**Melissa Stephenson Laws, DVM**

(PNER member #3923)

***BUILDING A LIFETIME OF GREAT MEMORIES!***

We asked Melissa to answer some questions about her life with horses and Endurance Riding. Enjoy getting to know more about our PNER Vice President!

**Dedication:** I truly could not do what I feel is my passion in life without my parents. They are always crewing for throughout the Pacific Northwest (and further). In all circumstances, they feed us, care for us, motivate us, and celebrate us after a completion. Not to mention you will commonly see my parents cooking at endurance events for volunteers and as fundraisers. My mother is also responsible for a ton of events planned at convention! The love and gratitude I have for them is unmeasurable.

**My involvement with PNER:**I love PNER as an organization and have been a member ever since I moved here in 2017. PNER offers riders a chance to promote trail maintenance, provide scholarships, and earn awards at the end of the year for a very small membership fee. I really felt like it was my turn to make a difference and give back to this organization. I am excited for this coming convention in Redmond, Oregon. I want this convention to bring members together and celebrate a year of hard work while also motivating us to continue learning and adjusting. In order to do this- sometimes we need a little inspiration and I feel like a lot of individuals have been underinspired since Covid. That being said, to keep this organization healthy- we all need to participate. Maybe it is just volunteering at one ride, or maybe it is mentoring a new rider, or volunteering at convention but I challenge everyone to put themselves out there in 2025.

**My early life with horses:** I have loved horses for as long as I can remember. My first memory on a horse is riding my mother’s Quarter horse Honey on the road bareback. My mother had to make the difficult decision to sell her horses to attend medical school and then I was without horses until high school! I wish I had been one of our juniors lucky enough to grow up doing this sport!

For my 16th birthday my parents surprised me with me a crazy gray arabian and a co-worker of my mother started telling us about “endurance riding.” The second I heard about endurance I wanted to somehow do it. This was pre- internet and social media so the information and resources that are so prevalent now were simply not available. I finally attended my first endurance ride at the end of veterinary school and was hooked even though my horse was out of control.

Graduating from vet school afforded me a little more money and time to seriously start conditioning. I lived in Nashville, TN where I worked for eight years for a mixed animal practice. I rode in the mountains of TN every single weekend. Endurance riding in the Southeast made me a better horsewoman and stronger competitor. The heat and humidity shaped my knowledge of how to electrolyte properly and I was able to participate in some great rides in the South, including Big South Fork, Biltmore and Old Dominon. My friend Dan and I rode Tevis together and we had a running joke that we needed sweaters and were a little chilly in California in July 🙂

**Experiencing endurance:** I am still in a very young stage of my endurance career and am amazed by some of the riders I have met with thousands of miles and quiet humility. Some of my personal accomplishments that I am proud of is completing Big Horn 100 successfully on the first attempt. This was a bucket list ride for me and I had to flip a quarter with David to choose going over Tevis that year! We are both so thankful we did as that ended up being the last year it was held and truly a magical ride. I also ranked nationally for Best Condition last year with Gizmo. Best Condition recognition is just affirmation that I am doing the best I can for my horse with conditioning, nutrition, electrolytes, and pacing well on a given course ( all important aspects of this sport). I absolutely adore pioneer rides – but I have a husband who is addicted to 75’s and 100’s so I get dragged along. That being said, there is nothing better than starting a ride in the dark and ending a ride in the dark under the stars.

**One of my favorite memories** is actually when I crewed instead of rode! My mom and I went to crew at Tevis at the very last minute because David Laws had no crew and was in a bind. (David was on our PNER team but we had never met previously). Tevis was an incredible adventure and I loved David instantly. I asked him what kind of food he wanted throughout the day and he told me Ceviche. I thought you have got to be kidding me! Who does the guy think he is? I was thinking more along the lines of granola bars! He also came in at the finish line smiling after Che left him on the trail at mile 93- thankfully someone in front of him caught him and he was able to complete. We drank champagne to celebrate and had a blast.

**The first horse** I brought to my first LD literally jumped into the large water tank with me on his back and started peeing. I wanted to climb under a rock- but I learned a really important lesson- not all horses are emotionally capable of handling this sport- and the sooner you know that the better off the horse will be. Don’t ever feel bad about switching mounts to something you feel safe on and who will carry you down the trail. Remember this was supposed to be fun!

**My current mount Gizmo** ( a 15 year old Arabian) has been with me for five years. He is an absolute handful for the first 50 miles but I feel like we have come a long way together. He has gained confidence and I have become a more balanced rider to help him.

**Reflections on endurance riding**: Endurance riding is the perfect equestrian sport. I love riding in beautiful areas, socializing at ride camp, and spending hours in the saddle with my horse. Endurance riding can be exactly what an individual needs it to be. You can ride competitively or make a whole day of it while you talk with friends. You can ride 25 miles or elect over time to move up to 50’s /100’s and multi days. Whatever you choose for you and your horse- the experience is truly a win win. I have had rides that took me every second to complete a 12 hour course with ride management honking the horn and I felt like I won Tevis just for simply completing.

I really wish I had mentorship when I started endurance riding. I’m still amazed at the wealth of information available on line now ( articles, webinars, etc) and this simply wasn’t available 20 years ago. I would encourage new riders to join green beans, make friends, and find a mentor who will help you with conditioning.

**Endurance has truly taught me** how I want to navigate all aspects of this short life. Endurance takes an incredible amount of self control and patience for training and conditioning (and then your horse does something silly in the field that sets you back another year). Endurance takes perseverance in difficult situations with weather not cooperating, being uncomfortable, being tired, and still being your best self. Just continue putting yourself our there and do the absolute best you can do depending on the circumstances that given day. You can do everything right and still not get to the finish line but you simply re-group and are ready to show up for the next ride.

**My personal advice to new endurance riders:**Find an incredible mentor; a rock who is going to push you and inspire you at the same time. When I lived in Nashville I was terrified of making the leap from 25 to 50 miles because I didn’t know if my horses were ready. I have a tendency to be overly cautious… I flew out and spent a week riding with Christoph Schork and he told me to go back and move up- they were ready. That support was what I needed to take the next step in my journey. I went home and the next week rode in a 50 miler for the first time- My horse earned high vet score Sometimes we just someone more knowledgeable to give you a push in the right direction.

The second thing I would recommend is to consider professional riding lessons ( in whatever discipline you love ). Every single one of us can get down the trail pretty well-but I have spent the last 2 years learning that our horses can do so much better if we are self aware, communicate better,and are more balanced riders. How we ride may work for 25 miles, but does not necessarily mean our horses will look or feel good after a multi day or 100. How we breathe, balance ourselves, and move during an endurance event impacts how our horses look at the finish line.

**Our lives now:** We currently own all different kinds of breeds and I love them all! From NSH to Arabians, to Rocky Mountain Horses to my mini Morty! David and I are developing our Rocky Mountain endurance breeding program and we currently have seven horses under the age of five right now- they keep us very busy! Our program is focusing on a taller and thinner build with great feet and the forward drive needed to move down the trail. I truly believe there is nothing more surefooted on difficult and steep trails than a Rocky Mountain Horse.

David and I are busy starting our 4 year old Rocky Mountain Horses right now – we have Sugar and Lucy and are thrilled to be able to ride them this season as 5 year olds. They spent the summer growing up at our place in the Wallowa Mountains learning how to move over rough terrain. Our horses are kept in the mountains in a 40 acre pen and are free to roam all day long. They are exposed to technical terrain, brush, deer and elk, streams, mud, etc. It is the perfect way to teach a young horse how to navigate the environment. David and I were able to do a lot of night riding after the working day was done to get them used to riding in the dark, using headlamps, and elk on the trail. I also spent a great portion of the summer tailing on steep terrain. It is mandatory that our horses ride out together as well as separately. We also have 2 three year old stallions Rocket and Shake that we will be campaigning in a few years as well as breeding. Watch out for these boys- they are truly going to be incredible.

We have been really busy building at our home- Quadrant 25 in the Wallowa Mountains. When we moved here, I sold my full service mobile small animal practice. This year I spent the summer putting in horse sites for camping so that we can offer space for horseback riders. We are completely spoiled that we live surrounded by Forest Service land and can ride off the property for 100’s of miles and straight into wilderness. Ultimately -our goal is to share this gift with others by offering not only a beautiful place to ride-but also our knowledge with others regarding gaited breeds. Gaited breeds can be very competitive and excellent endurance mounts- but management is very different than arabians and require a little more work to be successful.  
*We look forward to having PNER members come ride with us!!*