

Horses' health is primary concern during Tevis Cup 100-mile ride

By Sam McManis, Sacramento Bee

Much as we might be inclined to anthropomorphize horses – Mr. Ed, anyone? – much as we'd like to put faith in rugged-as-Robert Redford "horse whisperers" to intuit deep meaning from every neigh or nod, the sad fact is that even the elite equine athletes in the Tevis Cup 100-Mile Trail Ride are sorely lacking in one important area.

"They don't talk," said Garrett Ford, last year's winner of the Haggin Cup, awarded to the top-10 finisher in the Tevis whose horse was judged as best conditioned. "That, obviously, is the challenge."

Oh, but think how much easier caring for and racing endurance horses would be if a common interspecies language were indeed possible.

They could tell riders and race veterinarians when, and exactly where, they are hurting.

They could say why they won't drink when they've gone too long without fluids on the trail and why they refused to chew hay and grain offered at a checkpoint.

They could explain why their pace has suddenly slowed, why they seem knackered when they should be at a brisk canter, why that pail of cold water dumped on them during the heat of the day has withered their withers.

As it is, though, the many problems that can beset a horse in an endurance ride such as Tevis – which starts Oct. 8 and goes from Squaw Valley to Auburn along the Western States Trail –

remains an educated guess, something to be determined by experts only through a battery of diagnostic procedures performed at 10 checkpoints along the course.

There, horses will be poked, prodded and inspected nostril-to-hoof by equine veterinarians. They will have their pulses checked, their respiratory systems monitored, their skin pinched and gums pressed, their muscles palpitated, their gastrointestinal tracts listened to, even their mucus examined.

Think of a Tevis vet check as the equine equivalent to a NASCAR pit stop – the big difference being that it takes a lot longer and is considerably more thorough.

Even the fittest horse, whose heart rate slows quickly when resting and who appears fully hydrated, will spend 10 minutes idling at mandatory stops. If a horse's metabolism cannot recover within 30 minutes, or is deemed physically unsound, it is pulled from competition.

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