

VETERINARY PRE RIDE INFORMATION *by David Nicholson, DVM*

Having the opportunity to work a great number of rides every year, I am well aware that rider's attention spans are at an all time low by the time that the veterinarian starts to speak. Hopefully by putting a few words on paper I will be able to convey some pertinent information without having to bore those of you who I see repeatedly throughout the season.

First and foremost, everyone needs to recognize that the responsibility for the safety and well being of the horse rests with the rider, not with the veterinarians. Everyone here has presumably spent a great deal of time in preparing and conditioning for this ride. While you were on your training rides you should have felt a constant concern for the welfare of your mount and a realization that you alone were responsible for the horse. Unfortunately many people enter a ride and feel that now it is the ride veterinarians who are responsible for their horses. You are the one who is most familiar with your horse and are, or should be, aware of all of its idiosyncrasies. You will be the first to see and feel those subtle changes that could signal the onset of a problem. It has been said that endurance riding is a team sport. Indeed it is. I propose that the horse and rider team should include a veterinarian. It is imperative that you make the veterinarians aware of the subtle little changes that occur during a ride so that they can help you to evaluate your horse's true condition. At least on the rides that I am responsible for, the veterinarians are here to help you, not to be the ride policemen. Use the ride veterinarians as you would your team veterinarian on an FEI ride and your horse will be the better for it.

When presenting your horse for the pre ride check in, and best condition, please be ready. This means that you should have the blanket off and have the horse's attention. You should pay attention to what your horse is doing. It is your responsibility to see that your horse does not injure the veterinarian, innocent bystanders, or other horses. For those of you who have not vetted a horse with me, you will probably notice that the pre ride check in is somewhat abbreviated from others that you have experienced. I work under the premise that we are just going to ride them, not buy them. A pre purchase exam is unnecessary for a pre ride check in. Is it possible to slip something by us on a quick pre ride check? Of course it is, but who is responsible for seeing that your horse is ready to go on a ride? The obvious answer is the rider. If the rider is unable or unwilling to take that responsibility, they need to choose another sport. Experienced riders are usually appreciative of the shorter lines that result from these abbreviated checks. The main thing we are looking for during the pre ride check is that we have a basically sound horse that looks to be in good enough condition to cover the required distance without any problems. Most horses will receive an ok as the only comment if they are free to start the ride. If you are new to the sport, feel free to ask questions and point out anything that you feel that we should note. We will be happy to spend as much time with you as necessary, if there is a long line at the time we check your horse you might want to bring it back later when we can spend more time with you.

When you arrive at a vet check your rest time will start when your horse meets criteria. For the purpose of timing, we usually depend upon the pulse alone as long as the respiration is of a generally normal character. Horses that are in respiratory distress will be evaluated by the veterinarian on duty. We prefer to see the horses after they have been in for at least a half an hour. Experience has shown that horses who check in early are often neglected for the remainder of the stop and are often showing signs of myositis (Myositis is an inflammation or swelling of the voluntary (skeletal) muscles, often caused by injury, infection, or autoimmune disease) when the rest period is over. There are rare instances where we will take a quick look at a horse when it arrives at a check so that we can compare it with the resting state. Abuse of this courtesy check will probably have a negative effect on your cause. The first and foremost thing we look at is the general state of the horse. Far and away, the most important criteria that an experienced ride veterinarian must depend on is the general impression that the horse presents. Most, if not all, of the horses that I have seen that have crashed and required treatment have been at or near "criteria". Horses that are in good condition and are showing light to moderate stress will not be subjected to all of the Examinations that animals showing more severe signs of stress will. The purpose of the veterinary exam is for the veterinarian and the rider to make a decision for the well being of the horse as to whether or not to continue, or how to continue in marginal cases. It is important that the rider enter into this joint decision making process. By working together we should be able to do the right thing. We recognize that many of the old campaigners will suffer from varying degrees of pathology (something abnormal: a : the structural and functional deviations from the normal) that may affect its way of going. I place more emphasis on the pathology behind the lameness than I do on the degree of lameness. I have little problem with slight deviations in gait with an old arthritis, while I find a slight degree of Lameness to be of great concern if it originates from a tendon or ligament in a young horse. We will not spend as much time on horses with a bright eye, that appear to be having a good time and are moving freely, as we will horses that

are obviously showing more signs of stress. All of the standard criteria that you are familiar with have their place, but to use them on all horses at every check is counterproductive.

Now is a good time to discuss the topic of gut sounds. Many years ago it was considered good horsemanship on NATRC rides to check your horses gut sounds prior to offering feed. The premise was that the digestive musculature was some of the first to cease functioning under stress and that to overload the digestive system with food before the muscles had recovered was an invitation for a problem. Somehow over the years some people have come to the conclusion that a decrease in gut sounds is a grave prognostic sign. I have not found this to be the case. The quality of the gut sounds is of far more importance than the mere presence or absence of them. I am not at all alarmed at an otherwise normal horse with little or no gut sounds. What does concern me, however, is that I constantly hear from riders who feel that the cure for a lack of gut sounds is to load the victim up with roughage. To do this in an animal with an impending gastrointestinal problem is to invite disaster. Horses will do just fine with nothing more than water at a rest stop. If in doubt, it is far safer to withhold feed than to engorge a Static GI tract.

At the completion of the ride we will want to take a quick look at your horse to make sure that it meets the finishing criteria. At this point I am happy to take a look at lameness when you cross the finish line. Riders who are looking for more feedback are welcome to come back when there isn't a crowd and we will try to evaluate your horse in greater depth. If you have completed in the top ten you are eligible for Best Condition. If you choose to show for BC you should take the time to consider what you are doing. You are basically showing your horse in hand, just like the horse shows so many of you profess to hate. To show for best condition you should do everything possible to make your horse look good. If the animal is poorly groomed, lame and/or exhausted you will have no one but yourself to blame for the low scores. You should note that the guidelines for judging best condition state that a lame horse is not eligible for consideration. You should also be aware that hazing the horse is not allowed. It does not go unnoticed that the horses needing hazing at the finish did not require hazing at the pre ride check in. You should also note that AERC has asked that we use the entire point scale in scoring the veterinary part of the judging. They have also asked that we judge the horses against a hypothetically fresh horse as opposed to considering that the horses have just completed a long ride. This being the case, you should not expect that any horse would be able to receive a score of 9 or 10 under those conditions. I try to use the full scale and will therefore probably be giving lower scores than many of you are used to. Please bear in mind that these scores are relative only to the horses being shown on a given day and are not even relevant to other days on a multi day ride. Remember that you will usually reap what you sow. If you want to do well at BC you should train for it and put out the maximum effort to place your horse in a favorable light. It is unfair to the good horses that are properly presented to try and extrapolate the good out of a presentation from a horse that is reluctant to lead and suffers from a lack of animation. It is equally unfair to try and compare a well groomed horse with one that has a thick layer of mud and sweat caked on its body parts. I often hear from riders who say, "I know I don't have a chance, but I just want the horse to get some experience". That is fine. But let's make it a good experience and put out an effort to do as well as possible. Horses presented in hand should be clean and attentive to what is going on. Stay at the head of the horse and move to the side that the examiner is working on so that you can pull the animal's head towards the examiner in the event that the horse starts to kick. Try to keep the horse standing up with all four feet on the ground and its head up. When asked to trot out, give the horse enough lead that it can move with animation. When trotting out, look forward, not back at the horse. Some forms of lameness are more pronounced when the animal is trotting in a circle, you should try your best to make the horse's tracks define an imaginary circle on the ground. Make every attempt to present your horse and yourself in the most favorable light possible.

Finally, in the event that your horse requires treatment you should expect to be charged for the professional services rendered. Although we realize that many of you don't carry money on the ride it is your responsibility to look up the treatment veterinarian before the end of the ride and make a full settlement. Ride management has paid for veterinary services in relation to determining the condition of the equine contestants, not to treat them. You should be aware that my charges are usually significantly lower if I don't have to go looking for you. I hope that this article will help you to better understand the vetting process. By developing a good relationship between the riders and the veterinarians we should all be able to have a better time.

Good Luck and great riding.

David Nicholson, DVM, courtesy of www.Endurance.net