

RT Muffin Lives On Legacy of an Endurance Champion



Muffy exhibiting the famous trot that helped him win 1087 races in an 18 year career. (The Horse Ridge 100, 1990). Photo courtesy Ted and Judy Brown.



Leading the pack. Darla Westlake and Muffy with Alex Ann and Nathan right behind., Central Oregon. Photo courtesy Ted and Judy Brown.

The four-year-old Arab gelding had a trot to die for and the prospective buyer thought he might do well as an English pleasure mount. She took the blaze-faced chestnut home, then, just for fun, decided to join relatives in a 25-mile endurance ride.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

The horse is RT Muffin, and his owner—USET endurance rider, Darla Westlake. In the twenty years they've spent together, they've churned up over 10,000 miles of trails and been leading contenders in the highly competitive Pacific Northwest Endurance Ride (PNER) division of the American Endurance Ride Conference (AERC). "Muffy" has won numerous PNER year-end awards, has been the AERC Best Conditioned champion, and has placed well in some of the toughest endurance rides in the country. He was third in the 1988 Race of Champions. In 1991, he placed tenth in the grueling Tevis Cup ride and then went on to win the North American Championship in Carson City, Nevada. Later that year he was inducted into the AERC Hall of Fame.

Darla's husband, Terry, has also ridden Muffy to a number of wins, as have the two older Westlake children, Nathan and Alex Ann. He has won more than 65 Best Conditioned titles, and, at last count, had 108 wins—more wins than any horse in AERC history. Not bad for a horse once described as "a marshmallow on toothpicks"!

But time and the miles march on, and unlike in the movies, real life Super Heroes have to slow down. For Muffy, the slowing down process began in 1995 when he turned seventeen. For Westlake, a rising star on the USET endurance squad, it was time to start bringing a younger horse along and regretfully, her old buddy was moved into semi-retirement.

It hasn't been much of a retirement, though. The energetic senior has stayed in great shape and the kids have ridden him in a number of rides. In fact, the Westlakes often compete together as a family and have invented quite the amusing little game—though it's doubtful the competition finds it humorous! At any given time, the clan may have three or four top-conditioned horses, and are often far enough ahead of the rest of the field that they can ease up a little and re-order themselves if necessary, as it's understood that whoever is on Muffy gets the win. "He deserves it," Darla chuckles. "Everyone loves Muffy!"

Both Nathan and Alex Ann rode him in "rite of passage" 50-milers when they turned ten, and Muffy has continued to do enough miles that he was awarded Veteran Horse honors in 1998 and 1999. The youngest Westlake, eight-year-old Sierra, is hoping she'll get her turn someday, but Mom is noticeably silent on that subject. After all, Muffy will be 26 by the time Sierra turns ten.

But for now, he can still be quite a handful, and the kids often need to ride him in a curb bit. "He still wants to win," Darla acknowledges. "He's always loved to run, never gotten tired, and always looked ahead. He has more heart and desire than any horse I've ever known."

But the clock can't be kept at bay forever. What happens when the spirit is still so willing but the body is weakening? It's a question all owners of aging competition horses have to ask themselves, and the Westlakes were no exception. What was to be done with everyone's favorite horse?

I had the privilege of meeting RT Muffin a couple of years back and saw for myself the answer to that question. It wasn't at the hair-raising finish of a 100-miler. No, it was some place quite different. . . .

"Stand still, Muffy," scolds a slightly built eleven-year-old. I

.....
Dawn Hill