

The pack burrow: a man's best friend

By Finn McNally
Herald Reporter

(This article was published in the Aug. 8, 2025 print edition of the Leadville Herald Democrat)

After Kevin McNamee and Poppie crossed the finish line of the Leadville Boom Days Pack Burro Race, they were soon swarmed with friends, family and spectators. The duo took third place overall in the short course race. McNamee gave his burro a kiss on the nose and told anyone who congratulated them that the victory was Poppie's, not his.

"It's all her," McNamee said. "I'm just the guy on the rope."

McNamee is a lifelong runner, originally from Greeley, Colorado. Now living in Bailey, he is the operations assistant at Tomahawk Ranch and the assistant cross-country coach for the Platte Canyon High School team.

In 2022, McNamee heard about Fairplay's World Championship Pack Burro Race. He volunteered at the check-in table in hopes that someone would let him rent their burro. McNamee said that the obscurity and uniqueness had drawn him to the sport, and he knew he had to try it out. Within 10 minutes of volunteering, McNamee secured a burro and has been an avid racer ever since.

Nine months ago, after deciding that he wanted to commit to the sport of burro racing, McNamee purchased burros of his own: Poppie, Denver and Jasmine. Named after his late grandfather, Poppie is McNamee's personal race partner and close friend.

Poppie is a 7-year-old burro. When McNamee bought her, he was told that she was not a runner and may never be a runner. To date, she's competed in five races alongside McNamee with five more yet to come in 2025. Poppie is considered a mini-burro, much smaller than many of her competitors. McNamee said this makes inclines more difficult for her than the big burros but gives her some of the best top speed around.

On top of her abilities as a racer, McNamee said that Poppie's best attributes are her sociability and friendliness.

"I'd say just about everything is special about her, but her biggest thing is her natural temperament," McNamee said. "She's so good with kids, she's so good with anyone who just wants to love on her and I got really lucky with that. Not every donkey is going to let 40 people surround them and take pictures and be cool with it."

More than fitness or strategy, McNamee said that the bond between runner and burro is the most important key to success in burro racing. For the past nine months, he and Poppie have run together almost every day and spent time together even on the days they don't run.

"The premise of this sport is the relationship with your animal," McNamee said. "Is this relationship that you've built with this animal something beneficial for them? Because it really does come down to this being their race. The more I've swallowed that pill, the more I have felt too lucky and humbled to be on the end of this lead rope."

Over his four years racing burros and nine months with Poppie, McNamee said he's learned a lot about himself. He said that before Poppie, he used to get frustrated during runs. However, he soon realized that Poppie could read his body language and would respond to it.

"Anytime I'd get frustrated on the course, she'd basically just shut down. I had to learn that I'm basically not allowed to get frustrated per Poppie," McNamee said. "When it comes down to it, this is their race, we're just out here getting to pace for them and be with them, but we truly learn so much about ourselves through our crazy animals."

McNamee said that burros are very emotionally intelligent animals, something that is evident the more time one spends with them.

"Poppy is one of my best friends. The amount of time that Poppie has come and put her head on my shoulder... If you've never spent time with a donkey, I highly recommend it," McNamee said. "It's just one of the coolest feelings to see what these amazing creatures can do. I feel pretty lucky to get to hang with Poppie every day."

Next year, McNamee and Poppie will return to the Leadville Boom Days Pack Burro Race, next time to compete in the long course. McNamee said that he hopes to win it all and that eventually, he and his friend Poppie will win the Burro Racing Triple Crown.