HOW TO AVOID COMMON MISTAKES MADE AT ENDURANCE RIDES
Or
HOW TO DO THE BEST BY YOUR HORSE

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Over the last couple of decades, I've had the opportunity to watch and listen to all levels of inexperienced and experienced riders take on the challenge of a competition. Despite impressive advances in the endurance world, it seems that many mistakes are repeated time and again. Most solutions are based on a generous dose of common sense, but as so often happens with fallible human beings, it is hard to recognize how to apply these principles to our own lives. It's easy to give advice, and recommend to others to "Do as I say, not as I do." But, think how some situations apply to you and *your* horse, not just to Joe or Josephine Rider on the next farm. If you recognize a “faux pas” as something you have done in the past, remember that this is not a finger-pointing exercise, but instead this should be a learning experience for everyone, and should provide a multitude of ways to improve horse welfare. All these comments are true-life experiences; none of it is fiction or fantasy. Think of this as an exercise in relearning to tie your shoelaces so you don't keep tripping over them. And all the while, please keep your sense of humor.

PRIOR TO ARRIVAL AT A COMPETITION

Ride Frequency

A dilemma for every rider to consider is how much to ride and how often, whether it be training or a competition schedule. Even before heading from home to a competition, a horse may experience excessive wear-and-tear. He may arrive at an event looking slightly dull and fatigued, lacking in luster. Legs and joints may be puffy. Or, a horse seems fine, albeit gaunt and somewhat drooped in posture. A horse may start a race with abundant energy, but tires quickly. Performance failure occurs for three reasons, each ending in the same result.

The first reason for performance failure is related to a lack of commitment to a conditioning program that is appropriate to the level of competition. A young horse or one that is novice to long-distance sports should be conditioned diligently over 4 - 6 months before attempting even a slow 50-mile training ride. Conditioning for a 50-mile event should include occasional training rides of 20 - 30 miles. It is not uncommon for a horse to be put to the task of a 50 mile mountain ride, never having done more than 7 - 10 miles in a training ride. Also, consider that it takes two or three years to build a solid foundation for a 100-mile horse. Before tackling his first

100-miler, a horse should be at least seven years old. Don't shortcut the conditioning process; your horse will pay the price.

General fatigue occurs for a second reason: Over-training and riding a horse into the ground. Once a conditioning base is achieved, it isn't necessary to ride your horse hard for 4 or 5 days a week. Exercising him at some mild stress level *twice* a week is usually sufficient to maintain his current level of condition. A third ride in a week might include a light hack or dressage or cavaletti exercises. As a rule of thumb, keep training mileage to less than 70 or 80 miles within a two-week period. Give your horse several days off from training rides before you go to an event.

A third reason for "tired horse syndrome" results from an excessive frequency in competitions. It is not reasonable to ask a horse to compete in 100-mile events every two weeks. That is also too frequent an expectation for 50-mile events on a regular basis. Better to space out 50-mile events at 3 – 4 week intervals even if ridden slowly. For 100-mile competitions, consider that 6 - 8 weeks between competitions is reasonable, although light training can proceed during the interval between competitions. Your horse's body needs ample down time to heal and recover. A horse that is pushed too much may slowly wear down, looking peaked and strained by the end of the season, provided that his musculoskeletal system survives the assault.

Having said all that, it is true that there are unusual horses that are so efficient in their work that they are able to campaign on a more frequent schedule – These individuals blow away many rules-of-thumb. Ambition is a commendable trait, unless it compromises your horse. Ultimately, every horse will deteriorate from persistent stress of travel and competition unless given sufficient rest time. Just don't get overzealous in your planning or your expectations. Sometimes it's best to sit one out. Be a volunteer, and leave your horse at home.

Keep Things Consistent

Another phenomenon that endurance riders often fall prey to is the need to always "improve" on the details. This is great in theory and in practice, but try not to change your m.o. within two weeks prior to a ride. This includes any changes to shoeing, tack and equipment, and your own riding clothing. If you are considering acupuncture work, chiropractics, or massage therapy for your horse, don't do it just prior to a competition. Many horses have a musculoskeletal ailment as is common to all athletes. Your horse has learned to compensate for both the little and the big problems. If one of these therapists alters your horse's way of going, the horse will need time to accommodate a new physical "pattern." The time to apply alternative therapies is definitely not the day before a race, or even within the week before. It is best to work out the larger adjustments during the non-competitive season.

The same applies to shoeing modifications. Your horse needs time to adjust to a trim, or new angles on his feet, or the weight of different shoes. Think about how

you might feel if you are used to running in your Nikes and suddenly switch to a pair of hiking boots; your muscles and joints will feel the difference. It is best to build up to a shoeing change gradually, and not ask your horse to accommodate the new game plan over the course of 50 or 100 miles.

TRAVEL TO AND ARRIVAL AT THE RIDE SITE

Lead Time

Because many of us have to work to support our riding passion, it is often hard to get away many days before a competition. We find ourselves loading the camper and bundling our horses into the trailer Thursday night or early Friday morning to make it to check-in for a Saturday event. Not only does this add stress to our lives, but it may also affect one's driving when feeling rushed. Driving techniques radically affect how well your horse comes through the hauling experience. Similarly, the complement of your truck and trailer create either a rough or a pleasant ride. And, each horse responds differently to the trailer experience.

It is conceivable that before your horse even takes one step down the trail, he may already be suffering from dehydration and has less than optimal energy reserves. How often do we see someone arrive in camp on Friday afternoon after a six-hour (or more) trailer ride, the horse is whisked through the vet check, then taken on a short ride to check out part of the trail? Did your horse get a chance to relax his weary muscles, or refuel with fluids and energy?

Many horses bounce back right away when they get off the trailer, having eaten well and drunk regularly throughout the haul. A comfortable trailer allows some horses to doze on the road, and they arrive rested and well hydrated. But more commonly, there is stress related to transport. In a perfect world, arriving 2 – 3 days before a 100-mile event gives a horse time to rest, refuel, and adjust to biorhythm changes. When this is not possible, you may need to amend your demands on your horse's performance on ride day, providing him with more opportunities to rest and eat at vet checks and along the trail.

Hay Changes

When hauling long distances to rides, you may need to purchase hay from local sources. Whenever there are dietary changes, your horse's intestinal tract needs time to make adjustments. Different hay sources, and different hay types affect your horse's assimilation of altered nutrition. Typically you won't notice any difference, but certain situations are predisposed to problems. Removing a horse from pasture and feeding dry hay amplifies the effects of dehydration suffered at a ride. It is best to accustom pastured horses to

eating hay at home for several weeks prior to a ride, and continue this practice throughout the season.

Another common mistake is the belief that supplements should be increased in the few days preceding a ride. Adding additional nutraceuticals and vitamins to the diet increases urination and puts an added burden on the intestinal tract. Supplementing with additional grain creates more gas in the bowel. Besides, it is known that a horse experiences rebound hypoglycemia within four hours of eating a large grain meal. Subsequent to ingesting carbohydrates like grain, insulin is released into the bloodstream. This drives sugars into the cells, making it less available in the bloodstream for muscular work.

An intelligent rule of thumb: Keep the diet constant! Don't start experimenting with new and different feeds like rich alfalfa or added grain or pellets just prior to or at an event. If you must use hay bought from local sources, blend it half and half with your horse's regular hay to ease the transition.

Water Intake

Many horses don't drink well when traveling or even after arriving at a ride site. The type of water container you offer your horse may dramatically affect his water intake. Some horses prefer rubber buckets; some prefer plastic buckets, while others drink best from a galvanized bucket. Experiment and give your horse choices.

PRE-RIDE CHECK-IN

Sign-In at the Office

When you arrive at the campsite, get your horse comfortable and then check in with ride management. Pick up your ride packet and make sure all the information about you and your horse is correct. Ask if you will be weighing in before or after the ride, and find out the location of the scales. Make sure you have checked in at the ride office, have paid, and have your rider packet with your rider card and number in hand *before* entering the vetting area.

Timing

From a veterinarian's point of view, it is a more pleasurable experience if you don't wait until the last few minutes of check-in time to make your appearance. Obviously if you just arrived or were delayed by acts of God, everybody understands. But, when you've been hanging around the campsite for hours, waiting for others to vet through while thinking that maybe the vets will be too tired to notice marginal features about your horse, well, that's not a great strategy. Vets get restless and cranky standing around for that last hour with no-one appearing and then just as they're ready to pack up and head for dinner, here you come. Just as you are an

endurance rider riding your endurance horse, endurance vets have loads of stamina, too – Evaluation skills do not suffer by the end of a pre-ride check-in.

Presentation and the Vetting

Warm your horse up well for at least 10 – 15 minutes prior to presentation to the vet. Get his circulation going and warm up his muscles and joints so he will show at his soundest. In high profile rides, you won't get a second chance to bring him back into the vetting area once you are excused.

The trot–out is important to the presentation: Practice your trot-out at home, and train your horse to be obedient. Stay to the side of your horse on the straight line, and concentrate on making your circles round and large enough to maintain your horse at a trot. Don't rush, but also don't take forever to trot your figures. Don't go so far that the vet needs binoculars to see you. Performing this well gives you a chance to show off your horse, and the vets will appreciate your efforts. Other competitors also welcome a steady flow through the vetting area, as delays prevent people from attending to chores and social time.

Don't run off before having a number crayoned onto your horse's butt once you have received the go-ahead from the Vet Staff. This number identifies your horse as part of the event.

THE RIDE MEETING

The main thing to be said about ride meetings is you'd best go! Many times there are changes in the trail, in the hold times at vet checks, all kinds of things of which you should be aware. Management will tell you what you can expect on the trail, obstacles or hazards you may need to negotiate, gates to open and close. This is also the opportunity to set your watch to official ride time.

At the meeting, you will be directed on how you and your horse will be returned to camp should you have the misfortune to be pulled. If your horse is eliminated or you voluntarily decide not to continue on course, you must notify ride management immediately so folks aren't searching for you in the wee hours of the night, thinking you lost in the wilderness. Don't just pull out of camp, and leave. Management must know where you are as long as you are part of the event.

RIDE DAY

Settling Your Nerves

Only the coolest of cool don't suffer from nervous butterflies just before an event. Even riders planning to stay at the back of the pack often experience rattled nerves.

There's a lot of trail out there, and you never know what will unfold. But, if you adhere to a consistent routine from the minute you rise to the start of the race, each time the process gets easier, and you'll be confident that you haven't forgotten anything. Adhere to a protocol in feeding your horse and yourself, dressing, and saddling. Have all your clothing laid out the night before, and all gear stowed in saddlebags. Use familiar equipment that both you and your horse know and find comfortable. Have your water bottles filled and your packs loaded with energy bars, electrolytes for your horse, and don't forget that oral syringe!

If you anticipate spending time on the trail in the dark, check that batteries for your flashlight and headlamp are fresh. Have your reflective gear, like stirrup bars and brow bands, already installed. Pack glow sticks if you like to dangle them from the breast collar to light the way.

Despite a weather forecast of hot and dry, don't believe it, particularly in the western United States. Be ready for the worst, making sure you've got rain gear, or at least a large plastic garbage bag tucked into your cantle pack. It's no fun being wet and cold in the mountains, even in summer. Make sure your horse is okay with you wearing a plastic garbage bag, or you might find yourself with a long, lonely hike to the next vet check.

It's sensible to carry a basic first aid kit on your person in case you do get dumped and separated from your horse. Include basic anti-inflammatory medications for yourself, a couple of flares, a whistle, and a space blanket if you've got room. Carrying a cell phone isn't a bad idea either. You just never know.…….

Saddled Up and Ready to Ride

Amazing, isn't it? All these comments yet the trail hasn't even opened for competition! Before it does, think through your riding strategy. Start with a plan, and be prepared to adjust it as the ride unfolds. Start by warming your horse up for 10 or 15 minutes to get circulation moving in his muscles, and to warm up his tendons and joints. Don't hover around the start line as the confusion there often adds to your tension and affects your horse as well. Your watch should already be set to official ride time, and you only need to show up at the start line a couple of minutes before the send-off.

You're Off and On the Trail!

Hopefully, you won't be bolting with the front of the pack, and you will set off at a reasonable pace. It doesn't hurt to hang back for 15 or 20 minutes so your horse will go out relatively quietly. Sometimes riding with the pack fuels your horse with adrenalin, and he puts out more than he is capable of at the beginning. Adrenalin often masks signs that he is

getting tired until he is *too* tired. As a rider, it is easy to get caught up in the excitement of the group. Another unfortunate situation that often occurs is that some folks who are in Top Ten at local rides and have qualified for the more prestigious rides end up thinking they will be Top Ten all the time. But sometimes those valiant horses are allowed to move along too fast, and they eventually fade.

The First Vet Check

One of the biggest, proven mistakes is thinking that you've got to be in the first group into the first vet check. Statistics of several *Race of Champions* demonstrates some valuable data. Here are the results taken from the first 20 horses into the first check:

1992 ROC (Colorado):	8 of the first 20 into VC 1 did *not* complete = 40 %.
1993 ROC (South Dakota):	6 of the first 20 into VC 1 did *not* complete = 30 %.
1994 ROC (South Dakota):	9 of the first 20 into VC 1 did *not* complete = 45 %.
1995 ROC (Utah):	7 of the first 20 into VC 1 did *not* complete = 35 %.

Based on these statistics, if you are in the top 20 arriving at the first vet check, you have nearly a 40 percent likelihood that your horse will be pulled during the ride. The lesson in this: If you burn up the trail early on, you may well burn up your horse.

Getting Lost

Folks who get lost often think they've got to make up time by pushing a horse faster once the trail is regained. If you loose your cool, you'll have a tendency to over-ride to try to catch up. Only ask your horse to travel at a reasonable speed consistent with your original plan and his abilities.

Listen To Your Horse

Pay attention to subtle signs of fatigue. Don't ignore problems, and don't cook up excuses for your horse's waning performance. Take these indications to heart. If your horse is tiring, then slow down and allow him food, water, and rest breaks along the trail. It is not always necessary to move forward continuously. At vet checks, you need not leave when the out-timer calls your number provided you advise the out-timer that you'll be remaining a little longer to give your horse more time to eat and drink. Be sure to tell the out-timer when you leave so management knows you are back on the trail.

There may be a cut-off time for reaching each vet check. These cut-off times are usually calculated on an average pace of 4.7 mph. This is the *average* speed needed to finish a 100-mile ride in 24 hours, assuming cumulative hold time of three hours. A horse should be up to traveling at that pace; if not, then perhaps it is not adequately prepared for 100 miles of trail. Some parts of a trail allow a faster speed; other parts may dictate a slower pace, depending on the terrain and light. Listen carefully at the ride meeting for information about specific sections of trail that may

be rocky, or free going. Part of a strategy is knowing when you can afford to give your horse extra rest time, and realizing that once he has gained a second wind you will move along more efficiently and with less danger to your horse.

Using a Heart Rate Monitor

A heart rate monitor is an invaluable tool to maintain your horse within an aerobic working heart rate. Be sure you have trained with one at home so you know how to interpret the readings. It is important to also rely on your instincts to tell you when your horse is not doing well. There may be a problem despite working heart rates that remain below 130 - 145 bpm, or reasonable heart rate recoveries. A heart rate monitor does not always shout that a horse is imminently in trouble, either metabolically or due to musculoskeletal concerns.

Don't try to ride off of someone else's heart rate monitor. Your horse is an individual and no two horses respond to exercise demands in exactly the same way. Also, using a heart rate monitor like a tachometer invites injury. If there are rocks along the trail, or the footing becomes deep or treacherous, don't try to go fast enough to keep the working heart rate up around 130 or 140 bpm; slow down and walk if need be!

Don't ask your horse to work long periods at speeds for which he hasn't trained. I have seen competitors canter a good portion of a race, never having done so in training. Or, a horse is cantered downhill for the first time ever. Tendons, ligaments, and joints really take a beating from this lack of preparation, and muscles tire quickly.

Taking Care of Yourself

To keep your sensibilities throughout the ride, remember to drink well, and to eat high-energy foods. Fatigue invites judgment errors, and causes you to lose sensitivity to your horse. Take care of yourself! This seems logical, but along about 60 miles or so, you won't be thinking this clearly. It helps to have a feeding/drinking plan for yourself before starting the ride, and then follow this program all the way through to the finish line.

ENTERING VET CHECKS

The Approach

As you approach each vet check, the objective is to have your horse's heart rate down as quickly as possible so he can pass the pulse criteria immediately. Slow down as you near the check. Pour any remaining water from your bottles over your horse's neck. Dismount, loosen the girth, and lead him in. Often this signals your horse that he is approaching a rest stop and it is time to relax. Without your weight

on top, he doesn't have to expend as much energy carrying you. Loosen the breast collar so he can get his head down comfortably to drink. Then, pull off the tack to improve heat dissipation. In hot weather, head for available shade.

Ideally, you'd like to enter the vet check at a heart rate of 72 bpm or less. Allow your horse to drink if he wants, but don't allow him to eat prior to getting his pulse or going through the vet exam, unless withholding food upsets him. Eating slows his heart rate recovery. Train your horse at home to patiently accept this waiting process so he's not anxious about having food withheld, and so he doesn't pull on you to get to food. You shouldn't let him scratch and itch; he should stand quietly while you go through the cooling down process and while the P&R volunteer counts his heart rate.

Cooling

Soak the front part (neck, chest, head, front legs) of your horse until his chest feels cool to touch. Check the temperature of the water you use to sponge with, as warm water in a hot, humid climate delays heart rate recovery. And, if you over-cool, your horse will chill and the heart rate will stay elevated. If the air temperature is cool or there is a breeze, your horse may do better having his haunches covered with a light rug so muscles don't cool down too quickly and cramp. Muscle cramps lead to pain, and pain leads to a persistently elevated heart rate. On the other hand, if it is warm and the air is still, don't throw a cooler on your horse. Read the weather, and think.

It is best to intermittently walk your horse and sponge. A horse that is allowed to stand too long will have heat continue to climb in the muscles. Lactic acid also won't be flushed out of the muscles by circulation in the standing horse, so when you move your horse abruptly to the P&R or the vet, his heart rate will spike, possibly over criteria.

If your horse is taking more than five or ten minutes to reach criteria, which is usually 60 or 64 bpm, you are probably riding too fast for this horse's level of fitness, or something is wrong metabolically or he is experiencing pain somewhere in his body. Ride statistics have been examined with the finding that a horse that takes more than 14 minutes to reach pulse criteria will not finish the ride. With any delay in recovery, start looking for problems. If there are none, plan to slow your pace considerably on the next leg of trail.

P & R AND THE VETERINARY EXAM

As you enter the check stations, move your horse away from others. Bunching horses together with rear-ends facing butt-to-butt is not only poor horsemanship, but risks someone or some horse getting hurt. Keep your space, and be considerate of other people's space.

Have your ride card ready to present to the P & R person, and to the vet secretary. Once the P & R person records the start of your hold time, check your card to make sure you agree with the time written down. Also check your watch and remember that your horse must "pass" through all veterinary criteria within 30 minutes of the start of your hold time. Normally, you will flow directly from the P & R to the vets, and this gives you the full hold time to attend to your horse and yourself. If you are asked to return to the vet area for a second cardiac recovery index or re-examination of a particular concern, keep track of the time. On occasion, riders wander back about 40 minutes after the start of their hold and may be disqualified for missing the time cut-off that stipulates the horse must be declared “fit to continue” within 30 minutes of arrival in the vet check. Not fun!

When you present to the vet, use the same excellent trot-out procedures you did at the pre-ride check-in; that is, stay to the side of your horse so the vet can evaluate your horse's gait and not yours. Then you won't have to repeat the trot-out and you'll proceed through the check quickly. Watch the traffic flow through vet checks. Keep an eye out during your trot-out so you don't interfere with another rider's presentation to another vet. Your crew persons should be clear of the check area so people moving about don't cross in front of a vet's line of sight.

Communication

Back in the older days of endurance sports, riders tried to get "stuff" past the veterinarians. Fortunately, this antagonistic relationship is mostly a thing of the past. Most riders are quite up-front about their concerns. They realize it is to their advantage to point issues out to the vets, and to approach the vet exam as a team effort in determining what is best for your horse. More often than not, there is a true camaraderie between vets and riders. The point after all, is to do the best by your horse, while having fun during competition. In this light, don't misinterpret veterinary criticism. Keep an open mind, and don't be defensive. Rarely are comments directed personally. Most vets are very concerned, caring individuals, looking out for your horse's welfare. If you don't understand or agree with a veterinary judgment, then ask.

When you read through your ride card, don't get too carried away with a literal interpretation of the grading scores on your horse. The A's, B's, and C's are meant to communicate a relative physiological state to the next veterinarian down the line, or to remind that vet as to what was seen at a prior vet check. Each vet will use the grading scale a little differently, however the scores will be consistent within that person's way of judging. Remember that an A is what is expected of the normal, unstressed horse at rest. Most horses experience some deviation from this "normal" after traveling many miles down the trail. B scores are expected, and certainly do not detract from the capability of a horse as "fit to continue." C scores are less than desirable; a parameter that scores a C indicates that a horse is not coping well with exercise stress. The horse will likely be called back for a re-exam for safety

reasons. There should be progressive recovery over the period of the hold, or the horse may be pulled.

Behavior and angry language that reeks of poor sportsmanship and lack of concern for a horse's welfare makes it appear that the event is more important than the well being of the horse. Not all veterinary decisions are entirely correct all of the time, but each rider that enters an event must play by the rules of the game. Every horse is examined with the same scrutiny, and most every vet is as fair and objective as he or she can be. So, if there is a tendency to run off at the mouth first and never ask questions, then pursue anger management, or have a friend help out. If you see a friend having problems accepting veterinary information, step in to calm the situation.

Many times a veterinarian will discern an impending problem long before a rider might. As rider and owner of a horse, it is easy to loose objectivity, especially as you become more fatigued and hypoglycemic during the course of a ride. Keep your expectations realistic. Practice the art of communication, meaning that everyone should keep an open mind and learn the art of listening; then, it is possible to engage in a sensible discussion. Consider each veterinary exam as a new learning experience. Remember that the well being of your horse is *the* most important issue.

REFUELING AT THE VET CHECKS

Food and Water

Once a horse has passed through criteria and the vet exam, it is time for him to eat and drink. Offer wetted hay and watery mashes to improve water intake. Greedy horses sometimes grab too large a mouthful of hay, so it's best to fluff up the hay or feed directly from a bale to prevent choke. The chances of choking are greater as a horse becomes more dehydrated through the course of a ride and has less saliva present in his mouth.

Offer excellent quality hay that is not too stemmy or too leafy. Alfalfa hay replenishes potassium and calcium losses. If your horse is not used to alfalfa in his diet, only feed a small amount during race time. It is a rich and gaseous kind of feed, and can be overfed. Similarly, don't overdo the amount of grain you offer. This form of carbohydrate stimulates insulin secretion which drives sugars out of the bloodstream into the cells where it is no longer available to fuel muscle contraction.

Electrolytes

Ideally, you have been administering small, but frequent doses of electrolytes along the trail every time your horse takes a good drink. This reduces the lag time for absorption of these salts from the bowel so your horse is being replenished as he

goes. Once in the hold area let your horse eat and drink for a while before you administer more electrolytes. You don't want to do anything that might interfere with his intake of food and water at the hold. Some folks prefer to give the electrolytes just before leaving the check. Practice at home and know your horse's preferences. Have the electrolytes prepared in advance in a small container or in film canisters. Mix with applesauce or Maalox to make into a slurry that is easy to paste by mouth.

It is possible to give too much electrolytes. A horse might get a loose stool as a result, or become more dehydrated if not drinking enough water.

BACK ON THE TRAIL

Preparing to Leave

Be tacked up and ready to go at least five minutes before your out time. Both you and your horse should stretch. If you plan to take off at a fast pace, then warm your horse up for five minutes before you hit the trail hard. This is especially true if you had ice boots applied to the legs, as collagen stiffens and the tendons loose their elasticity when cooled down. As you head off towards the next vet check, remember to keep that constant rhythm and pace that allows your horse to work efficiently. Speeding up and slowing down at random intervals exhausts valuable energy reserves.

Riding Along the Trail

Practice good horsemanship throughout a ride. Be courteous to other riders by letting them know if you are coming alongside to pass. Only pass if there is sufficient room to get by without endangering yours or another's horse by pushing them off the trail. If you are in front of a group of riders, use hand signals to communicate if you need to slow down suddenly due to rocks or trail hazards. Nothing is more important than safety and courtesy to others. This may be a horse race, but a win or a completion should not be at the expense of horses or riders.

The Last Leg

As you leave the last vet check and head towards the Finish, don't be tempted to over-ride the last miles, especially if you are not competing for Top Ten. I have seen many a horse burned up on the last few miles, only to be sadly pulled at the Finish. The criterion of "Sound at the Trot" at the Finish was established to prevent people from blowing their horses out in a crazy race in the last miles. One such example still haunts me -- I remember one horse that was pretty tired, and the rider was cautioned to go easy in the last stretch. Unfortunately, she got swept up in the grand finale, raced for the line, and her horse broke its leg. Such tragedies don't happen very often, but they stick in everyone's brain for many years. What is worth noting is that it is hard to remember who won what race, when. So, at every mile of

the trail, measure whether a placing is worth the risk. Most of the time, those horses that are pushed hard at the last do make it across the Finish Line just fine, and they receive a completion with no problem, but boy, are they tired.

POST-RIDE CARE

Monitoring Metabolics

Your job is far from over once you cross the Finish Line. There is still a lot to do to take care of your super athlete. In every case, post-ride care should be addressed with diligence; allow for adequate rest time following a competition. Throughout the next several days, you want to carefully monitor your horse's heart rate, capillary refill time, attitude, appetite, water intake, and bowel movements. The heart rate recovery gives you a check on hydration, level of exhaustion, or pain. In judging Best Condition horses the day after a tough ride, it has been interesting to note that the more tired horses breathe faster, with an accelerated respiratory rate. This is another parameter every rider should track during the post-ride period. Sometimes, the rapid breathing is a result of an endotoxin flush due to bowel stagnation and overgrowth of gut bacteria.

Offer your horse soupy gruels with electrolytes. Free choice grass hay should be available, as much as he wants to eat. Often as I peruse the trailers at the end of a ride, I see horses that are out of hay, and more importantly, out of water! Make sure multiple buckets of water are available at all times. Leave a couple of full buckets near where your horse is parked so roving veterinarians can top off the water in the wee hours of the night if you happen to be sleeping. But, don't rely on other people to keep your horse well watered.

Minimizing Soreness

Your goal in managing your horse immediately after you dismount is to minimize inflammation as much as possible and to keep your horse as comfortable as possible. Standing still beside the trailer after hard exercise causes tired muscles to tighten. You can minimize his stiffness and muscle soreness by periodically hand-walking him around the campsite. This keeps you loose and supple, as well. Massage the big muscle groups over his haunches and shoulders to soften the muscles and encourage circulation. Carefully do leg stretches to maintain range-of-motion through the joints and ligaments. Clean dirt and sweat from your horse's coat, including his legs. Check girth, saddle, and bit areas for chafing. Apply Desitin^{R} or antibacterial salve to keep abraded skin from drying and hurting.

Icing legs after a tough workout reduces the inflammatory response, and keeps the puffs and swellings to a minimum. A tired horse is likely to chill easily, so don't just slap on those ice boots and leave them. Put them on and off at about 20-minute

intervals, or massage the legs with ice cubes. After icing the legs, apply standing bandages to continue support of the tissues and further prevent lower leg swelling.

Medications

Once a race is finished and you have received your completion, unless you are showing for Best Condition, many people think they can now give medications to their horses. A word of caution: Although non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs like phenylbutazone or Banamine^{R} are effective to combat inflammation, swelling, and muscle soreness, *don't give any of these drugs until at least 8 hours post-ride.* These drugs are toxic to the kidneys in a dehydrated horse, and can also elicit gastric ulcers. Your horse needs to be allowed sufficient time to hydrate before receiving these anti-inflammatory products. If you rode your horse intelligently and pay careful attention to post-ride management, you shouldn't need to rely on such anti-inflammatory medications. Because joints take a tremendous punishment over the course of 50 or 100 competitive miles, it might benefit your horse to receive an intramuscular dose of Adequan^{R} to minimize inflammatory enzymes within the joints. Allow your horse to relax and refuel for some hours before you give the Adequan^{R}.

Returning Home

Just as your trailer ride to the ride site may slightly compromise your horse in his hydration and create muscle fatigue, consider that you need to allow him sufficient rest time and hydration before hauling for home. This is especially true if you anticipate many hours or days of driving. Your horse just put forth a Herculean effort, and he is probably bushed. Don't be too hasty in packing up camp and leaving until you are certain he is okay.

At Home

We have now come full circle. Give your horse sufficient healing time after a ride. A general rule of thumb: Allow 1 day of rest for every 10 miles of trail. Pasture turnout is best, but if that is not possible, you may want to lightly ride or pony your horse for 20 - 30 minutes each day to loosen him up so he's not stiffening up by standing in a small paddock.

IN CONCLUSION

Not a single person is exempt from making mistakes. Mistakes are human; the trick is to not repeat them twice. Hopefully, as you read through this you gleaned some valuable tidbits of what to do and what not to do to bring your horse through an event safe and sound. It's the details that allow your horse to excel!

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