

Endurance Riding

What is Endurance Riding?

Endurance riding is defined by the American Endurance Ride Conference as ‘An athletic event with the same horse and rider covering a measured course within a specified maximum time’.

Endurance rides are races, which vary in distance between 80 and 160 km and are covered in a single day. In Australia, there are now regular rides of 80, 100 and 120 km held on nearly every weekend of the year. In addition, there are several two-day rides of over 200 km, and marathons of 4-5 days, covering between 320-400 km. The most famous of these is the Far-A-Way 4-day Easter ride of 320 km at Kenilworth in Queensland, and the Shahzada 5-day ride of 400 km held around the village of St Albans in the MacDonald Ranges just North of Sydney.

The minimum distance for an affiliated endurance ride is 80 km. Most endurance rides start in the early hours of the morning whilst it is still dark, in order to allow the horses to cover some of the distance in the cooler hours of the day. (The prevention of ‘overheating’ and dehydration are major priorities for any horse competing in an endurance race). Rides are split into several sections, and the maximum distance that any one section can be is 50 km.

Normally an 80 km ride will be split into two 40 km legs, but due to the ride base location, it is often necessary to make one section longer than the other to make up the distance. Rides in excess of 80 km are usually made up of three legs, and 160 km rides have a minimum of four legs.

The horse with the fastest time is the winner providing the horse meets the ‘fit to continue’ criteria as determined by a veterinarian. The horses are also monitored by veterinarians throughout the ride at predetermined checkpoints and will be withdrawn from the ride if judged unsound or metabolically unfit. Each ride has mandatory rests or ‘holds’ for the horses throughout the ride. The vetting procedures in Australia are as strict as anywhere in the world with the welfare of the competing horse always being the prime concern. The ‘End of Ride’ veterinary examination commences 30 minutes after horse and rider cross the finish line. As stated, in order for a rider and horse to successfully complete a ride the horse must be judged by the vet to be ‘fit to continue’. Horses judged ‘fit to continue’ at the end of any ride must:

- Have a heart rate of 60 bpm or less
- Be metabolically stable and not be exhausted
- Be capable of being ridden further
- Be in a good welfare state
- Be sound, that is, not lame

The Athletes

The primary rule in endurance riding is that no horse is eligible to start in an endurance ride until it is a minimum of 5 years old, with a full mouth and all teeth in wear.

Prior to becoming an Endurance horse, the horse is first known as a Novice horse. A horse is considered to be a Novice horse for a minimum period of 90 days – the 90-day period commences from the date the horse is first entered in an affiliated ride (an affiliated ride is a minimum distance of 80 km) – and until it has successfully completed a minimum of three rides (of 80-120 km) to accumulate 240 successful km's. During that minimum 90-day period, a Novice horse may only enter a maximum of four affiliated rides. However, a rider may take any length of time to complete the Novice stage. Once the Novice horse has successfully accumulated 240 km's in affiliated rides, it is known as an Endurance horse.

It seems that successful endurance horses come in many shapes, sizes and breeds but the most popular, by far, is the Arabian breed and its derivatives. The Arabians, generally show an ability to travel at moderate speeds for many hours without harming themselves. In addition, they are known to have excellent respiratory and circulatory systems, hard well-shaped hooves and bone and an ability to hold their 'condition' on relatively small amounts of food.

Choosing the right athlete and administering a good training program are imperative, as endurance riding is about durability. Collected information from the American Endurance Ride Conference to assess completion rates from competition, showed that out of nearly 10,000 annual starts over 80 and 160 km, completion rates were about 80 and 70% respectively. Development of lameness was the main reason horses failed to finish (53%), with metabolic (18%) and other (29%) problems responsible for failure in the remainder of horses.

Endurance riding is a challenging athletic endeavor. Understanding the demands of an endurance ride are essential in planning the correct preparation for your horse. Following articles will address some of these competition demands with suggestions on how you might use the information in your training program.

Reference and Additional Reading

Staring Out in Endurance. Australian Country Style 1995