

As I open the doors to my stock trailer, two sets of large, soft eyes focus expectantly on me. I reach for Blue first. He turns quietly; I hand the lead rope to my friend Jeff. I reach for Gus. He carefully follows me off the trailer.

Pads and saddles go easily into place, followed by horn bags with lunches, then bridles and snaffle bits. I ease into the saddle and feel myself settle deeply into the very core of Gus. He had anticipated my move, and in that special telepathy between horse and rider, he signals that all is well.

Under a bluebird sky, we embark on a 30-mile ride on a familiar trail into the South Carolina mountains. Before we enter the woods, I note our exaggerated shadows that make us look like Titan kings on mythical, giant horses. Except for the outline of my cowboy hat, we could be riding out of ancient Greek literature. For millennia, poets and artists have dreamed of great horses with arched necks, tucked chins and powerful hindquarters. Today I live that dream as long, smooth strides carry me through shades of sunshine and shadows.

The horses, both Tennessee Walkers, are especially spirited. A running walk is the momentary gait of choice for Gus, but gentle rein pressure occasionally reminds him, "Not yet." Soon the trail turns onto an abandoned logging road. A few more walking strides to show good manners, then a light squeeze says "Now."



The trail in autumn

A fine horse, a pleasant riding companion and a beautiful path through the mountains make for a day to remember.

By Gene W. Wood, PhD

Thus begins a four-beat staccato rhythm that lifts and carries. A harmonic wave wells up through me. Could even Aladdin on his carpet have ridden this well? My heel touches Gus again, and we roll into an easy canter known well to children on merry-go-rounds. We could go forever, but the bend is coming, so we slow to a walk, then glide gently into the woods like dancers exiting a stage.

The trail begins to climb. As the grade picks up we lean forward, shifting more weight over great shoulders. Front legs reach up and out to pull us forward as powerful hind legs, individually, rhythmically reach up, make

contact, lift and push.

The trail levels, and we continue until we hear the rushing waters of a small stream. I allow Gus to reach for the surface. Only a horse-

man can know the joy of feeling a good horse drink deeply from a pool of cold, clear water.

After a breather we head for the ridge top at a ground-covering walk. The side slope becomes longer and longer until we are looking out over the top of the forest. By noon we top out and select a good place for viewing the landscape below. Bits are slipped out of mouths, horses are tied to a highline and girths loosened. Jeff and I find comfortable seats under the trees. Here we dine and drink deeply the wine of beauty in time and space. This bottle is one of a kind and can never be duplicated, even though we may return here again and again.

Conversation dwindles, and soon with hat pulled over my eyes, I slip into sleep. The horses stand quietly, perhaps dozing, too.

Nap over, we ready the horses and begin our descent. Careful placement of hooves prevents stumbles. Powerful limbs brake against slides. A light rein allows for constant adjustment of our balance. Gus knows how to do it all so well.

Back at the farm at the end of the day, we go to the front porch for a glass of wine, and relax. It's been the sort of day horsemen dream of, one whose memory will carry us through long winters to come. 🍷

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