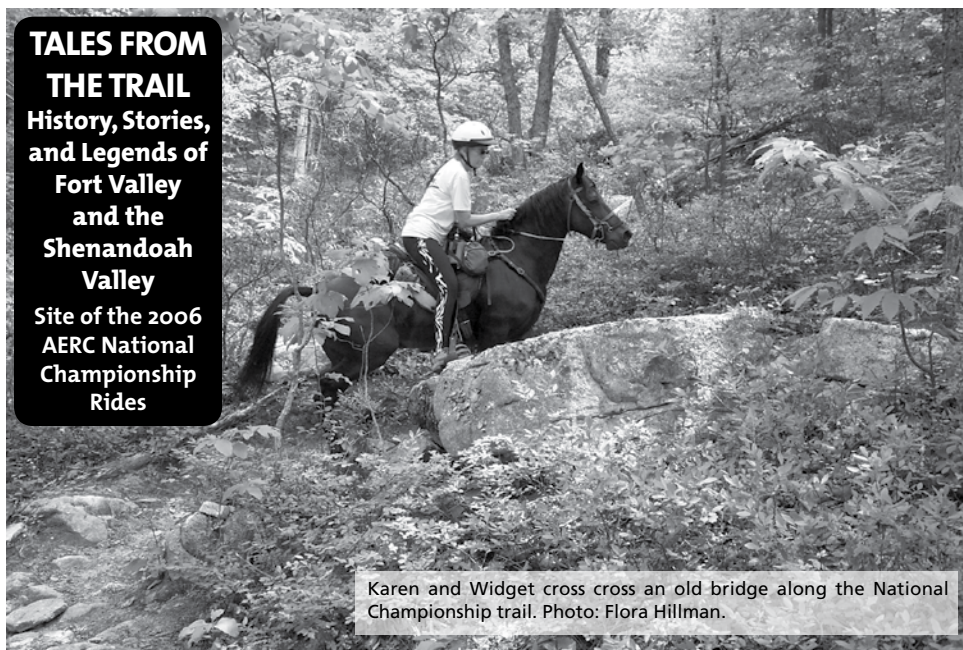


Following in World Championship footsteps

Endurance has changed in many ways since the 1988 world championships, but beating the trail is still the main objective



TALES FROM THE TRAIL

History, Stories, and Legends of Fort Valley and the Shenandoah Valley

Site of the 2006 AERC National Championship Rides

Karen and Widget cross an old bridge along the National Championship trail. Photo: Flora Hillman.

PART FIVE OF FIVE PARTS

Eighteen years ago the entire endurance world watched as 64 riders of national and international fame set out in the crisp pre-dawn hours of September to tackle 100 miles of Virginia’s historic Massanutten trail. Only 42 would finish, one so jubilant that he threw his hat into the air when it was announced that he had completed.

It was the 1988 World Championship; the U.S. was the host country, and Front Royal, Virginia was the chosen site. The Old Dominion was still a fledgling organization, but the trail had already established itself as one of international caliber—the perfect challenge to test the best against the best.

Riders came from all points of the globe, from Switzerland and New Zealand, Portugal and France. Only the U.S., British, German, and Canadian entries used their own horses; the rest leased experienced endurance horses whose owners came along to offer advice and crew.

It was a truly monumental event for a young Bob Walsh (ride manager for the 2006 AERC National Championship) who fondly remembers how this international competition brought the OD trail, and the great Massanutten—the site of this year’s national championships—into the world spotlight.

“I was stationed at the later vet check at McCoy’s Ford (where the OD trail crosses the Shenandoah River),” Walsh recounted, “so I had the chance to drive around and watch the riders. While some countries sported a team ‘uniform’ there were also folks riding in blue jeans and baseball caps. Some wore sun visors, some just any old hat. The atmosphere was also distinctly

more casual than today. There wasn’t near the hustle and bustle at the vet checks as there is today.

“The approach and horse management was also casual, rather like it was a really long ride. Just a sponge on here and there—not a crowd of crew descending on a horse when it comes into the check nowadays,” recalled Walsh. “There was no real use of heart monitors those days since they had just started to come out with them. Wristwatch GPS units were unknown, as were many of the high-tech tools riders use today.

A naiveté still surrounded the young sport for some of the attending counties. “The Spanish had never gone beyond 80 miles. Neither had Portugal,” Walsh said. “The British team was constantly partying—they were a wild bunch. They did pretty well in the beginning and were with the front runners for quite a while.”

But the 1988 World Championship trail wasn’t one to be taken lightly. “The 2006 NC trail comprises about 80% of the same trail used in the 1988 World Championship,” Walsh said, “so this year’s NC riders will really be following in the footsteps of some incredible riders. Those World Champion-

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1/4 page ad

national championship news . . .

ship riders learned quickly that this is not a trail won by speed alone. It doesn't cater to any one type of horse, but favors a rider that uses both strategy and knowledge of their horse's strengths.

"It was a learning experience for the Europeans and a great accomplishment for those that completed," said Walsh. "It was a way to get more countries involved in the sport. There were no complaints on the ruggedness of the trail, just the length."

With the upcoming 2006 NC, Walsh is eyeing the differences that have developed over the years to better serve both riders and crew on this trail. "For over 30 years the Old Dominion and Fort Valley rides have been held on these trails," Walsh explained. "Hundreds of horses and riders year after year cover these trails, and as a group we've re-thought a few things. We're more conscious of the vet checks and where to place them, and how to adjust trail to encourage riders to strategize better and more efficiently."



Photo: Flora Hillman

'Buy' a piece of NC trail history

The entire 100 miles of the 2006 AERC National 50 & 100 mile Championship trail will be "for sale" in sections to AERC members, friends, relatives and supporters. "Buying" a tax-deductible segment of the trail will not only help support this grand sport, but will also offer the "owner" a chance to be part of this incredible venue.

All contributions are 100% tax deductible, and may be made payable to the Old Dominion Endurance Ride, Inc.—a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization.

A special page listing of all the trail "owners" will be published in the NC program, so don't delay in the land rush to buy a piece of the historic Massanutten trail, and a unique place in AERC history! More details are to be found on the OD website at www.olddominionrides.org.

"We still use the same old glow sticks like we did in the past," noted Walsh, "but we also see more technology—like GPS, heart monitors, heat sensors—available to the riders to help them accomplish their goals."

"Still, each section of that ancient mountain trail has a character all on its own," Walsh added, "and while the world has advanced and changed—from prehistoric Indian tribes to George Washington's and Stonewall Jackson's eras, up to today—the breathtaking view and rugged terrain of

the trail has remained unchanged for millennium. Every rider that started almost 20 years ago in the 1988 World Endurance Championship shared the same goal as the NC rider today—to beat the trail.

"The tradition of that trail holds the shadows of riders of the past," Walsh said in closing, "and those shadows are still out there—along the crest of the Massanutten."

To all those riders who will challenge this historic trail in the 2006 AERC National Championship—your welcome awaits in Fort Valley, Virginia!

Come ride, cheer or volunteer!

2006 AERC National Championships Oct. 20 (100 mile) • Oct. 22 (50 mile) Front Royal, Virginia

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www.olddominionrides.org/championship/Championshipride.html