

TEVIS 2018

By Sally Fenner

My hands are clammy and stiff, frozen into a claw shape. My head is spinning, dizzy I feel as if I am about to faint. As the world is rotating, rushing around me I feel nauseous and I swallow with a loud forced gulp, my mouth is so dry!

Go to your happy place Sally, I command with as much authority as I can muster and as I chant over and over 'doughnuts and coffee, doughnuts and coffee, doughnuts and coffee my head and eyes are drawn to a place I do not wish to look at again – to my right, to the terrifying depths of the canyon floor, 1000s of feet below me.

"Damn girl, you did it again! Are you stupid? You looked down! DON'T LOOK DOWN! Doughnuts and coffee, go to my happy place, doughnuts and coffee! It wasn't working, and my eyes looked to the right again. All the physiological symptoms of vertigo hit me hard and all at once and I felt as if I was losing my balance and falling to the right and down to the depths below.

Where was I?

Why was I feeling this way?

I was at Pucker Point on the Western States Trail, in the Sierra Nevada, in California, in America competing in the Tevis Cup 100mile (160km), in one day, endurance horse race.

Pucker point was infamous. It was deemed by most the worst section of an already terrifyingly narrow trail that had no barrier between you and your horse and a horrendous vertical drop off 1000s of feet to the river and canyon bottom below. This one section was something that put many people off attempting the Tevis Cup. I was one of those people that had a fear of heights and suffered vertigo just climbing up a step ladder. Oh, I had tried to overcome this fear on many occasions. Hang gliding, parachute jumping, bungee jumping – backwards forwards upside down, you name it I had tried it, but as I turned fifty my fear had seemingly grown worse not dissipated.

I cursed myself questioning, "And why did you want to do this again?" You are half a century old now for goodness sake! You should be slowing down, not doing crazy things like the Tevis Cup.

At that moment in time, I wondered if anyone had ever actually crawled on their stomach, around Pucker Point? Maybe I would be the first. There is a first time for everything, I chanted, trying to see the funny side of my situation.

I got off. The trail was narrow. This was a BAD idea. There was not much room for my horse let alone for me as well and I wished to keep myself securely on the wall side of this goat track. I felt like planting my back against the granite rock wall, rising vertically the other side of the trail on my left. But that would be way too slow going and what if someone caught me up and wished to pass me? Focus Sally, I demanded again to myself and just look straight ahead. "Toughen up princess!" The words echoed around in my head. "Eat some concrete and harden the hell up!" My husband's voice resounded in my brain. Build a bridge and 'get over it'! I imagined him yelling at me. His warped idea of encouragement.

Still, nothing was working, and I became catatonic, frozen to the spot. As I stood there, still stupidly looking to my right to the horrible drop so close to me, only a few inches of trail between me and plummeting to my death, I felt compelled to move towards the edge not away from it.

I was once told this is what is so awful about having a fear of heights, the inexplicable and non-sensical pull to make you want to jump off the edge!! What was this invisible, strange force telling me to creep closer to the danger zone.

As I inched further along the trail I felt ridiculous not riding and managed to find a good spot (well, as good as it was going to get) to re-mount my steed. The horse offered a trot and threw me a look out of the corner of his eye as if to say, "You stooopid Hooman, I got this, just hang on and let's go, for goodness sake, I don't know what ya problem is!" My beautiful chestnut, pure Arab gelding, called Rymoni, launched into a forward 9 mile per hour trot, showing no fear at all and I just hung on!

In no time we had reached the next check point. As I offered Rymoni food and water I chatted to a rider who had passed me before Pucker Point and stated in a fairly shaky voice, "Well that was damn scary! Terrifying in fact!" As I let out a nervous giggle. "Whaaaaat? She replied, surprised. "Oh no, that wasn't scary, we trot and canter that shit all the time!" "Ah ok, really?" I exclaimed. Wow, did I feel foolish now. I slinked away to grab some food and water for myself, somewhat embarrassed and rather dreading what was to come on the trail ahead.

My lead up to the Tevis cup had been a rather tumultuous affair, a roller coaster ride of epic proportions to say the least. A sort of a smorgasbord of disasters. I so very nearly did not make the start line!

I had experienced a rather calamitous endurance season in Australia. I had not been able to find a good horse since my very successful and special partnership with Cherox Aladdin ended when he retired. I had been through 5 horses who either turned out not suitable for endurance or who kept vetting out from lameness on the longer distances. I finally bought my mare back in to work who was a qualified endurance horse but who had been off having a couple of foals. She was doing well until a suspensory ligament rupture, 'catastrophic' in nature, as described by the vet put her out for good. I was shattered. I was only a couple of months out from Tevis and I had not even managed to get one 50 miler ride in (80km). I was NOT ride fit for Tevis. I pulled my young boy out of the paddock to at least do a couple of smaller rides on. The first ride back he stood on a branch that snapped and flicked up and hit him under his belly. He leapt like a cat up in the air and bucked in one motion. Had I not then been lying on the ground in agony I would have thought it was quite a spectacular movement. I had broken my coccyx for the fourth time since I had been back riding in the last 12 years! This trauma was on top of a broken back (L2) years before from a car accident. The pain was immense.

I pushed through the pain and borrowed a horse for the last 80km on the calendar that I could possibly ride in before Tevis. Success at last, not only a completion but second place and BC. Finally, perhaps my luck was changing. I still did not feel ride fit for Tevis but at least one 80 km ride under my belt was better than none at all.

There was only a week to go to my flight and two weeks to Tevis now. Then, the day before my flight, I began frantically packing and my heart sank as I opened up my passport and realised it had expired on 4th July, just a couple of weeks before. At first, I was in denial that this could not be sorted out in time. But as the day drew to a close, the realisation dawned on me that I had totally blown all chances of boarding my flight the next morning as I simply did not have time to get a new passport. Emergency passports would only be issued if a relative was dying not because some idiot had failed to check her passport when booking the flight!

Then I had an idea. I was a dual citizen, originally from the U.k., I had a British passport. However, the rules in Australia are that if you are an Australian citizen you must fly into and out of Australia on

your Australian passport. Would they enforce this rule though and actually prevent me boarding the aeroplane? Maybe, but it was more likely that it was getting back into Australia that would prove problematic. I was prepared to risk it. I was determined to get to Tevis. Then I realised I needed an ESTA – and electronic authority to fly into the USA. It could take up to 7 days to get one approved. With my heart pounding and tears flowing I wrote an email with my application explaining how urgently I needed an ESTA for my British passport. I waited and waited. Then after four hours and at 8 pm at night I received the email granting my ESTA. I was going to get on that flight tomorrow morning after all!

My wonderful husband Mark Fenner (who had offered to stay home and look after all my horses, dogs and cat), waved a goodbye to me at the airport and I struggled to overcome my next hurdle, arguing with airline staff that I was happy to fly out on my British passport as I was unlikely to be let back in to the country. I didn't care. I just wanted to get to that Tevis start line. Did they not understand what Tevis was?

Then my flight was delayed. Then on landing in LA I was pulled aside, the ESTA had not electronically shown up for my British passport and I was asked so many questions that I missed my connecting flight. Angry and upset I messaged Claire and Troy Eckard who had agreed to do an exchange with me where I ride one of their horses at Tevis, they ride one of my horses at the Quilty. Claire was so reassuring and told me everything would be fine and before I knew it I was relaxed in their company and enjoying a beer outside their RV with their horses on Terry Howe's ranch. I had made it this far. I could not wipe the grin off my face.

Troy's horse was a stunning 15.2hh Arab, Rymoni and my ride was a stunning bay 15.3hh Arab, Flash Gordon. These were good looking horses, great conformation, strong backed and FIT. Troy had done a wonderful job getting these boys ready for Tevis. I felt like I had won the lottery. At last, perhaps things would go my way. Claire and Troy were like dream hosts, generous, fun, organised and very welcoming and kind. I was in such good company, everything seemed perfect.

I had a week to ride Flash and get to know him, he was a powerful boy and attacked mountains like a mountain goat! It was as if he was approaching mountains like my husband's mountain bike sticker suggested 'WANT them to be big hills!' He was a rangy, forward moving boy, with amazing depth of girth. He must have a huge heart and set of lungs. He was a lot of horse but I felt comfortable riding him and could not have been more positive or more excited about the approaching start time for the Tevis Cup!

We camped a few days at the finish line in the Fairgrounds in Auburn so we could familiarise ourselves with the end of the trail that we would be riding in the dark on race day (if we were to make it that far). The horses had completed Tevis last year and seemed to know the trail extremely well already. "Trust your horse, they know where they are going," Troy told me over and over as I gasped at the drop offs down to the American River below. I thought they were frightening but I had no idea what was to come. "Oh, you think they are big drop offs?" Troy cackled. "You wait!" Great I thought, choosing not to think too much about his statement. I really did not have any idea how petrifying I would find pucker point. At this stage, ignorance was definitely bliss.

After the third ride I noticed that the first item I was going to see if I made the official finish line was the Dunny, the Australian name for the toilet. Troy and I laughed at this thought.

We made the beautiful drive up to Robbie Park passing through some scenery that was extremely dramatic. I had mountain biked from Canada to Mexico for my honeymoon (yes you read that correctly) across the Continental Divide trail criss-crossing the Rocky Mountains back in the year

2000, so I had seen 'dramatic' scenery before in America. However, it was wonderful to see the Sierra Nevadas, an area I had not visited before. As we passed Squaw Valley and Lake Tahoe and then the official start of the Tevis Cup, it all finally began to seem very real. I was here. I was actually going to do this. There was at last a reality that had been a dream for so long. I loved it when a lifetime plan comes to fruition.

One last ride to check out the first few miles of the Tevis trail and then pre-ride vet check. Flash and Rymoni passed with all A's. We were good to start. I could hardly contain my excitement.

Then it happened. All my dreams went flying out of the window. Troy and I were sitting in the shade watching all the beautiful Tevis horses trot out for their pre-ride vet check when he received a call from Lynn our camp neighbour. "Flash is hurt, he got himself caught in the high tie system!"

I have never run so fast. My feet practically did not touch the ground back to our camp. Sure enough, there was Flash, now untangled, and walking around but injured. He was slightly cut up on his near fore and his near side hip and his off hind fetlock. On closer inspection we all agreed the visible injuries were seemingly, fairly superficial. However, we did not know muscularly what damage had been done – the invisible! We trotted Flash out and initially he was sound. I told Troy even if he was sound I doubted he would make it to Robinson Flat and still be sound. I predicted he would be sore and I didn't wish to start an injured horse and then vet out. We had to think of the horse. He was too good a horse to take silly risks with. Troy agreed and after an hour Flash was trotting out lame, mostly on his near fore. I was out. My Tevis dream gone, just like that. How was this happening? Everything slowed down and went into a blur. I shed a few tears and Claire gave me a hug. The Tevis gremlins were at work again she stated. I felt like I was jinxed and that the world was plotting against me. Sure, there were people way worse off than me in this world. I should not be complaining. But this was Tevis, didn't the world know how important this was!

I collapsed onto a chair and then suddenly had an idea. One of the other Australian riders had had the misfortune of having an accident at a ride just before Tevis in Australia. He flew out anyway in the hope he would recover in time, but bad luck had followed him and the Tevis gremlins caused an infection so bad he ended up in hospital instead of at the Tevis start line. Was it wrong to get excited at the thought that perhaps I could take his ride????

I ran around camp trying to find out whose horse he was meant to be riding. Sadly, it did not eventuate. My Tevis dream was over. Final.

I went to the pre ride talk for riders new to Tevis. This was very insightful but I couldn't help feel so devastated that I wouldn't be riding. Then a black bear strolled on past us all and I couldn't help but smile at the amazing place I was in. I was just going to have to be crew for Troy. I would learn a great deal. There was always another year.

At first, the words fell on deaf ears. "Sal," shouted Troy, did you hear me? "What?" I glanced over to him with glazed eyes. Not much seemed to matter now, nothing seemed to be important. "Sorry, what did you say? I was miles away!" I replied, trying to snap myself back into the land of reality. A reality I didn't really wish to face.

"You are just going to have to ride my horse." Repeated Troy

"Whaaaaat?" I said, dumstruck.

"Take my horse, ride Rymoni!" "Nooooo, I couldn't possibly take your horse. No Troy I can't ruin your Tevis dream." I gasped.

"I've got my Tevis buckle, I live here, I can come back again, I can't let you come all the way from Australia and not ride, take my horse. No argument, you are riding Rymoni."

I knew Claire and Troy were special people but for Troy to offer me his very special Rymoni, his horse, his Tevis ride, this was true sportsmanship. What a gentleman. But, how could I? I was meant to be riding with Troy, not riding his horse. The reality of what this actually meant hit me. I would be on the trail on my own, no guide, no Troy to pace me, on a strange horse! Could I even do this? What if I let Troy and the crew down. The anxiety gripped me and my stomach turned.

And so it was that at 4.30 am on Saturday 14th July 2018 I found myself sitting on a horse I had never ridden before, in the dark, in a strange saddle and about to attempt the hardest, toughest most frightening endurance race in the world, the Tevis Cup. How did I get here again? Why am I doing this? That's another fine mess you have got yourself into, my Tevis devil growled at me on my right shoulder, hands on hips. You will be fine my Tevis angel sung, smiling at me on my left shoulder, you go and have fun. I felt weak at the knees and had butterflies in my stomach. Rymoni was not happy about not having his buddy Flash by his side and fidgeted and neighed in protest. Before I knew it, a voice shouted out somewhere in the dark, Pen 2 to the start line. It was too late now, Rymoni and I were on our way. There was no turning back. I had about 100 horses all around me and we jostled our way down to the start line. 60 horses had already started just ahead of us in Pen 1.

It was not long before a girl behind me said "Cougar Rock is coming up isn't it?"

"You are asking the wrong person, I'm a Tevis virgin, from Australia, I have no idea," I laughed in response.

Then it dawned on me. Oh My God, Cougar Rock. I had not had a conversation with Troy about Cougar Rock. Would he want me to ride Rymoni up it, or not? Oh no, what should I do? Everything had happened so fast the day before that Cougar Rock had totally skipped my mind. Troy had stated he would not take Rymoni up Cougar Rock as he is a daisy cutter (a description of a horse's lower leg action that swings outwards) causing him to be quite the stumbler and with a heavyweight on his back he felt this was not a good choice. I had asked if he was ok with me taking Flash up Cougar Rock and Troy said yup go for it. But now I was on Rymoni, what was the right thing to do? The words of Troy telling me how he had fallen off Rymoni five times last year from him stumbling on the Tevis trail bounced around in my head. This was not a good idea. Self-preservation for myself and my horse set in.

Don't do it - the Tevis devil shouted, not wanting me to succeed and have fun. Do it - the Tevis angel encouraged me.

The next thing I knew I was following a mule up Cougar Rock! What just happened I giggled. I had vaguely been aware of a person shouting out "Cougar Rock to your left, trail around the rock to your right," but it was as if, without any control over the decision, we had taken the path to the left.

"Oh Shit!" I exclaimed out loud. Rather too loud as I looked ahead at what we were in for! Here we go Rymoni.

That mule flew up Cougar Rock like nothing I had ever seen before. That was impressive, I whispered to Rymoni. I hoped Rymoni would find it as easy. I remembered someone at pre-ride talk advising, don't rush your horse just let them have their head and let them go at their pace. I followed that instruction to the tee and perhaps did not have enough leg on to encourage Rymoni up the main rock face where I had been told horses had tumbled over backwards. Rymoni hesitated. Then he stumbled. "You want me to go up that? Why? There must be a better route stooped

Hooman!" No Rymoni that's the way up, this is where we get our famous 'Cougar Rock' photo don't you know!"

Then with just one small squeeze of encouragement he obliged like the fantastic horse he is and up he leapt. I was so proud of him. Gooooood boy – my voice shaken with adrenalin. We did it Rymoni, we did it. Now how to tell Troy his horse went up Cougar Rock!!!!

The trail was insane with pine forests of such beauty it took my breath away and steep, steep climbs and descents, in fact there was hardly any flat ground, we were either going straight up or straight down or at least that's how it felt. The 46 degree F day melted into a 51degree afternoon in the canyons where the air could not escape and there was no breeze. I felt like I was melting! I stopped whenever I could to cool Rymoni. I had no idea where I was in the field. I just stuck to Troy's instructions and bowled along at an average pace of approximately 7-9 miles per hour. A good 100miler pace. A good pace for a completion. At our first 1 hour hold at Robinsons flat Rymoni was quite stressed at not having Flash by his side and considering he was usually a good eater he was only picking at his food. We couldn't finish 100 miles on an empty stomach. He had to eat. Troy took him for a walk, distracted, Rymoni was constantly looking around him for Flash. Neighing at every strange horse he had never met. Finally, Troy found some grass and Rymoni settled in to eat a good stomach full which stimulated him to eat hay and mash. We had taken an extra half an hour beyond our hour hold time. It didn't matter. Always, the horse and their needs come first and Tevis, more than any other ride, was about good horsemanship.

After eating as much as I could consume and popping a couple of salt tablets and after my incredible crew had filled my backpack bladder with Gatorade and pockets full of food we were off once more. Rymoni had finally seemed to accept he was alone and that Flash was not going to be by his side this Tevis ride. He trotted off beautifully and covered the ground well. He focused on the trail and time seemed to stand still. I was in my heaven!

I was having the time of my life. This horse was giving me the ride of my life. Claire and Troy and their crew Bruce, Krista, Scott and Lisa were helping me so selflessly I was amazed at the set up and support. Crew from other riders offered help. The volunteers out on track at checkpoints where your crew were not allowed were delightful, always smiling, always offering help, willing to do whatever you asked. One offered to take hold of a mule whilst her rider went to get food, the stubborn mule brayed and bucked and yanked the volunteer sideways nearly pushing her into the water trough. Horses and crew and riders scattered. These volunteers were gold, there was nothing they wouldn't do to help. 800 of them too. These statistics blew my mind. This was a special ride, a very special ride indeed just due to the amount of very special volunteers if nothing else.

I rode two canyons on my own. Where had all the other riders gone? The field had spread out so far. The smoke from Yosemite fires was hanging around and choking me and my horse in the already humid and high temperature day and extremely dusty trail.

My mountain bike racing days had put me in good stead for being very strict about my calorie and water intake. Every hour I knew how much I had to consume, or I knew I would be suffering later! I had to eat and drink even though I felt ill from the heat.

I passed many sick people and horses due to the conditions. People passing out, some vomiting, some sitting hugging laps full of ice, unable to get their core temperature down, horses on drips, the list went on.

Later on in the ride, I must have got my hydration and eating program right, I felt relatively good, considering the extreme conditions. Rymoni felt good. In fact, the further we went the better he felt. I think he was now on a mission to get back to Auburn where his buddy Flash was.

I made it out of the second canyon and wished I had had at least one other rider to accompany me as Rymoni was not such a great a climber as Flash and this was where he suffered. Troy usually got off and gave him a break as a heavy weight rider to help him get through, but the heat and humidity forced me to stay on, sorry Rymoni.

When I emerged at the next check point I felt quite emotional and said to a volunteer I don't think I can do another canyon on my own. She pointed to a guy riding in to the checkpoint at that very moment and said stick with him he knows these canyons like the back of his hand. I took her advice. I later found out this was the legend Rob Ribley who had ridden approximately 117 one hundred mile rides and completed 100 of them. I could not even comprehend this. A legend indeed. He started riding 100mile rides at 17. He told me he constantly questioned why he kept doing them. He made me laugh. We don't choose the endurance bug, it chooses us, I thought.

We rode together for several more checkpoints and into Michigan Bluff where I have never been so happy to see my crews' smiling faces. I spotted Terry who had picked me up from the airport, a die hard endurance rider from southern California. Terry asked me if the trail had met my expectations, There were no words! I gave her a hug as she offered me food. I was nearly in tears from the excitement, the adrenalin, the exhaustion, the emotion of it all. "It has met my expectations..... and so much more!" Was all I could finally blurt out as I hopelessly failed to explain how I felt.

Troy ordered me back aboard Rymoni and said come on Rob is leaving, you have to stick with that guy, don't let him out of your sight. Everyone knew riding with Rob was the best thing I could do right now. Our horses paired well together, when one was dogging or flagging, the other led. We yo-yo'd our way to Forest Hill, the second hour hold. My incredible crew were scattered up the hill leading into the vet area with jugs full of ice water to pour over Rymoni. I couldn't help but share it with Rob and our Canadian friend who had ridden with us the last section. There were people with hoses kindly offering to cool our horses down before vetting in from families whose houses backed on to the trail. It felt like the whole town was out to help. What an experience.

I had the luxury of the Eckard's incredible RV that meant I could sit in air conditioning and have a cold shower. Gold! A change of clothes, a couple of slices of salty pizza and with the crew working non-stop on Rymoni, cooling him, feeding him and massaging him, I felt we had a good chance to finish.

"Only 36 miles to go!"

"It's all down-hill from here!"

"You're on the home stretch!"

Were some of the words of encouragement ringing around the pine forest as Rob and I departed Forest Hill. Just a few turned out to be lies I decided! It certainly was not all down hill from here I cursed.

Rob and I walked out of Forest Hill on the tarmac, no point risking injury on the slippery surface at this stage. We enjoyed a string of families out to cheer riders and horses on. What a special feeling that was and we thanked every single one of them for being there.

As we turned off the tarmac and back on to the single track the light began to fade. We rode into the darkness before the full moon rose to give us some relief from the strain on our eyes. I was glad the darkness disguised the drop offs. I was exhausted from being nervous of seeing them.

Rymoni seemed to get stronger and flew along the trail leading a huge section in the dark and into our second to last check point. We had gained another rider a kiwi girl called Jenny riding Potato Richardson's mare. (yes his real name – all his siblings were named after vegetables and another legend in endurance).

We vetted in at Francicos and I was impressed to see hot coffee on offer. They had surely thought of everything. Now where were my doughnuts? I was in my happy place at last. I allowed myself to actually believe for a second that I was going to make it, that Rymoni and I were going to get that Tevis buckle. Don't tempt fate, Just keep on keeping on, stay focused you are not there yet I demanded to myself.

As we dropped down to the American river I felt comfort in the fact that my tracker meant many people were following me on their computers. They were all with me in spirit. I also had the thought that if I fell over the edge that at least they wouldn't be wasting time searching for me. They would know where I had died!

Focus, Sally, stop with the negative thoughts. I laughed at how ironic my last thought was.

Rymoni floated along with such determination and energy he knew he was barnbound. This felt good and I let him move along and set the pace. Trust your horse, Troys' words whispered to me in the darkness. I certainly trusted Rymoni. He was so sure footed in the dark, he barely stumbled once in that last 36 miles.

As Rob and I approached the Quarry, the last vet check, Rob warned me that many a horse had vetted out there and to take it easy trotting along the rocky trail into the check point, only 6 miles from the finish. Rob stated he had been vetted out there in the past. He didn't want a repeat of that experience. Nor did I.

We walked in to the lit-up Quarry and jumped off. Rob found his wife there. She didn't feel well and had waited there for him, so they could ride in together. I hadn't realised this at the time and after vetting in and allowing Rymoni to eat and drink his fill I was a bit confused as to why Rob had ridden off without me. I figured out what had happened and as they were just taking it easy and walking I decided to trot on and wished them luck. Rymoni and I were on our own again. I also had not realised at the time, but Jenny had been vetted out at the Quarry with only 6 miles to go. I was devastated for her. Her mare had stumbled badly whilst riding with us and it was enough for her to trot out a bit sore.

As Rymoni dropped down the trail to 'no hands bridge' I felt myself inhale a gulp of elation. Oh Rymoni, we are so nearly home! This is where Troy and I had ridden to when we were familiarising ourselves with the trail camping at Auburn. It seemed an eternity ago.

I practically walked that last 4 miles, jogging a little where the trail allowed, which wasn't much, it was a tough few miles. I had seemingly been dicing with cut offs half way through the ride and this had panicked me. You cannot ride the Tevis cup too slow or you won't make the 100 miles in the 24 hours. When you can get moving you really have to get moving. I felt like I had covered good ground early in the morning when it was relatively cool, however, the extra half hour at Robinsons Flat put us back a little and I had taken a wrong turn early on at Squaw Valley ski resort and ridden a few extra miles, this as well as having to stop to undo the saddle to adjust a slipping back saddle

cloth and losing my electrolytes for Rymoni had set me back even more. So, when check points were telling me I only had an hour to get to the next vet check and I had a huge canyon in between me and the next check point, I was beginning to think I wouldn't make it.

Now, however, I knew I had it in the bag. I didn't quite know how, but we had made great time in that last 36 miles and as I turned the last corner in the trail there it was..... The Dunny! and I knew we were home. I've never been so glad to see a dunny! Now, just for the last hurdle, the last vet check at the finish.

Troy, Claire and the crew were cheering me on and playing 'I come from the land down under!'

I didn't know if I should laugh or cry! I kind of made a funny snorting sound as I attempted to do both.

I fell off Rymoni and let him drink to his hearts content at the finish line well.

We all walked that champion horse down to the oval. I could see relief in his eye and I matched that feeling of relief in my stomach.

We trotted our lap over the finish line, hands in the air for, our final Tevis photo.

We vetted in 'one of the best trot outs of the day' stated the head vet.

We did it. Hugs and cheers all round. I could not thank my crew enough. We looked after Rymoni and when he was settled and eating in his yard I turned to Troy and said, "Now where's my beer?"

Claire turned to me and said do you know where you came? I had no idea. NINETEENTH! How on earth did we do that, I laughed incredulous at the thought.

I was the first International rider and in the top 20, unbelievable! 'To complete is to win' – but this was the icing on the cake. My fairy tale had come true.

On my way back home, I was pulled aside at the airport due to my passport issue. With my sore muscles causing a stiff walk making me look like a comical cross between Marilyn Monroe and a cowboy, my riding helmet swinging off my backpack, a grin from ear to ear and sporting my Tevis buckle, the official in uniform looked me up and down and with a frown asked me, "What exactly have you been doing here in our country?"

How could I even begin to explain.....!!!!

Or had it all been a dream????

