
MULTIPLE TIME WPBA TRIPLE CROWN WINNER: TOM SOBAL

There are several legendary burro runners in the pantheon of burro racing greats, but there can only be one GOAT. That conversation begins and ends with Tom Sobal. Tom won a total of 55 burro races, won 27 in a row at one time, and 11 World Championships. He set course records at Fairplay (3:44) and Leadville (2:27), which may well never be broken. Tom was featured on the cover of the Wall Street Journal, in Sports Illustrated, and has been inducted into the Leadville Leadville Lake County Sports Hall of Fame and the Colorado Running Hall of Fame. In this edition of our Triple Crown corner, 4 time Triple Crown winner Tom Sobal shares some great stories and world class training and burro handling tips.



What got you started in burro racing?

Frank Mencin, an excellent runner in Leadville, informed me that he was planning to burro race but was injured, so he said I should try running with Maynard the burro he planned to use.

John Giardino, the burro's owner, took me out with Maynard to show me how to run burros. I remember almost quitting in the first mile because I could not keep up with Maynard sprinting at the start and pulling John behind as they pulled away from me.

That may have been my only burro training run before Maynard and I were racing the Leadville Burro Race a few days later. We finished in second place but I was frustrated as I did not know how to get Maynard to go faster. John yelled at me a few times during the race to "use the end of the rope". Not knowing what he meant, I spent the rest of the race gently holding the end of the rope.

Can you share a bit about your background/career?

I lived in Leadville for 16 years supporting myself by working part time as a bicycle mechanic/ski tech, and also making money as a mountain runner, snowshoer and burro racer. I liked a low-key lifestyle and for many years ran more miles each year than dollars I made during that year.

How many years did you/have you raced?

Not sure 15-20 years?

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

I never owned any of the 7 different burros I won races with. I would only start training with a burro in late May or early June as it was too/ icy snowy to safely run burros in the winter in Leadville and would only run every other day at most with the burro, probably only averaging 30-40 miles a week. I focused on quality runs with the burro, almost all runs were at or faster than our goal burro race pace. We would do 5-6 mile tempo runs over hills with a burro averaging just under 6:00/mile. Steady 8-10 milers around 7-7:15 mile pace. 30 second to 2 min hard uphill repeats. Mile time trials under 5 min flat. Maybe 2-3 longer easy 15-20 mile runs each season focusing on time out there and maintaining a steady pace over and past scary obstacles on routes the burro had never been on before. This was all near 10000' elevation with hills.

I otherwise ran 70-80 miles a week year-round, which included miles with a burro, on snowshoes, on paved roads and or on rougher trails. My training was similar to burro training except the quality days were on snowshoes in the winter (and a full schedule of snowshoe racing normally at distances from 5-26 miles, and more paved road runs to get ready for road/mountain/trail races).

Since I have never driven a car, I commuted to work and otherwise rode a bike everywhere for transportation and recreation. Six months of regular snow shoveling on long driveways provided necessary core and upper body work

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

I never paid attention to the Triple Crown as it did not exist, was only a contrived label, and there was no extra recognition for winning those three races in the same years during many of the years I burro raced. There were many years when Buena Vista did not have a race. So, I do not know which burros I may have won Fairplay, Leadville and BV with in the same year. I might have won those three with Maynard and with Bullwinkle.

There were some years when I likely could have won those three races (as I won the other two) but decided not to run the third burro race as I wanted to do some bigger and more significant non-burro race.

I remember one year I had won Fairplay with one burro, Leadville with another, and made a last-minute decision before the start of the Buena Vista race to run with a third totally different burro I had never run with before. There was no "rule" that said you needed to win those three races with the same burro since there was effectively no 'Triple Crown' then. I thought it would be fun to try to win all three races with different burros.

That BV race was memorable as we were running well up with the leaders a few miles out of town when my saddle started to fall off. After stopping to fix it I was caught by my wife, Melissa, running with the pen mate of the burro I was running. We tried everything but those burros were inseparable for the rest of the race. Our teams finished together somewhere in the top 10 but we both had frustrating races as I ran slower than I wanted to and she ran faster than she wanted to.

There was another year when I had spent many hours training one of Curtis Imrie's burros, Mordecai, with the understanding that I could race him all summer. After we easily won Fairplay, Curtis acted like

Curtis and took Mordecai away from me for Leadville because he thought he could win running with him (he didn't).

What was your most memorable race?

All the races I did were memorable for me. I quickly learned that if I wanted to burro race well I would have to spend the entire race focusing on getting my burro to go fast and putting their needs above mine. It's hard to forget the mental, physical and emotional energy that was required to burro race well. Of all the races I have done, burro racing is the most challenging as you need to focus the entire time. There is no coasting, no lead is ever safe until you finish, and the runner is never in full control.

One year in Buena Vista, I believe I was running Bullwinkle owned by Bill Lee. We went out hard but were caught by Rob Pedretti a couple of miles out of town. We kept up a furious pace for the entire race. I pushed myself and Bullwinkle very hard trying to drop Rob, but I knew he was a very good runner and he kept right behind us the whole way. When we hit the railroad grade on CR 304 coming back I was able to up the pace some but could not drop him. Finally, just before entering the singletrack trail to descend back down to town, I heard him grunt and say something like "can't do it" and he slowed down. We pushed hard all the way across the line because I feared he would come back to force a burro race finish.

After winning the Breckenridge Crest Mountain Marathon the day before, Maynard the burro and I lined up to run a burro race at Copper Mountain. It was maybe a 10k race that was and out and back uphill/downhill on a ski slope cat road. I was tired and dragging on the uphill part of the burro race and did not have it in me to push Maynard. Hal Walter and Curtis Imrie tagged teamed their burros together and were well out of my sight at the high point turn around. I had just about given up on catching them but Maynard came to life at the turn around. He feared doing any more unknown uphill and wanted to get 'back down to the barn' as fast as possible. I was barely able to keep up as he roared back downhill. I felt like a cartoon character whose legs were a blur as I sprinted to stay up with Maynard. We caught and flew by Hal and Curtis with a mile to go and won easily.

I won many races with Maynard, I believe 27 in a row at one point spanning a number of years. Normally I was the one driving him to run faster at the end of races but in that race he was the instigator forcing me to run faster. That was the last time we would ever race together as he tragically died a few weeks later.

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

On the way back from a great benefit 50k burro race put on by the Archeleta Family in Antonito, we stopped to spend the night on a ranch Jim Feistner and Barb Dolan were living on. At their suggestion and without thinking, I put Maynard into the pasture with their three burros for the night thinking he might enjoy grazing on the new shoots of grass coming up. The next morning, I was shocked and upset to find Maynard shaking, bleeding and bruised with dozens of bites, cuts, and scrapes all over his body. He looked like he had lost a knife fight. The other three burros beat him badly defending their home turf and establishing dominance in the dark. Maynard was a gelding, generally feared and avoided other burros, and was too weak and tired from the race to defend himself. I felt absolutely awful and stupid for putting him in that situation. That was the worst burro decision I ever made, and I cringe thinking about it today.

I raced burros for the personal challenge it provided and did not really care about what others thought of it. But it was winning the Leadville burro race many times, and setting the course record, that I believe was instrumental for me in gaining a degree of acceptance and respect as a new resident among locals in that small mountain community. This was especially true as I was not a native, not a miner, didn't socialize much and was likely otherwise viewed as strange.

Success at burro racing played a part of me being featured in articles in Sports Illustrated and the Wall Street Journal. It was one thing that helped with me being inducted into the Leadville Lake County Sports, and ultimately the Colorado Running Hall of Fames.

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

If you want to burro race, train hard to get your ass in shape so when you run with a burro you can make it as easy for them as possible. Burro racers are what make burros race. Burros are too intelligent to otherwise run for more than a short distance on their own. You need fitness to make yourself and a burro go.

Don't make the burro drag you around by getting pulled by the rope. That is hard on the animal and helps drain the limited motivation they have to run. I never ran with a tight rope, and I believed this allowed the burros to run faster over the entire race.

There is no substitute for the miles you spend out with your burro and make those miles count.

Work with your animal on pavement some and expose them to all the scary things they encounter at the end of races (cracks in the road, manhole covers, painted crosswalks, cars, crowds of people, etc.). Those things are even more frightening when the burro is tired at the end of a long race. Your team will save time if your burro is conditioned to civilization. You will also finish smooth and controlled, which will impress the spectators. Most burro race spectators only view the finish, and teams stopping/starting, darting into the crowd, and generally struggling hurts the image the public has of burros and burro racing.

After finishing a race, I would sometimes take a burro back out to run over the last quarter to third of a mile of a race finish again. That type of repetitive work in unique and specific conditions always paid off with faster and smoother finishes in the future.

I would sometimes train burros by running a couple times over the old Leadville racecourse finish. That uphill third of a mile through downtown on Highway 24 was arguably the scariest in the sport. I was once warned by a Colorado State Patrol trooper that if I was caught doing that again I would be ticketed. When I mentioned this to Don Ferrie (a true legend in the sport as long time Leadville race director, etc.) he told me not to worry about it, as if I was ticketed he would pay the fine.

You and your burro need to function smoothly alone. Train alone, pass others alone, navigate obstacles alone, lead alone, finish ahead of others alone. There is little satisfaction or reward involved with holding a rope attached to a burro that is fixated on following other burros.

Other reading:

<https://leadvillesportshall.com/tom-sobal/>

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