

BURRO RACING'S TRIPLE CROWN WINNER - Bobby Lewis

I am talking with Bobby Lewis, the Director of The Link School near Buena Vista, Colorado. Apart from his responsibilities with the school, Bobby has won the Triple Crown of Colorado Burro racing and is a recognized champion of this unique and demanding sport.



Marv: Bobby, I know you've been participating for several years.

Bobby: Yeah, and winning sometimes.

Marv: Talk about that whole experience.

Bobby: It has been a fun way to be part of the mountain community. I've run for a bunch of years but a neighbor, Curtis Imerie, who had been part of the sport for a long time, loaned me a donkey for the 2004 or 2005 race. It's been fun learning how to work with the animal, perhaps a combination of fun and frustration. Certainly challenging. The people are good people to be with and it's fun to be part of this local event.

Marv: So there is a co-dependency between you and the animal.

Bobby: Yeah, the burro has to be willing. Like in Fairplay, Colorado, if you go out and run thirty miles through the mountains, you have to be in shape, not get struck by lightning and all of the things that will challenge the runner and the burro. It's a process of trying to coax the animal through while not putting more importance on the outcome than you should.

Marv: Explain the Triple Crown. What are the differences, difficulties and uniqueness of each of the runs that make up the Crown?

Bobby: Oh yeah, there are races at Buena Vista, Leadville and Fairplay. The hard thing is they're back to back weeks. You start in Fairplay and run 29-30 miles to the top of Mosquito Pass and back. That's a big exertion. Usually, it would take you a few weeks to recover from a race however; the next week is Leadville with 22 miles up to the same pass from the other side. Then the following week is Buena Vista, which is 13 miles. Buena Vista is not that far but it is very hot and very fast. So the Triple Crown is an extreme demand on animals that have saddle soars, and runners that are whipped.

Marv: Do you have the same participants at each of the three races?

Bobby: Pretty much. All burro runners sort of are invited to the party. There is kind of a core crew of people who are into it and then everybody wants to keep the sport alive by inviting new people into it.

Bobby: I've only been able to run Leadville once because of a meeting I attend that has been at the same time. The year that I won the other two races, I drove all night to see if I had a shot at winning the Triple Crown. I thought it would be fun to have a go at it and I won. There are other burro races around Colorado. There are races at Georgetown and Cripple Creek and other locations, but the big race of the summer is the Triple Crown.

Marv: Is each year unique?

Bobby: Oh yeah, cause may be you have a different animal, then how sketchy is the weather at the top of Mosquito, etc. You would never choose to run starting at 1 pm and go over a 13,000 ft. pass.

Normally, you'd be up and off that by 8 in the morning, but in this race that's when it's scheduled. Every year that I've cross this pass lighting has been hammering up there.

Marv: How does your burro react to that?

Bobby: Burros are different from horses. They are much more predictable. They do get wound up but they don't panic and flee, like horses do. They just stop when they're worried so getting them to go up the mountain, into a storm, can be pretty demanding.

Marv: Have you used the same burro each year?

Bobby: No, I've used different burros. I bought a little two year old from Curtis a few years ago. Since then I've been running him, but in the early years I would borrow one. Most guys will loan you a burro for one half of your winnings.

Marv: Kind of like bulldogging or calf roping?

Bobby: Yeah.

Marv: Why do you keep doing it? I'm trying to understand what you get from this.

Bobby: Well, there are practical things. We earn enough to cover the animal's feed for the year, if we do well in the races. Also, I think I look for things that let me a part of something. Like the burro racing community. It's entertaining. I like to run. It's not always pleasurable if the burro decides not to go and you're pulling your hair out. We call it "Burro Wars." I guess it's being able to do something kind of quirky, being part of a niche sport.

Marv: So are their tactics that are a part of this?

Bobby: Oh absolutely. Each burro is different. My burro is young enough that he will not race on his own. Every time I go to a race I know that he will not leave the other animals. Sometimes I've gotten a mile out in front and he will just stop. I can't make him go at that point. So my strategy, until he is mature enough to run on his own, is to run with the lead pack, no matter how slow or fast it is. If it is fast I try and hang on, if it's slow I enjoy it and chat with folks and try and win in the end.

Bobby: Someday he'll be a mature and confident enough animal that he might not care where the other burros are. However, they're social animals and to get one that will run out in front is kind of rare. I think, in the future, we can get out in front and stay in front in some races. That can be more relaxing than fighting the whole group because someone else is setting the pace. I run a lot with a guy named Hal Walter and Hal pushes the pace when he wants to so I don't have control of the race. I'd rather push the pace really hard for several miles and be running alone. But...the burro would have to be willing to do that.

Marv: Well, obviously you enjoy the activities of the sport. Are there some goals that you have that haven't been achieved, that you'd still like to do?

Bobby: Ah...no, I really don't set goals like that. Races, winning or losing, it's always fun to win but I never show up on the starting line with that as my goal. I want to run well and genuinely be a good sport, if that results in winning that's fun. If I finish 17th and had a good race and enjoyed the animal, then I'm happy with that.

Marv: How about other goals?

Bobby: Oh, big life things. Yeah, I do.

Marv: You know, other people look at you and say, “Wow, look what he’s accomplished.”

Bobby: I’ve been so fortunate to do these things and last summer to take a big crew up to the Arctic. We had done the first set of a river back in ’76 in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. So I took friends and family back last year and shared the Arctic with them. It’s not that I don’t have personal ambition but my ambitions are more around doing things where I get to share with others. That was how I was able to have early experiences because others were generous and included me. This year I’ll take these boys and cross the country on the Divide Trail. Next year I will take a group and climb some pretty interesting objectives here and in South America. Next year’s crew will be hiking boys.

Marv: Certainly your values, your outlook on life and your giving nature, make you an outstanding individual. Thank you Bobby Lewis.

Bobby: I’ve been blessed. Thank you