



Virginia La Rocque (No. 6) rides CF Rare Rookie; Christini Mai (No. 7) rides Ina's Rocket Man; and Steve Irvin (No. 1) rides Satie in the Virginia Trail Riders 30-mile ride at The Homestead on Monday. Bath County riders and award winners Trish Darby and Claudia Campbell expressed gratitude for LaRocque's assistance during the event. (Photo courtesy Cristie and Co.)



Bath County residents Claudia Campbell (No. 8) and Trish Darby (No. 9) ride Monday in the Virginia Trail Riders 30-mile ride at The Homestead. The two-day ride tested the endurance and physical conditioning of the horses, as well as the suitability between the riders and their horses. Campbell, riding Willow, won the suitability award and second place in the novice division. Darby, riding Rolo, won first place in the heavyweight division. Both were first-time competitors in the 30-mile ride. (Photo courtesy Cristie and Co.)

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behavior and conditioning are evaluated.

"The horse's manners count for 40 percent of the score and the physical conditioning counts for 60 percent," said Darby. "The horses were examined by a veterinarian before we left on any kind of ride and then a vet would check the horses halfway through the ride, and again at the end to make they were well hydrated and their pulse and respiration were OK."

Darby's steed, Rolo, is related to the famous working horses that pull the Budweiser beer wagon. "He's a Clydesdale-thoroughbred cross, not normally what people use for endurance riding," she said. "I got him five years ago as a three-year old. He's a big horse. He's a real ham. He likes to do tricks and he's very playful. He seems

to enjoy life and has a lot of enthusiasm."

Both Bath competitors praised the good sportsmanship demonstrated by other riders.

"The competition can be intense but all the riders look out for each other," said Darby. "Claudia Campbell and I decided to do this together and, since it was the first time for each of us, we were asking a lot of questions and got some great help. There is a sense of competition but I think it is secondary to be out and enjoying the countryside with your horse. It's probably the epitome of good sportsmanship."

Campbell agreed. "The other riders welcomed us as newcomers," she said. "One woman in particular, Virginia (La Rocque), took us under her wing and gave us pointers to ride more successfully. It wasn't a cut-throat competition; it was very supportive.

People were like that across the board. That was very nice."

Campbell competed previously in TREC — a sport in which riders navigate unfamiliar country and camp out under the stars. "At the other events, we were camping out; at The Homestead, we were pampered," she said. "You're going back to a hotel room with restaurants and coffee in the morning that's already made. We were sheltered. It was a safe place to start this kind of long distance trail ride."

Stimpson discussed Campbell's suitability award. "If you had a really experienced, hard-hitting jockey and he was riding a really hot-blooded thoroughbred, you'd say that's a perfect match," she said. "Then you might have an easygoing, relaxed rider with an easygoing, relaxed horse that just fit. If you took the easygoing rider and put him on the hot-blooded thoroughbred, they would not be suitable. Claudia's ability and personality matched her horse's, if you will. She had a really lovely horse that anybody would have wanted to ride. The congeniality between the horse and rider just seemed to come out and mark them, out of 24 people, as a real pair together."

Campbell's steed, Willow, is a Morgan — a compact and muscular breed. "It was a privilege to be recognized in that arena," she said. "It was truly just an honor and a privilege to be considered. It was a very positive, reinforcing experience." The Warm Springs rider and her horse are preparing for the 50-mile ride in the spring.

VTRI includes nearly 100 members from across the commonwealth and nation. Membership is not required to participate in the spring and fall rides, but riders are required to stay at the hotel.

Campbell and Darby are among just a handful of local residents who have participated in the event. "We've never had many (local participants), but we wish we'd have more, because I know quite a few people who trail ride down there," said Stimpson.

Boosted by the two new Bath County riders, participation reached a peak last week. "This fall was one of the largest attendances we've had in well over 10 years," said Stimpson. "We had a wonderful article in The Virginia Sportsman spring edition, so we think we got some exposure from that. We've been working on word-of-mouth, and we did have some local participants this year. I think they had a really great time."

Darby praised the event organization. "It ran like clockwork and I can't say enough good things about the organizers," she said. "Jean von Schilling is on the VTRI board and she and her husband hosted a lovely event at their farm on the night that we checked in. Jean was there both mornings to see people off and she was very helpful. Claudia and I were babes in the woods and she hooked us up with Virginia, who was extremely helpful and looked out for us. She is lovely."

More information on VTRI and its activities can be found on the group's website at www.virginiatrailridersinc.com.

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