



## CRICKET

By JEANETTE WARREN  
Photos by Charles Barieau

• Cricket brings Diane Claggett across the finish line to win the 1971 Drakes Bay Fifty Mile Ride.

**U**P IN THE rolling foothills of Auburn, Calif., out of sight and sound of busy Route 80 with its frantic ski season traffic, a small horse enjoyed a vacation over the winter months. She had earned a rest.

Though no great beauty, her gen-

eral appearance is pleasing. She has a small white marking on her forehead, but the rest of her is solid chestnut. Although by nature sort of a busybody, she shows no particular animation; in fact, she more often than not rests with her small ears well back. On the trail they are usually in this



• Phil Gardner watches Cricket relax in the water after a long ride.

position also, belieing her enthusiasm.

She weighs in at 750 pounds soaking wet, and she packs it on a 14-hand frame. She is not purebred anything, but has a mixed heritage that boils down to half Quarter Horse, a quarter Tennessee Walker, and a quarter Arabian.

She was bred ten years ago by Mrs. Barbara Radford of nearby Lincoln. She was given the name of Cricket, possibly because of her minute size. But at a very tender age she began to show some of the energy that was to be directed toward conquering the endurance field in later years. She broke Mrs. Radford's arm, so it seemed a good idea to let her go and a trade was made with Harold Whitfield of Auburn for a Shetland pony. It wasn't any of Cricket's doing, but "Whit" broke a leg and the little horse was put up for sale. An unlikely person bought her . . . a tall young man who, astride Cricket bareback, could touch his heels under her belly. They were an incongruous pair. They just did not look right together. Something was wrong . . . either the man was too big or the horse was too small.

People talked behind their backs . . . "I thought Phil Gardner was interested in endurance riding. Does he think *that* horse is going to pack 190 pounds down a 50- or 100-mile endurance trail?"

Phil referred to her as his drowned rat, but he smiled when he said it. He had a hunch. And when people asked about his miniature endurance horse, he talked about her uncanny intelligence and how she could figure out any gate. The only thing that would keep her in was a chain and a snap. Phil swears she has the snap figured out, but her lips just don't have the dexterity to work it.

Once he watched her extricate herself from an impossible tangle of barb wire. She didn't rush, but took it one foot at a time and slowly worked at it until she had all four legs free without a scratch. The little mare thinks big, as her future records would prove. She never fights another horse, but somehow she always seems to end up boss of the pasture. She threatens without coming to blows, badgers just by baring her teeth, and the other horses get the idea. Her supremacy is not disputed.

And so Phil talked about his horse, but very few listened because, after all, Auburn is endurance country and little Cricket was obviously not up to playing in this particular ball game. And still Phil smiled on.

The day of reckoning arrived. It was endurance season 1968 and Castle Rock Challenge Ride time. Phil and his improbable horse lined up with the rest in the game in which all

horses are pitted against the same obstacles for 50 or 100 miles, regardless of their size, age, or ability. The undisputed champions of endurance riding, the Arabians, were there. Lightweight ladies were perched on their lightweight saddles. The athletes who could get off and run, leading their horses for miles, waited patiently for the start of the ride. And then there were Phil and Cricket, the unlikely combination.

Many hours later, at the finish line, there were Phil and Cricket again, just as unlikely a combination as at the beginning. They weren't first, but they were in the coveted top ten and somehow the die was cast. Cricket had been introduced to endurance riding and endurance riding had met Cricket. She and her 190-pound cargo were to be reckoned with in the future.

To prove that she had found her field of endeavor, although Phil knew it all along, Cricket confirmed it to the last of the doubters by placing second on another 50-mile ride a week later. It was obvious that she had embarked upon a career, which by 1972 has become quite enviable. She started the 1969 endurance season by moving up to second place in the Castle Rock Challenge Ride. A week later she won the Tellington 100-mile 2-day ride. She capped it off by taking home the best-condition award, which is traditionally given to the horse in the best physical condition of the first ten horses to finish an endurance ride.

So Phil took his horse to the Peaceful Valley Ride in Colorado. The little mare, trained at almost sea level, covered the 50-mile trail at elevations from 8,500 to 12,000 feet and took 45 minutes off of the course record to win. Phil continued to campaign his chestnut mount and always managed to finish in the top ten in all the rides. She capped the 1969 season by winning the High-Point Endurance Horse of the Year trophy awarded by the Nevada All-State Trail Riders. She had competed on 500 miles of endurance trails and never been out of the top ten. In 1970 she was runner-up for this award.

Phil had reached a decision, however. He knew his weight was handicapping the spunky little mare from reaching her full potential. He figured she could do better with a lighter rider. So in 1970 he loaned her to a neighbor, Diane Clagett. Diane and the mare came in in fifth place on the Tevis Cup Ride that year. Phil was pleased with the rider he had put on Cricket, but he ran into an obstacle after the race. When he went to retrieve Cricket, he returned home with an empty trailer—Diane flatly refused to give her up. Phil knew better than



• After his first endurance competition on Cricket, Phil Gardner was sure he had a winner.

to come between a woman and a horse; so he gave the situation a little thought. It didn't take long until he realized that maybe Diane and Cricket were the right combination. Slender, blonde Diane was able to meet the 150-pound minimum weight required by most endurance rides by just a hair. She was a good rider and it looked as though she had a competitive streak to match Cricket's. So Cricket changed hands again.

The rest of the story is sort of current history among endurance riders. Cricket and Diane started out the 1971 season at the 50-mile Castle Rock Challenge Ride by coming in only seconds behind Pat Fitzgerald on his famous Quist. Anyone giving the legendary Pat this much of a run for the money has to be pleased with their performance. But a leg injury suffered on another horse kept Diane out of a couple of rides and it wasn't until July that they were able to line up at a starting mark again. The locale was Red Bluff and the Diamond Ride, where they had a choice of making a 50-mile loop or a 100-mile double loop. They chose the 50 and the only one to beat them was Kathy Perry on Pathfinder. But, as if to make up for not winning, Cricket won the best-condition trophy. Inching up closer to the winner's circle, Cricket and Diane managed to tie for first place on the Tri-Cities Ride, held in over 100-degree heat against 133

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## Cricket

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competitors. With the Tevis Cup Ride only three weeks off, the objective was obvious. But misfortune in this ride struck and Cricket was lame at the 85-mile point and was disqualified. She was in third place at the time.

Undaunted, the formidable pair set out a month later to conquer 100 miles of Nevada desert in 10 hours and 7 minutes, a course record for the Nevada All-State Trail Riders Virginia City Ride. And once again, the horse was judged in the best physical condition and added another trophy to Diane's trophy shelf. This was one of the rare times in endurance ride history that a horse has won both first place and best condition on a 100-mile 1-day ride.

Apparently Diane and Cricket were making up for their goof of the previous year when they had to settle for 11th place after getting lost and covering 130 miles before they found the finish line.

To top off the 1971 endurance season, this intrepid pair took a six-day rest and then embarked upon the fifty-mile Drakes Bay Ride. Obviously used to the winner's circle at this point, the two made an easy victory and set a course record. And they did it with relish—neither the girl nor the horse needing urging; they both like to go!

And so 1971 passed for Cricket and Diane. And this is where the story started . . . with Cricket taking a rest in the Auburn hills and Diane assumedly doing the same. The disheartening thing for hopeful 1972 endurance riders was that Cricket is just ten this year, considered the prime age for an endurance horse. And Diane isn't telling, but a lot of people don't have to be told—they think Diane is just reaching her prime, too.



• "Someday, Bill, you'll look back at all this and laugh."