

## Five girls, one trail, hundreds of miles

For four girls and me, 256 miles in ten days on horseback was more than just a challenge to overcome, it was a learning experience. This past summer Savannah Grant and her horse Montana, Dani Balzer and her horse Cowboy, Heather Govitz and her horse Sunny, Rylie Alward and her horse Cody, and my horse Goldie and I completed a journey of a lifetime.



Beginning in Oscoda, Michigan, we began our voyage across the state. Ten days later we arrived in Empire, 256 miles away from our starting point. A trip like this has not only allowed us to learn more about each other and ourselves, but what it truly means to work hard and be dedicated as well.

We are a part of an organization called the Michigan Trail Riders Association (MTRA). The MTRA is a non-profit organization, which holds several horseback rides each year to promote the use and development of horseback and hiking trails in Michigan and encourage outdoor education. Their goal is to help riders enjoy the sport of horseback riding and the love of the outdoors in a unique way. Families from all over Michigan, as well as other states and Canada, have joined the MTRA. The shore-to-shore rides have had more than 100 riders per event and this past summer, fourteen of those who completed the ride were from Gladwin.

On May 31, 2012, the last day of school, we all arrived at our first trail camp, signed in with the Trail Boss (Theresa Gunders of Gladwin), picketed the horses, and set up camp for the night. Each day we had a routine that we did without complaining. We could agree that the first challenge of the day would have to be to “Wake up at 5 a.m.!” Dani said. Then after, Govitz added, “...be kicked out of the camper into the cold, no matter how bad your hair looks. Once we get ready to go it’s all kicks and giggles all the way to the next camp.” We were kicked out of the campers, or “our rigs,” so that the adults could take them to our next camp, leaving us with the horses until the MTRA bus brought the adults back to camp.

We followed a single track trail marked with blue triangles or blue dots on the trees along the trail. Each trail was about 25-30 miles long. The first couple of days we rode with adults until we, including our horses, got the hang of things. Then, when the fourth or fifth day came around, the five of us began to ride on our own instead of waiting for the adults to return on the bus. We usually left around six in the morning, as soon as it started to get light out. A normal ride to the next camp usually lasted about six hours.



While on the trail, we played all sorts of games and activities. “We would play catch with the pine cones, sing, run our horse and sound like Indians, put leaves in our hair, jump logs, and sleep,” Dani said. The most memorable game that we played had to be the one where we would reach as high as we could and pull off pine cones from the trees above us. Then, when we had a hand full of pine cones, starting from the leading horse, we would throw the pine cones backwards and try to get it all the way back to the last horse on the trail which may sound like something easy to do, but it is actually harder than you think.



The worst part about the long rides would be not knowing how far you are from the next camp, so you never knew when you're going to see the campers off in the distance through the trees. One day we were so excited to see camp on the other side of a hill that we started running our horses into camp while we yelled like Indians with our arms in the air. We got a few funny looks from people already in camp.

When we arrived in camp our day wasn't nearly over yet. “Our biggest responsibilities were taking care of our horses and making sure that they would be prepared for our next day,” Alward said. Each day we had to make sure that our hay bags were always full, and we had to lead them to water every couple hours because the horses don't have buckets of water at their picket lines. Around 6:30 p.m. we would feed the horses grain plus a scoop of electrolytes so that they would have energy for the rides. Then, to end every night, we had a group meeting at seven o'clock. We had these meetings so that if there was anything we needed to know about the trail the next day, the Trail Boss would discuss it with us.

At these meetings, we would do more than just discuss the trails. The other four girls and I also played games with the other nine kids that were on the ride. Some of the games we played were the island-survival-teamwork game or the Cheeto-warriors game. In the island survival game we had to fit five or six people all on a small square of fabric for about five seconds, without falling off. The Cheeto-warriors game is where a team of five people were separated by about ten feet. One of the players had their hands full of whipped cream to catch the Cheetos that their team was throwing at them. Whoever had the most Cheetos at the end of the game won. The winners would win glow sticks to put on their horses at night. We basically dominated at the games because of our awesome teamwork.



After the games, we would pack our saddle and horn bags with drinks and snacks for the next day. "One thing learned was, never forget your snacks!" Govitz said. And I believe that all of the girls could agree on that one. After all the chores were done and things were ready for the next day, we were off to bed.

Over the course of ten days we learned many life lessons. One lesson that Alward learned was, "That you can do anything you set your mind to," she said. For Dani, some lessons that she learned were "Communication: Always try to tell the people riding behind you where holes, logs and branches are in or on the trail. Responsibility: You have to feed, water and groom your horse constantly. There really aren't a lot of breaks," she added. We all had our own challenges as well. "Think the biggest challenge was getting up at five every morning after a cold day of riding 25-30 miles. You're sore and cold and tired but you just have to do it," Dani said. "My biggest challenge was making it all the way on a young quarter horse," Grant said.



The scenery on the trail was so indescribable; it's not every day that you get to see nature at its best like this. There were so many times that we were able to sneak up on some animals and sometimes some does and their fawns, too. "The scenery on the trail just amazes me! Goose Creek and the high banks of the Au Sable have gorgeous spots along the trail," Alward said. We saw waterfalls, sunsets, bald eagles, and even portions of the trail where disaster went through and the only thing you're able to say about it all is, wow.

What amazes me the most was the scenery. "When you're going through the trails you see some beautiful things," Govitz said. Even though nature is beautiful like this, there can be the downfalls as well. Our biggest problems with nature were the bugs. Although they bothered us all day long, they



helped us shape some pretty great stories. The ticks were our major problem. After every ride we had to check our horses for ticks because they carry diseases that can be extremely harmful to animals. You wouldn't think that tiny bugs would be a big problem, but at one camp we could remove up to ten ticks on just one horse! Not only did we get ticks off the animals, but we had to check ourselves for ticks as well. They were disgusting. Ticks weren't our only problem. Although it was so cool to see the light glisten off the dew on the spider webs that

were strung across the grass and trees in the mornings, they became a disgusting nuisance to whoever was leading on the trail. The bugs were annoying, especially the "fighting midgets" according to

Savannah. Fighting midgets are those small bugs that are literally called biting midges. She had misunderstood someone when they were reading a bug spray can and from then on they became known as “fighting midgets.” They would swarm us and our horses and always end up in our eyes, which really hurt. A lesson that we learned from that was always have bug spray and dryer sheets that we would tie in the headstall of our horses to keep bugs out of their faces.



On the last day of the ride, the group holds an awards night which is a night to share stories and give gag awards to people that had funny things happen to them while they were on the ride. As one of the awards, Dani and I received two rubber kick balls for the award of our new nickname, The Bouncing Balzers. “I got off my horse on the side of the trail to go to the bathroom and it was raining earlier that day so I had rain clothes on. As I was swinging my leg over to get back on my horse, my leg hit my horse’s butt and made him jump forward before I had my hold on the saddle. I ended up bouncing off his butt and landed behind him after bouncing off the ground, too. Then, the

next day we rode, Carlee was behind me and a tree had fallen over the trail from a storm that had passed earlier and we had to find an alternative route to get around to the other end of the trail. This meant that we had to go through some thick brush with our horses. When Carlee was going to go through, a smaller tree slipped under her saddle and got caught in her cinch, which startled her horse. Coincidentally, the trail was going downhill at the same time so the horse side-stepped and somehow Carlee ended up on the ground and landed with a bounce, just like I did. And that is how we got the name “The Bouncing Blazers!”

Even though we were tired after a long day on the trail we always found ways to make amazing memories each night. “One of my favorite memories from the trip was when all of us girls had a bonfire and we melted the tips off glow sticks and splattered them all over each other and the horses. We looked like glowing monsters!” Alward said. This was by far one of the funniest nights that we had.

Savannah, Dani, Heather, Rylie, and I all agree that the best memory from the ride had to have been when we reached Lake Michigan after riding thirty



miles that day. The feeling of accomplishment when we saw the lake ahead of us was so unexplainable....it took our breath away. We knew we had finally done it, something that so few people have ever been able to do before. "When we got to Lake Michigan, it was so cool because we finished! It was such a nice day and we ran our horses from the beach into the lake. My horse laid down in the water. While I was on him," Dani said. Anyone who completes the shore-to-shore ride receives a trophy for their hard work. Horses which complete the entire ride can be registered as Michigan Trail Horses, which is a big deal if you ever decide to sell your horse.



"If you were thinking about going on a ride with the MTRA, make sure your horse is healthy and in shape. Bring warm clothes and rain gear. Definitely be prepared for what is ahead of you and make sure you have warm clothes, snacks, and drinks. Get sleep the week before you go because you will have the lack of sleep the whole week on the ride," Govitz said. You have to be physically and mentally tough enough to be able to ride five to six hours a day.

The adults were impressed by our hard work. "What most amazed me was their willingness to help others even when they were so very tired. They would do the older people's chores in addition to their own and never complained. They got to bed late, rose before the sun came up, and work with a smile. They not only readily saddled their own horses, but also some of the 70-year-olds' horses, too. They were so caring and thoughtful and not just toward people, but the animals, too. After a thirty-mile ride on the back of their horses they took great care of these animals, graining, watering, letting them roll, and bathing them each day. What great caregivers they were. I want the world to know how dedicated these girls were. They all had the same goal: to succeed and get their trophies, rain, or shine. Their perseverance was strong: they are all very responsible young ladies. They made me so proud," said Cyndee Balzer, who also rode across with us.



There was a lot to be happy about after this journey. "We are all very proud of these girls. It is a tough ride and it takes physical, mental endurance, and determination to finish and none of them quit!" I was amazed that we had five teenage girls in camp with no phone service, electricity, TVs, radios, etc.... and we never heard 'I'm bored' And we had no arguments. I was so happy to spend the time with these wonderful riders and see them appreciate their families, animals and nature," said Kelly McCulloch, who also rode across with us. Dani said she is most proud of "Finishing!"

All ten days, all 256 miles! And that all five of us did it together.” We were all so honored to have our families make it across with us and be able to spend this time with them, too. “I hope to cross again and again, as many times as I can in the future,” Alward said. This is a goal that can surely be met. Some of the MTRA members have crossed over fifty times!

We had some gut wrenching laughs, learned valuable lessons, saw things that you don’t get to see every day, met some amazing people, and made some lifelong memories. Being a part of the Michigan Trail Riders Association opens up so many new perspectives on life. It has taught us lessons that can’t normally be learned anywhere else. “Everyone should do it because it’s a blast,” Govitz said. Being able to spend this journey with friends makes it just that much better. “I don’t think I would go again if I didn’t have these girls with me. I think that they are what made it so great. We also had to go four or so days without showers; but it was worth it! Bring rain stuff because it rained a lot!” Dani said. You will never really understand what we have all done until you try it yourself.



By Carlee Balzer