

S * C * A * T * E * R

SUNSHINE COAST AREA TRAIL & ENDURANCE RIDERS INC.



COMPETITIVE
TRAIL RIDING

HOW TO ENJOY THE SPORT

HOW TO ENJOY COMPETITIVE TRAIL RIDING

SELECTION OF THE RIGHT HORSE

The horse you already have might very well be the right one. Often the family or backyard horse is a potential champion – the key to success is not the price paid, but the care and effort you put in.

If you don't have a horse, however, and want to choose one, consider the following suggestions:-
First, to start competing, a horse must be at least 3 years old. The age limits have been chosen by experienced veterinarians so that horses will not be injured by working when they are too young to withstand long distances.

In looking at a prospective trail horse, pay special attention to the legs. They should be straight and with adequate hoof sizing. Next, a horse with a lightly built body will have an advantage over the heavily built horse because it can cool down more rapidly.

Temperament is important too. The horse should be reasonably well mannered or at least potentially responsive. It should be willing to go when asked or even enjoy competing but still be able to settle down to take advantage of rest periods. The latter will come with experience. Mainly the horse should be one you like or could come to enjoy since you will spend a lot of time together.

TRAINING AND CONDITIONING

After you gain experience at CTRs you will develop a workout programme that best suits you and your horse. Until then, this discussion can serve as a guide. It is based on the assumption that your horse is trained in the basics and obedient to a degree.

Both training and conditioning should be part of the programme. Training aims at teaching the horse not only to obey commands, but also how to handle rough terrain and obstacles such as steep climbs, rocky descents, deep creeks, fallen limbs or logs etc.

Conditioning toughens the horse and builds stamina by improvement in muscles, heart, lungs, tendons, ligaments, skin, feet, etc. In the peak of condition, the horse will not tire readily. Its breathing will not be as rapid as when it was 'soft' nor will its heart have to pump as fast. Also, when it is trained, it will handle itself better and waste less energy through inexperience and nervousness. Most mature horses can be brought to an adequate level of condition within a couple of months. Longer is better, but much less might be sufficient for a one day ride.

Look at your conditioning and training programme with a long-term view in mind even if your first ride is less than a month away. Initially, a non-stop workout of one-and-a-half-hours to two-hours per day, 3 or 4 days per week would be a reasonable programme. When your horse reaches a reasonable level of fitness, you will be able to maintain this level by working your horse one or two times per week.

Walk the climbs and descents and trot only on good level ground. At the same time, your workouts should be learning experiences. Seek out difficulties that are challenging but safe – go up and down banks, pick your way through rocky creek beds and over logs and ride into dead end spots and back out. Especially remember that horses respond best to praise, not punishment. Reward with praise and pats when the performance is improving. Practice mounting several times during your workout - this is the first challenge of most CTRs. Improving your own strength and flexibility will help you mount and ride better.

Learn now to take your horse's pulse and respiration. They are a guide to the animal's tiredness.

The time the horse requires to recover to accepted heart rate criteria is an accurate measure of condition. This recovery period will decrease substantially as your horse increases its fitness level.

TACK AND EQUIPMENT

CTR Rules state that a saddle and a bridle that afford good control without harming the horse must be used. This gives riders lots of latitude in the choice of equipment.

Improper fit and adjustment of tack, especially of the saddle, can cause galls and soreness through pressure and abrasion. Although saddle pads can help by cushioning, they rarely make up for a bad fit. A crupper and breastplate can be used for keeping the saddle in place on hills.

Any bridle that affords good control without harming the horse is suitable. Again, adjustment and fit are important.

TACK AND EQUIPMENT cont.

Whips and spurs are not permitted.

An approved safety helmet must be worn by all competitors.

HORSE HEALTH JUDGING

The Horse Health (HH) Judges are competent horse people whose task it is to determine the welfare and soundness of any horse to continue.

HH checks take place before and after the ride and sometimes during. A horse is not considered to have completed until it has passed the final HH check.

HH Judges use a variety of criteria in order to judge the condition and soundness of a horse.

These include:-

Pulse – the horse's pulse must return to 65 beats per minute or less in 30 minutes during, or at the conclusion of the ride. Any horse that does not recover to 65 beats per minute may be excessively stressed and should be carefully evaluated by the rider and the HH Judge.

Respiration – can be a measure of fatigue but is also an indicator of body heat transfer. High respiration would be a problem if it were higher than the heart rate. This would also give rise to concern for the horse's fitness to continue.

If your horse's pulse or respiration remains elevated, spend more time cooling him/her by sponging water over the neck and legs.

Dehydration or water loss through sweating, panting, urine or faeces is a major problem to trail horses. This can be determined by pinching a fold of skin on the horse's neck. Normally this fold will immediately go down when released, but will remain longer, sometimes several seconds, in the dehydrated horse.

Soundness is judged by examination to determine the presence of saddle and girth soreness, sore back muscles, blemishes and wounds.

Riders are then required to run their horse out over a nominated distance to determine lameness. Lame horses are not permitted to continue.

HORSEMANSHIP JUDGING

Care, handling and riding skills are important to the judging but trail safety is crucial at all times. Be alert to anything that might endanger your horse, yourself and others.

All CTR Judges are volunteers and, as individuals, often have different opinions of the importance of the numerous aspects of horsemanship. However, the Judges are given a criteria including what points to allocate for various aspects of each judge point and this helps to maintain uniformity. All the judge points are aimed at providing opportunities for growth and improvement in horsemanship.

Getting used to being judged often takes time and experience in the art of riding a CTR. It's initially somewhat disconcerting, but do the best you can. After a while, you'll realize how supportive the judges are and that their willingness to sit out on track for 4 hours to do the judging is evidence of their passion for CTRs and their desire for you to succeed.

In general, the Judges are looking for calmness, control and horsemanship from the rider and co-operation and willingness from the horse.

Examples of the type of judge points you'll encounter at a CTR, are:-

- Tack, grooming and safety checks
- Mount – either from the on-side or off-side
- Traversing
 - creek/water crossings
 - bridges
 - gullies
 - obstacles including canvas and soft materials
 - terraces
 - bush weaving
 - log step overs including straddling a log and pausing

Examples of the type of judge points you'll encounter at a CTR, are:-

- Opening and Shutting a Gate while mounted
- Uphill ascents
- Downhill descents
- Back Ups - Blind Trails
- Ground Tie
- Hoof Check
- Use of Leg Aids - Turns on the Hind
 - Turns on the Forehand
 - Leg Yielding
 - Side Passing
 - Weaving around markers or obstacles
- Transitions – Walk to Trot to Canter and variations
- Correct canter leads and trotting diagonals
- Catching your horse and putting on its halter or bridle
- In Hand work outs
- Flexing horse's head to either side
- Dismount and re-mount from a log or tree stump
- Riding one handed
- Putting on a coat/raincoat while mounted

Each competitor has one chance to do a Judge Point and is required to complete it in 2 minutes. Don't focus on this time restriction as you'll find that two minutes will allow you not to rush.

Scoring the horse and rider separately makes CTRs a unique sport and even though your horse may have trouble at a judge point, you could score well for your horsemanship.

If you attempt a Judge Point you'll be awarded some points for both rider and horse even if you don't complete the judge point. However, if a rider dismounts in order to negotiate any judge section and leads the horse, i.e. a refusal at a water crossing or a descent which a rider judges is beyond his ability, the rider and the horse forfeit all points for that challenge. If a rider uses anything as a whip or uses excessive force, the rider forfeits the points allocated for the rider but the horse can still be scored.

Waiting for another rider on track causes hold ups at Judge Points and is unfair to other competitors trying to ride to their time schedule. If you wait for another rider after completing your Judge Point you will forfeit all points for that judge point.

PRE-RIDE CHECK

Once a rider has nominated only that person is permitted to care for their mount i.e. grooming, feeding, watering, saddling. Exceptions to this rule, such as assistance for a junior rider or for work performed by a farrier, must be approved in advance by the Ride Director.

Late nominations may be accepted by the Ride Management provided the horse is presented for a pre-ride HH check one hour prior to the ride starting time.

The purpose of the pre-ride check is the recording of any significant blemishes or wounds and for determining the horse's ability to start. In addition to the head-to-foot examination, movement at the trot in-hand is observed.

RIDE BRIEFING

Before each ride, riders are briefed about the trail.

Among the things likely to be discussed are distance, timing, pace, terrain, water availability, trail marking and any special instructions.

THE START OF THE RIDE

Riders should be saddled and ready to present to the In-Hand Presentation Judge, 15 minutes before the rider's scheduled starting time. Riders generally then proceed to the Mount Judge and upon completion of this judge section, riders proceed to the marshalling area where they must remain until instructed to proceed. Riders are generally timed out at 3 minute intervals.

TIMING OF A RIDE

Timing and pacing are important factors in Competitive Trail Riding. An understanding of the time is needed to avoid time penalties.

The Ride Management sets a riding time for each CTR. A 15 minute (5 minutes for Open Riders) grace period is allowed either side of the ideal ride time before penalties are incurred. A rider arriving more than 30 minutes early is disqualified and a rider who is more than 30 minutes late cannot place but remains in contention for a completion prize.

Pulse and respiration stops are not included in riding time. A rider who is delayed at a Pulse and Respiration stop may inform the Ride Secretary at the finish line and if substantiated, a time allowance will be made.

2km, 4km, 6km, 8km, 16km (24km if appropriate) and 3km to home markers on track help riders to gauge their pace. If you find that the ride time is too slow for your horse or you are ahead of schedule, you may stop along the trail, dismount, and wait, but no forward motion is permitted unless the rider is mounted.

An exception to stopping on the trail is within the last 3 km. From the posted '3km to home mark', riders must keep moving forward. No stopping, backing, weaving or leaving the track is allowed. Riders may, however, stop and wait (mounted or dismounted) before passing the 3km mark.

RIDING THE TRAIL

If you have not had the opportunity to warm up your horse before the ride, it would be best to do so by walking the first km or so of the course. Not all horses are willing to do so, however, and they become over anxious. Try to maintain quiet control and you will help restrain some of the behaviour. Staying free of groups or bunches will also serve your purpose.

By avoiding bunching up with other horses, you and your horse will do better primarily because you will be more attentive to each other and to the trail.

Also, if a judge cannot properly observe you and your mount when you are riding, he/she will probably fault you based on fairness to riders who are observable.

Crowding is a matter that has to do with safety. When you can, you must allow at least a couple of horse lengths between you and other horses in front, partly because your closeness affects the other horse and partly to avoid accidents through bucking, shying or in tight locations such as narrow climbs, descents and through challenges.

If your horse is a kicker, you must tie a red ribbon to the tail as a warning to others. Just because your horse has a red ribbon in its tail, it does not negate your responsibility. It is your horse that is a potential danger, so keep it in mind – don't let situations arise where another competitor or their horse could get hurt.

Whenever you need to stop on the trail to rest or adjust gear, move well off to the side so you don't block anyone's progress. Remember that riders must be mounted in order to proceed in a forward direction unless specifically instructed by a Judge or Official.

Staying on course simplifies life on the trail. Being familiar with a map, if provided, is just as important as staying alert to markings. The course is marked by arrows, ribbons and blockers and sometimes lines on the ground. If you think you are off course, check the ground for hoof prints. If unsure, ride back to where you last saw a marker and proceed from that point.

When you come to water, offer it to your horse. The quantity you allow should depend on your horse's condition. If your horse is overheated, offer small amounts at a time. You could use this water stop to strap your horse. If your horse is in good condition let him drink his fill.

PULSE AND RESPIRATION STOPS

Pulse and respiration may be taken at given points on the trail.

If you see a P & R team ahead on the trail, do not hold back, but proceed directly to them. Dismount and stand near the horse's head as the steward records your horse's P & R. If your horse's pulse is 65 beats or less and respiration is at an acceptable level you will be free to continue. If not, you have a 10-minute hold period to allow the P & R to recover.

After an interval, the steward will again take readings. If recovery is still not attained, a further hold period of 10 minutes occurs and if recovery is still not evident, a final 10-minute hold time occurs. After a total hold time of 30 minutes, a horse is disqualified. This would be an indication of stress, insufficient conditioning, lameness or other

factors which affect a horse's recovery. Whatever the case, there is a problem and the horse will not be permitted to continue.

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POST RIDE AND FINAL CHECKS

The final Horse Health check is similar to the pre-ride inspection. It is scheduled a half-hour after crossing the finish line.

Horses are taken to the HH Judge in the order they finished. After strapping your horse, walk your horse slowly during the waiting period to keep it limber.

The final check is crucial to the judging because it is a major test of any soundness problem. If your horse is judged sound, the judging is complete, and at this point your riding number should be returned however all riders are still under the control the ride committee until they are in receipt of their scorecard.

AWARDS AND SCORECARDS

As soon as the Ride Secretary completes the scores and places, riders are called for the award presentation.

At the presentation, the winners and place getters are announced and completion awards made. All riders who complete the event receive a completion prize and a scorecard and riders are considered to have completed the event and are free to leave the ride base.

Master sheets which record total points at each ride are maintained and, as one of the benefits of being a SCATER member, trophies are awarded annually to the riders with the highest points.

CONCLUSION

While any competitive event involves some pressure and competitiveness, aim to have fun while improving your riding skills and knowledge.

Ride Officials are always available to help you. Good luck and enjoy the experience.