

Care of the Rider During Endurance Events

By Linda Tanian

A lot of articles have been written about the care of our horses during an endurance ride but there is considerably less written about rider care. Many of us will lavish every attention on our horses to ensure they have adequate feed and water during training and at endurance rides but then pay no heed whatsoever to our own state of well-being.

It is just as important to make sure that as a rider you have plenty to eat and drink. If insufficient fuel and fluid is consumed it can affect our judgement and we may make mistakes or become confused during the course of the event. The endurance rider is just as much an athlete as the endurance horse is and it is our responsibility to ensure that we are fit enough to compete at a high intensity for a sustained period of time.

Our horses are looked after by strappers, riders and vets to ensure that they are metabolically and physically capable of doing the next leg. Not so the rider! The rider is the only one responsible for ensuring they are 'fit to continue'. It is up to the rider to maintain their levels of hydration and ensure they consume enough food to provide the requisite amount of energy to meet the exercise requirements of the sport. Appropriate intake levels of vitamins and minerals as well as electrolytes are also essential practices to ensure we can manage the physical demand.

Each of us riders has a body of differing ability and conformation and it is up to us to ensure that we achieve the maximum potential. The goal is to prepare ourselves for many consecutive hours of maximum stress while maintaining a clear head and a sound body. We need to ensure that we can make the correct decisions while following the track marking, looking out for hazards such as low branches and helping our horse as much as possible by being a light and considerate rider. When the horse is tired the rider needs to make every effort to ride in a manner that reduces the load instead of adding to the load.

Excessive rider weight places more stress on both the rider and the horse, limiting the rider's athletic abilities. Riders carrying extra weight fatigue quicker than riders who are at their optimal body weight. Lack of appropriate training, both ridden and non-ridden, will also impair the ability of the rider and lead to early fatigue and conditions such as back and muscle strain. Undertaking additional exercise, such as cycling, walking or running, helps improve the rider's fitness levels and contributes to an increased ability to go the distance.

It is important for the rider to get plenty of sleep as drowsiness quickly erodes our ability to make correct decisions and contributes to the early onset of fatigue. It is sometimes difficult for a rider to get adequate sleep at a ride due to nervousness or anxiety and a quick nap during the afternoon prior to the ride may help achieve the requisite amount of sleep. Quick naps during legs are also very beneficial, especially in the longer rides.

Hydration is very important and an adequate level of fluids is the best way to delay the onset of fatigue. Riders should drink water or electrolyte replacement fluid as often as possible throughout a ride. For some people it is sufficient to drink in between legs while other riders carry fluids with them on the ride. This can be achieved via the use of a 'camelbak' or water bottles carried on the rider or saddle. Avoidance of alcohol on the day prior to the ride will help maintain adequate hydration levels.

Drink as much as possible in the days leading up to the ride and throughout the actual event. If you become thirsty you are already dehydrated so you need to drink before you get thirsty.

Climactic conditions should also be taken into account when planning your ride. Hot conditions can lead to conditions like heat stroke and heat exhaustion. The rider should ensure they carry enough fluids to avoid dehydration and ensure adequate electrolyte replacement. The rider should also be acclimatized to activity in hot conditions.

Cold and wet conditions can lead to hyperthermia and the rider should ensure they have sufficient layers to maintain warmth and remain as dry as possible.

In all situations it is the rider's responsibility to ensure that they have prepared themselves adequately for the likely conditions they are going to encounter during the ride. There is no mandatory requirement for ride organisers to provide fluids and food during a ride so the rider should manage this aspect to meet their own requirements. Use the training done at home to test out what works for you as a rider in terms of the fluids and sustenance required. Don't leave it until the day of the ride to work out that you can't stomach the thought of eating the chocolate bar you've packed in your bum bag and you'd rather have something sweet!