the award ceremony. Biting my nails in anticipation, I stared at the saddle I dreamed of winning. But when the person on the loud speaker announced the high point earner, it wasn't me. At first, my heart sank. Then I remembered all the wonderful accomplishments I had made with Rusty and all the confidence I had earned. Of course, when it was announced that I was the 10th highest point earner, I couldn't help but be happy. I won a forty-dollar gift certificate to my favorite tack store as well as a new halter and lead rope.

Really, though, all the prizes were just things; stuff you could get just about anywhere. But what I had gained was nothing any amount of points could ever earn me: confidence, faith and trust that would never be broken between Rusty and me.