Why a Dressage Trainer Runs 100 Miles

Annie, the CEC manager and dressage trainer, recently ran 100 miles in the Leadville 100. A question many would ask is - why would *anyone* ever do that? For Annie, the answer is simple. There is just something that attracts equestrians to long-distance runs.



Annie before the start – Number 581!

A Little History

The first person known to run 100 miles was an endurance rider in the 100-mile equestrian endurance race called the Tevis Cup, which has been competed through California's Sierra Nevada mountains since 1955. At the 1974 Tevis Cup, Gordy Ainsleigh's horse went lame, and he decided to cover the 100-mile distance on foot. He finished in 23 hours and 42 minutes. Beginning in 1977, the event officially allowed runners, and 14 people competed alongside the horses. By 1985 there was a separate race for runners only, called the Western States Endurance Run. Many of the traditions in ultra-running come from its equestrian past, including the cut-off times, rugged trails and aid stations, and winning belt buckles. Ainsleigh, by the way, is still running at 79 years old.

The Leadville 100 began in 1983 after the Climax molybdenum mine outside Leadville suddenly closed, leaving most of the population (over 3,000 people) unemployed. The town was facing an economic collapse when Ken Chlouber, with help from Merilee Maupin and Jim Butera, had an idea to bring people to Leadville. As he explained at the start of the race this year, "If you make people run 100 miles, for sure they will stay overnight!" So, the Race Across the Sky, as it became known, was born, and it has become one of the most iconic 100-mile races. The organization has grown over the years and brings in runners for many races including a trail marathon, a 50-mile race, and many mountain bike races up to the 100-mile distance. With the money they make, they have helped the local economy

and created the Leadville Trail 100 Legacy Foundation, which gives $2,000 scholarships for higher education to every single kid that graduates from the local high school as well as support for other local needs. This year, much of the money they raised went to help local businesses recover from the devastating Willow Creek fire, which kept visitors away from Leadville this year during the busy summer tourist season.

What you Need

First off, getting a spot in the race is hard. There is a qualifying and lottery system to get in; you can't just sign up. But this summer Annie found herself in a position to enter and have the fitness to imagine finishing.

Even though it seems like running 100 miles is all about being in good shape to run, there are other qualities that are as important if not more so. You must be persistent. When things start feeling bad or even impossible, you must keep going knowing that it won't last forever and it will get better. You solve problems all the time. What do I wear for the changing weather? Do I change my shoes here or there? If you have trained or ridden horses, you see much of the same constant persistence and problem solving in your daily life.

You need a crew. The athlete running the race needs food/clothes/moral support when they arrive at the many crewed aid stations. They also need pacers, because after the first 60 miles or so, an extra person can run with you to keep you on pace, eating and drinking, and take care of any other issues you may be having. Annie had an amazing crew starting with her boyfriend Jeff, and Nancy from the Cordillera Metro District office who has been a running buddy for years and pacer at another race. Nancy rounded up two of her crazy friends, Becky and Kyle, to cover the last 40 miles of the race, which take place overnight and into the morning.



Annie and her crew.

Being an equestrian made the race seem possible. Horses are focused athletes in our sport, and dressage is a way to build their fitness so they can do their job. Trainers use all their tools to design nutrition plans and make sure the horses' daily schedule makes them happy. They use their time riding, lunging, or cross-training to improve the horses' abilities to do their job well, and stay happy and willing by being strong. Trainers (and barn managers!) spend all their time problem solving, on and off the horse. Running a long-distance race seemed like a culmination of skills Annie has been practicing for years.

There was a lot of mental work to prepare for the race, again made easier by years of equestrian sports and showing. There were first aid kits, food, and clothes all divided into each section of the race. Annie made a detailed chart to track all her needs. This mental organization is something she loves, and it made it even more rewarding when it paid off. Once all the planning is done, the race begins and you can get into your physical body and do that work for the rest of the event.

When it came time to prepare for the Leadville 100, physical training seemed easier because Annie herself was the athlete. She was doing all the same aspects of fitness, nutrition, and problem solving, but for herself instead of for a horse. And she is not the only one. You will see a handful of equestrians competing in long-distance trail races all over the world.

How it Went

The race starts at 4:00 AM and the cut off is 30 hours later. It goes from downtown Leadville to Twin Lakes, then over Hope Pass to Winfield, a ghost town north of Buena Vista. Then you turn around and run back almost the same way you came. The pass is the crux of the race, with about 6,500 vertical feet over 20 miles and a lot of steep moments.

For a while the miles were flying by, and after some mellow hills on trails and dirt and paved roads, Annie reached the Twin Lakes aid station and prepared to go over Hope Pass with hiking poles and fresh socks. Even though she has practiced it many times, the long uphill up to 12,500 feet and then steep downhill was not a walk in the park. Rather, it was miserable, slow going, and it felt like her legs were about to fall off. But after she returned to Twin Lakes, her second wind began as Kyle kept her company for the next several miles. There was speed walking and little jogs, but the goal at this point was just to keep the pace to be able to finish within the cutoff time.

The middle of the night was also the most boring piece of trail, mostly paved road near the Leadville Fish Hatchery, and Becky helped with that section. She kept Annie "running" (it was a shuffle at this point), but the hardest part was not being able to eat any food without feeling ill.

Finally, Annie got to Nancy and the last 15 miles of the race. The sun came up, the meadow they ran by had a beautiful layer of fog on it, and the sky went from pink to orange to blue. The hill they had to climb made it seem like they might miss the cutoff, but then the miles of downhill that followed allowed Annie to get her third, or fourth, or fifth wind. The skin was breaking on Annie's feet, her legs still felt like they were going to fall off, and she still had a hard time eating. But she was almost there!

The last mile was run with the whole crew down a corridor of cheering people with so much energy that it gave Annie one more boost. All five crossed the finish line during "golden hour", the last hour before the cutoff. About half of the people that started did not finish the race, which is typical. It was an emotional ending to a day that felt like two lifetimes.



2026 Leadville 100 finisher!