

LOCAL

A Girl And Her Horse



As the sun sets, Erna and Love Story anticipate the 5:15 am start of The Tevis Cup race, an equine endurance competition, from Truckee to Auburn on July 20, 2024. **Roberta Alvarado, OBSERVER**

A 100-Mile Ride Through The Gold Rush Puts Erna Valdivia And Love Story Through Their Paces

Words And Photos By Roberta Alvarado
OBSERVER Correspondent

TRUCKEE, CALIFORNIA
The sun filters through the tall pines, accentuated by the dust kicked up by trucks and hooves. Riders, supporters, mentors and trail crew gather for a light dinner the night before they set off on the ride of their lives, the 100-mile Tevis Cup challenge.
They include Southern California's Erna Valdivia, at 17 the first African American junior participant in the Tevis Cup's 68-year history. "I love to do 50-mile rides - this is our first 100-mile ride," she says. "I like to compete."
The organizers mix lighthearted congratulations with critical facts: tomorrow's ride starts at 5:15 a.m. Horses must not line up too early and certainly not too late, and all must reach the finish line by 5:15 a.m. the next day.

The Tevis Cup, an annual, world-famous endurance ride established in 1955, weaves through trails connecting the mining communities of the gold rush era from 1849 to 1852.
Also known as the Western States Trail, this remote, mountainous terrain runs along the canyons of the Sierra Nevada foothills, the native lands of the Nisenan, Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla peoples. The ride is restricted to a maximum of 220 horses.
It starts at Robie Equestrian Park at 7,100 feet, winds its way down, then back up to almost 9,000 feet, through the river, over a narrow swinging bridge, and rocky ridges to finish at Auburn Fairgrounds. Timed with the fullness of the moon in late July or early August for better visibility, this year's race was held July 20 when the moon was nearly full.
In November, Erna Valdivia fell for Love Story,

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Erna talks to Love Story, who nuzzles back, seeking hugs. The Tevis Cup race, an equine endurance competition, Truckee, California on July 20, 2024. **Roberta Alvarado, OBSERVER**



Sponges filled with water help to keep Love Story cool during the high temperatures.



Susana Jones and her horse, Elie, ride alongside Erna Valdivia and Love Story. This is the ninth Tevis Cup for Jones, who is Valdivia's mentor. **Roberta Alvarado, OBSERVER**

Urban Living



A brief jog helps keep the horses' muscles warm ahead of the big event. The Tevis Cup race, an equine endurance competition, Truckee, California on July 20, 2024. **Roberta Alvarado, OBSERVER**

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a.k.a. "Lovie," a rather feral horse so fearful of people that one day Erna's mom, Vera V-Abdallah, entered her stall at Love This Horse Equine Rescue, their family-run Arabian horse rescue near the town of Mojave, causing Lovie to leap over the gate in fright. Lovie, a large, white Arabian, is now 8 years old.

V-Abdallah gave her the name Love Story to offset her rambunctious personality, and after the popular Taylor Swift song.

Valdivia is among those Black riders currently supported by the BeyGOOD foundation's Black equestrian fund.

She follows in the footsteps of a long line of strong, fearless women who also rode and trained horses. Her mentor, Susana Jones, 70, started training Love Story and, after an injury she thought would end her ability to ride, gave her to Valdivia for finishing. Pretty quickly they formed a mutually caring, trust made for endurance rides.

When Valdivia was just 2 weeks old she was adopted by V-Abdallah, who at the time lived in Haiti.

V-Abdallah, originally from Germany, was once a school principal in the United States. Feeling burnt out and unfulfilled, she moved to Haiti. Her leadership skills and working with children led her to run an orphanage. It was there that V-Abdallah met and adopted Valdivia's older sister Tamarah; one year later, she adopted Erna. When a massive earthquake hit Haiti in 2010, V-Abdallah worked hard to find forever homes for all the children in the orphanage and then moved back to the United States.

Valdivia started riding at 4 on the Mojave Ranch. When asked how it feels to be a trailblazing young African American woman in a primarily European American sport, she says she doesn't think about it much.

Not only is Valdivia's participation providing valuable representation for future generations, she is also highlighting the achievements of two African American riders who preceded her.

ON COMPETITION

"I LIKE TO COMPETE."

Erna Valdivia the first African American junior participant in the Tevis Cup's 68-year history

The U.S. Equestrian Federation does not require members to disclose race, but of those who did, 92% are Caucasian while only 0.5% are Black. Larry Luster was the first African American rider to complete the Tevis Cup on his horse, Blackfoot, in 1969. In 1998, African American rider Patricia Gay participated. Little is known about either participant. The family has reached out to the community in hopes of learning more.

Outside of school and caring for horses, Valdivia says she likes to eat and sleep. The trail is hot, tough, fatiguing, and rigorous. Seven vet checks between start and finish must be reached within a window of time. There, each horse is monitored and cleared to continue to the next check or pulled. On average, 50% of participants complete the ride. Fifty-six horses finished this year.

V-Abdallah anxiously stared into the distance waiting for the first glimpse of her daughter's arrival at the first vet check. Lovie arrived wearing a temporary boot and needed a shoe replaced. Both riders and horses refuel, replenish, and take a brief rest before going on.

This year's Tevis Cup included the tragic loss of two horses. Both fell off the trail at steep locations, 50 and 75 miles into the ride. The large animal rescue team was dispatched, but sadly, neither horse could be saved. The riders were not seriously injured.

Remaining on the mountain in the elements during this additional time put extra wear on the horses. Every step of the way, Valdivia and Jones monitored the well-being of their beloved horses to determine whether it was in their best interest to continue or to pull them. Although the horses were cleared to continue, Valdivia and Jones made the painful decision not to proceed beyond mile 68.

Valdivia's advice to young riders following in her footsteps is to "push through, have confidence in your horse and yourself. At the beginning, your legs will burn, and you will wonder what you have gotten yourself into, but keep pushing. Always talk to your horse." She adds, "Be calm, show a lot of love, relax, and be yourself."



Erna and Susana arrive with Love Story and Elie Jones 6 hours into the race at Robinson Flat for a 1 hour rest and vet check. The Tevis Cup race, an equine endurance competition, Truckee, California on July 20, 2024. **Roberta Alvarado, OBSERVER**



Erna gives Love Story one more hug as she prepares to remount and continue the trail. The Tevis Cup race, an equine endurance competition, Truckee, California on July 20, 2024. **Roberta Alvarado, OBSERVER**



Erna Valdivia's sister Tamarah Valdivia holds a check from Beyoncé's Bey Good Foundation at the Bill Pickett Rodeo in Los Angeles. The gift was for the family's organization, Love This Horse Equine Rescue. July 20th. **Courtesy photo**



Susana Jones and her horse, Elie, rode alongside Erna and Love Story. As Erna's mentor, this is Susana's 9th Tevis Cup. Truckee, California, July 20, 2024. **Roberta Alvarado, OBSERVER**



The official vet technician checks "Love Story's" vitals at Robinson Flat, 36 miles in The Tevis Cup race, an equine endurance competition, held in Auburn July 20, 2024. **Roberta Alvarado, OBSERVER**