

14 MAR 2018

Hey JW,

Sunny and I had an adventure that I thought you might be interested in. I have a friend, Jec Ballou, who is a horse trainer and also an ultra-endurance runner, and she's training for a 100K (that's not a typo – she's planning to run 60+ miles in one day) in the Fall. She likes to have company while she runs and Sunny has to get in shape for the NATRC season, so we've been going out together to Fort Ord. Jec averages about 8 mph on the trail. Sunny can keep up on the flats or uphill, but I make her walk all downhills, so Jec has to wait for us sometimes. We've done this a couple of times now and we've gone 9 or 10 miles in about an hour and a half. Sunny actually does really well: she does a sort of sugarfoot trot and stays well off Jec's back, but still close enough for us to chat.

Anyhow, last week Jec emailed me and asked if we wanted to meet her at 6:30 AM at Rancho San Antonio, in the Los Altos Hills, for an 18 mile run. I'd never been to Rancho San Antonio, but the Google said it would be about an hour and fifteen minutes to get there, so we would have to leave about 5:15! In a burst of optimism (probably due to spending too much time with Wayne), I said we'd do it. Sunny seems really comfortable going out with Jec, and it would be a great way to see a new place: Jec is a lot calmer than most of the horses we ride with, especially those that are in good enough shape to go 18 miles in the Los Altos Hills!

Saturday morning came and everything worked out beautifully: I got up on time, we left the barn exactly when I hoped we would, there was no traffic . . . Then we arrived. The entrance is on a hilltop and you look down into the parking lots around the trail heads of the park. There were two huge parking lots and they were jammed – Jec estimated over 100 cars. I just sort of stopped the truck and stared – it was 6:31 in the morning! What were all these people doing??? As it turned out, they were hiking up the same trails that we intended to take.

At that point, I was worried about finding a place to park the trailer and tack up Sunny, but I followed the "Equestrian Parking" signs and they led me to a wide, unpaved lane right up the middle of the closest lot. It ran the entire length of the lot, so when we were leaving we just had to pull forward – no trailer backing required. We were able to park along the left edge of the lane and have enough room on the tack room side of the trailer to tie Sunny for tacking up, which I did. That part of the parking lot was definitely designed by a horse person. That said, it was like being in the eye of a hurricane; everything around us was activity. Sunny was really good – she got a little high-headed as she got out of the trailer, but stood for getting saddled, even though it was clear that she was the major attraction in the park, at least in the parking lot.

Just as I finished saddling up, Jec came trotting over and we started up the trail. "Up" being the operative word – the first thing we did was climb 5 miles. My guess is that in the first 3 miles,

we passed more than 150 people. They all seemed to travel in groups of 3 or more. We were trotting, so we were overtaking most people and when we passed one group, we were never more than 100 yards behind the next group that we had to get around. Sheesh. Anyhow, Jec kept running and we trotted along behind her.

Sunny was great – Jec could often pass groups that required us to wait for a wide spot to get around, Jec being somewhat skinnier than Sunny and also less intimidating to non-horse people. (I should have mentioned that I think Jec and I were among the few native English speakers on the trail, by far the majority of the hikers were Indian and Chinese and many of them got really excited at seeing Sunny because they'd never seen a live horse. I think that Sunny might have been the Facebook sensation of Saturday afternoon – lots of photos were taken!) Anyhow, I really thought that Sunny would be nervous if Jec got too far ahead, but it didn't seem to matter – she had confidence that we were going to catch up sometime.

We finally reached the top of the first hill, 5 miles up. There were great views and the traffic had eased a little bit. At that point, though, Jec's route plan had us going downhill. I always walk Sunny downhill (NATRC rules!) and Jec can always run downhill faster than Sunny can walk, and these were really STEEP downhills, so Jec just sort of vanished down the trail, which seemed okay to Sunny, until she saw a culvert dumping water out the downhill side of the trail – at which point she levitated about 7 feet to the left. I must have been leaning that way because I stayed on, but it was really surprising for a number of reasons, not least of which is that it was the ONLY time she spooked all day.

We continued downhill for a while, then the trail turned up again for a short rise. Just as we reached the top, a female turkey jumped down from the high side of the trail. Sunny stopped for a second, but when I urged her forward, she marched on toward the turkey, who quickly hopped out of our way. Whew! That could have turned out differently. Just after we got over the hilltop, Jec came running back to us. The trail that she was planning we would take was closed to horses because of wet trails, so our ride was going to be shorter than 18 miles. I said I was disappointed, but I was lying.

We continued downhill til we came to an offshoot that went up to a bunch of antennas on top of a hill. Naturally, Jec took off up the hill, so we followed. About a quarter mile up the trail, we ran into seven more turkeys! Instead of jumping off the trail immediately, they trotted away up the hill on the trail for quite awhile, staying safely ahead of us. They made the pace look easy – so I guess the "turkey trot" is a real thing! Sunny and I only went up about a mile, then turned around. We figured that Jec could catch up with us on the downhill and we didn't want to slow her down more than necessary. However, when we got back to our original path, there was no Jec, so we waited for her. It gave more people an opportunity to take pictures of Sunny.

Jec finally showed up and we started the long downhill. Jec would run ahead for awhile, then come back and pick us up, then run away again. It worked out well because it allowed her to make up the miles that we missed because of the closed trail.

About two miles from the parking lot, Jec noticed that scraping sound you hear when your horse (or the horse you're running behind) makes when it has a loose shoe. I got off to check, and, sure enough, Sunny had worn two nail heads off her rear left shoe, so it was sort of rotating off a little bit with every step she took. Sheesh. So I got off and hand walked her in, which was not as easy as it sounds.

First of all, that part of the trail was the only singletrack we did. Second, it was relatively flat. Third, we were only two miles from the parking lot and it was 9 AM now, instead of 6:30 AM. What this added up to was a really, stinking fraught return! There were a zillion people – more even than we saw at the start because it was later and it was flatter. Then, we met all those zillion people on a trail that was . . . 5 feet wide. Sunny is a tolerant horse, but there ARE limits. Finally, because it was flat, there were a lot more kids on this route and if the kids didn't want to pet the horsey, their parents insisted that they should. Sunny got her picture taken about 100 more times, most of them snuggling with some scared kid.

We finally made it to the parking lot where there was another horse trailer parked and a guy wearing an official-looking vest was tacking up his horse. (He was a park docent.) As I tied Sunny to take her saddle off, the guy walked over and said, "I've been riding here for 15 years and you're the only horse person I've ever seen here, besides me."

Boy, do I get that! One of the things that has changed as Sunny's gotten older and more experienced is that most of our rides don't qualify as adventures – but this one sure did!

Hope you guys are all doing well.

donna

