
2013 WPBA TRIPLE CROWN WINNER: HAL WALTER AND FULL TILT BOOGIE

We began our Triple Crown corner to feature responses to interview questions from past Triple Crown winners as a means of providing insights and information from those that have been to the mountaintop in our great sport. Curtis Imrie used to say, "when in doubt, print the legend." This week's Triple Crown responses come from an actual legend in pack burro racing, a man who has literally been to the mountaintop more times than anyone in the sport's history, Hal Walter. 2022 was Hal's 43 consecutive year of pack burro racing. He is a 7 time World Champion who has competed in over 200 pack burro races and won the 2013 Triple Crown. Hal showing little signs of slowing down as evidenced by his second place finish in last year's Fairplay short course and third place finish in the Leadville long course.



What got you started in burro racing?

I ran my first marathon in spring of 1980 with my friend Miles F. Porter IV. His buddy Curtis Imrie joined us as our pacer. Curtis later invited us to his ranchito in Four Elk outside of Buena Vista. I knew nothing of pack-burro racing but was immediately taken by the history and lore,

but moreover the animals themselves. This notion of training and preparation of a burro as a teammate was particularly intriguing and struck something deep inside me. That summer I went for my first training run with Curtis and Stuart Saucke over the upper loop of the Fairplay course. A couple weeks later I ran my first race at Leadville with a burro named Moose. In those days there was only the long course, which remains the same route to this day. I got passed by Kelly (Palmer) Murphy in California Gulch to win my "Last Ass Over the Pass" trophy.

Can you share a bit about your background/career?

I've been a journalist for most of my professional life, working in newspapers, magazines, book and web publishing, and am the author of four books. I've also worked for decades as personal editor for Dr. Phil Maffetone, a health and fitness expert. Over the years I have been a wrangler and ranch manager as well. I currently coach high-school cross-country and track, and am also a substitute teacher.

How many years did you/have you raced?

My first race was in 1980, so this will be my 44th year.

What was your training schedule like for you and for your burro?

Burro training keeps me in touch with the seasons and my own cycles of fitness and recovery. At this point my training is mostly intuitive. Ideally my training season actually begins in the late summer or fall with some epic backcountry burro adventure, often two or three days out packing in the high country or some other epic trek. I feel backcountry excursions like this are invaluable in the training of a burro-human team, as they build a high level of trust, bonding and awareness. Starting in October I like to start working toward getting 100 runs with whatever burro I plan to race the following summer. This amounts to three to four runs per week through June. Recently, with Harrison a collegiate athlete and needing to do a long run most Sundays, it's been a family affair with Mary and I taking burros along for the workout. Generally, a long run per month helps, and in the run-up to the race season, a longer run every 10 days builds the necessary physical and mental endurance.

What was the burro's name that you won the Triple Crown with and can you tell me a bit about him/her?

Full Tilt Boogie. There's a book about her . . .

What was your most memorable race?

When you've run close to 200 pack-burro races there are so many fleeting memories that tend to blend together into one big race called "life." Of course winning my first race in Chama, New Mexico, in 1985 is right up there. There was that time in 1989 when I ran my PR for the Fairplay long course in just over four hours and came in fourth place. There was a Leadville race in which a big rock got stuck in Clyde's front foot early on going up 5th Street and I had to pull over, tie him to a tree, and find a bigger rock to pound the stone loose from the shoe; when I was done

with this I was way off the back but continued nevertheless, eventually passing almost everyone over the rest of the course and placing second by nudging out Curtis and Oscar right at the finish. A huge milestone for me was Spike nosing out Rob Pedretti and Oscar in 1998 to finally win my first of seven World Championships. However, one race that still replays over and over in my mind was in 2000 when I broke away at Fairplay early and got to the Mosquito Pass summit so far ahead of everyone that the next team had not even yet reached American Flats. We ran down Mosquito Gulch and back along the river all alone. It was hot, and Spike was dripping sweat, crusted with salt, and slowing down considerably as we drew closer to town, but I was confident we had the race in the bag when in the last mile Spike stopped to pee. I looked back then and could see Tom Sobal coming in hot. Mentally, I crashed right there as Tom had beaten me so many times. I encouraged Spike to get moving and speed up but he appeared to be bottomed out. Tom caught us in those rolling grassy hills right outside of town and passed like we were standing still. Spike responded by giving chase but Tom pulled farther ahead over the last hill and disappeared into town. I presumed he had already won the race but Spike didn't give up. As we came into the South Park City ghost town I could see Tom and his burro ahead on Front Street swerving slowly left and right toward the finish. Spike was now charging toward the finish. We caught them at the Park Bar and as we passed Tom's burro veered right, up and onto the boardwalk of the bar. Spike cruised to the win. There were a lot of lessons for me in that race.

Do you have any other stories to share from your adventures in burro racing?

I was so fortunate to come into pack-burro racing during its golden years. When I started, the legendary Joe Glavinick was still racing and competitive. I also had the opportunity to race the long courses with Ardel Boes and Tom Sobal, the winningest burro racers of all time, as well as Curtis and Lee Courkamp. Some kickass women burro racers including Kelly Palmer, Susan Applegate, Mary Gorman, Mary Walter, Kendra Jeronimus and Diana Koss, and later Barbara Dolan, were inspiring as well. Now it appears I have been along for more than half of pack-burro racing's entire history and have witnessed an evolution of sorts. In particular, the growing role of women in the sport has changed it for the better, with athletes like Triple Crown winner Tracy Loughlin now leading the way forward. On the downside, the recent phenomenon of people who want to rent a burro for their "bucket list" race is disappointing and contrary to the spirit and nature of the sport — so many of these people miss the point.

I have been blessed over the years by the support of Mary — who won her own Triple Crown in 1990 — my family, friends and others in the burro-racing community. In hopes of sharing my authentic experiences with burros and in pack-burro racing, I have written many stories in my books *Wild Burro Tales*, *Full Tilt Boogie* and my ebook *American Flats*. This year I am offering one-on-one coaching for burros and their people to further share my experience and know-how. Contact me personally at jackassontherun@gmail.com for more details or to schedule a session.

Do you have any advice to share with newcomers to the sport?

Inform yourself of the history and lore. Pack-burro racing is not so much a sport as it is an art form. Be prepared to leave your ego at the starting line. The burro probably does not care about your little race unless you have built a solid relationship. Please do not insult these animals by showing up without adequate preparation. Wet saddle blankets are still what gets it done. For those who don't know, saddle blankets get wet with sweat.

Early on, I was drawn to pack-burro racing as a lifestyle and many times over the years I have questioned my choice in sticking with it, as it has been the source of some question marks in my life, and also has been strangely isolating on some level. There is something annoying about the chuckle of a big-city client when the subject of pack-burro racing inevitably comes up. But it's been no joke to me. As the years go by I have found increasing value in this rocky road and in my rural existence even though it has not always been easy.

More recently I have become aware of something I had known intuitively all along — the metronomic gait of running with a burro is therapeutic. This aspect of movement can be very powerful and I believe it is this natural "therapy" that has unwittingly helped me remain active over the years, and moreover been helpful throughout my adulthood as I've reckoned with the effects of early childhood trauma. The built-in value of the connection with the natural world also is undeniable, and there have been so many experiences I would not have had if it were not for a burro leading me to them. There is also the notion that all these years of working with burros prepared me for the challenges of raising an autistic son . . . a larger topic that is explored in my book "Full Tilt Boogie" and actually continues to this day.

