January 2020 Tani Bates (by Jo Christensen)

As we begin 2020, many of us have aspirational goals that likely involve our horses, possibly trying new things, or attempting new challenges in the sport of endurance. Skill and luck will be required to accomplish these things as well as just plain determination. Determination is a quality that is exemplified by this month’s feature rider, Tani Bates. Tani’s success in the sport is due to in large part to her determination not to let life, finances, school, or any other obstacles the world has thrown at her get in the way of working towards her aspirations. The PNER and its members are characterized by many things, but all would likely agree that determination is a key quality. Tani’s determination truly exemplifies the heart and soul of the PNER.

Tani’s love of horses began as an infant when her aunt set her up on horses before she could even walk. Her earliest memory of riding is at 5 years old when her father bought her a horse. Unfortunately, family dynamics being what they were, her mother had a patent dislike for equines. When Tani and her sister fell off the horse and Tani hit her head on a rock, which landed her in the hospital for a couple of days, it was all the reason her mom needed to get rid of the horse. However, her irrepressible father promptly bought her an ornery (is there any other kind?) Shetland pony. Tani cherished the pony and its foal until Tani was 9. Her father passed away then and her mother promptly got rid of the horses.

Now horseless, Tani was determined to keep riding. She unabashedly admits she figured out early how to make friends with people based on whether they owned a horse or not Horse quality was not one of the criteria, however, and she was often relegated to riding some pretty rank mounts. At 16, she moved in with an aunt, she acquired a horse of her own- a 2-year old appaloosa mare.

She trained the mare herself and rode her everywhere- a style of riding she describes as “hell on wheels.” She had no truck or trailer, or even a saddle, but such was her determination to ride she just headed out from town (Vale, Oregon) and spent many happy days out in the desert, racing through the sagebrush, and hunting jackrabbits on horseback.

At some point she took off her spurs long enough to get married (maybe she kept her spurs on?) and her new husband decided he wanted a horse… so they ended up with a part-saddlebred mare. Unfortunately, the mare was far too forward for her husband, so Tani ended up as the mare’s person. And, like several others we have featured on this page, she first discovered endurance through an ad on the bulletin board in a feed store and thought endurance would be a good activity for the saddlebred. She met up with an experienced endurance rider in the area who let Tani know she would likely be needing a saddle and need to learn to ride her horse at the trot- not just gallop wildly through the sagebrush all day.

Tani was immediately hooked on the sport of endurance. She loved getting to see new country and having a new goal for going out riding, if not an excuse to ride even more. Such was her determination to keep riding she persisted despite having two small children and working two jobs (veterinary technician and school bus driver).

Eventually she added an Arabian gelding to the family. A couple years later, her 8 year old daughter was accompanying her to endurance rides. In the mid-1990’s, she met Pat Murray, a long-time endurance rider, who mentored Tani out of her comfort zone (at that time, “fast fifties”) into the longer distances.

Life intervened, as it often does. During a divorce, Tani moved to SW Washington. She discovered vet techs get paid very little there like back in Oregon, and she couldn’t afford to do endurance, keep horses, and live on her own. Determined to keep riding, she went back to school to become a nurse. Even while in nursing school, she was determined to ride but the rides had to be worked around her school schedule. She reports that she drove her riding friends crazy picking them up at o’ dark thirty to ride so she could later study or go to class. At this point she was doing about one endurance ride per month.

Tani’s heart horse, Marjan, came into her life about this time. She got a call from Darlene Merlich who reported that the brother of a horse Tani was riding for a friend was for sale and Tani needed to come look at him. Tani reports that she told Darlene “I don’t need another horse!” but somehow she found herself driving over to look at him. She took him for a test ride and marveled that despite the fact he was fat, he had immense power…and no brakes. She thought PERFECT and bought him. She discovered a bit later that he was a bucker and found out that is why he was for sale. No one had told her Marjan had unloaded everyone that had ridden him.

Tani describes Marjan as being very competitive and has scared her many times. He has run away with her several times during which she “thought she was going to die.” No doubt her early years as a “hell on wheels” bareback sagebrush-rider came in handy during these times. Still, determination stepped in again and she stuck with him and made it work. They reached 4,000 competition miles this last summer. Marjan is 17 years old and is showing no signs of slowing down, at least mentally! When asked about her favorite endurance ride or memory with him, she reports that she has so many she is unable to choose.

Tani has been a member of the PNER since circa 1996. She thinks of the organization as a big, extended family of like-minded individuals. In fact, she points out that she often spends more time with her PNER endurance family than her own family.

In addition to piloting Marjan all over the northwest, Tani is the Washington State Representative for the PNER, where she serves as the “go-to person,” facilitating communication between the organization and riders in her state. She has also served as PNER vice president, and in the past has been a ride manager. She is also deeply passionate about trail work and helping keep trails open for equestrians. She helps organize 3 work parties a year on local trail systems as well as carries out many trail maintenance tasks on her own.

Tani reports that her biggest challenge related to endurance has been “living in reality, even when you don’t want to.” Time and finances are often huge obstacles... no matter how hard you want to go to a ride or do something with your horses, reality steps in and the truck has to go to the shop. Etcetera. Every one of us has had our aspirations in the sport come crashing down when reality steps in- yet anyone looking at Tani’s accomplishments in the sport despite frequent collisions with real life should be inspired by her determination to keep moving forward. Hopefully, this inspiration will help the rest of us dig deep and find that kind of determination in ourselves as we move into 2020.