

Think 'paid dues' to assess your equine

By Bruce Weary DC

The mere challenge of riding a horse 25, 50, 75 or 100 miles in a day is often what attracts many riders to our sport.

Far and away, most horses reach the finish line in good shape, with very few instances of injury or metabolic crises. However, the physical demands from this level of activity can overwhelm a horse, if he is ridden beyond his level of fitness and capability, or if he simply isn't having a good day and exercise becomes a stressor.

Fortunately, the horse will communicate to us the many signs that he is tiring and possibly becoming at risk of exhaustion or other metabolic trouble, if we know what to look for. There are a couple of popular mnemonics that can help prompt us to notice how our horse seems to be functioning:

-- ADR simply means "Ain't Doin' Right," and refers to an overall impression of a horse that appears tired, lackluster, and not reflecting the signs of health and well-being.

-- EDPP is a little more specific, and is an abbreviation for "Eating, Drinking, Pooping, and Peeing," which draws our attention to whether these four primary bodily functions seem to be occurring to degrees that can help assure us the horse is metabolically sound.

These simple observations are usually made when the horse is at rest, either in a vet check or back at the trailer after a ride, possibly because abnormalities are easier to notice when the horse is idle, and without all the distractions of moving along the trail in competition.

But some horses can get in trouble out on the trail, where it can be more difficult to discern early on that a horse may be having difficulty, especially if our own "race brain" has taken over. Many of us have experienced the regret of ignoring possible signs of trouble in our horse, only to have them worsen later on and possibly require veterinary treatment.

The most important checklist

The purpose of this article is to expand the list of "hints" a horse can give us that he may not be doing well, and that we should slow down and possibly seek veterinary attention.

1. Pooping. I list this one first because the horse can live or die depending on whether he has proper gut motility. The intestinal tract keeps food moving along, and is responsible for the exchange of fluids, energy, electrolytes and nutrients that not only make exercise possible but keep the horse alive.

Notice how often your horse is defecating on the trail, the volume and consistency—is it solid or runny? If mucous is visible, dehydration is indicated. Does he strain unusually hard to defecate? Make note of anything other than what is normal for your horse.

It's been said: "No hoof, no horse." It may be more true to say, "No guts, no horse."

2. Appetite. It may be true that a horse is largely running on what he ate two days prior to the ride, but he still needs gut fill in order to fuel himself during the ride and to keep his intestinal tract rolling along. Pay attention to your horse's interest in eating both at the vet checks and out on the trail.

If he seems disinterested in food at a time when he should be hungry, keep an eye on him, check his gut sounds, and consider having a vet take a look-see. On the trail, if he's straining to grab a bit of grass, let him eat for five to 10 minutes. It will be a good investment of time to keep him doing well, and could make a big difference in the ride for both of you.

3. Impulsion. As a horse begins to tire, his impulsion may decrease. As fatigue sets in, there may be less spring in his step, or he may have to be increasingly prompted to move forward. Sometimes this can mean the horse has hit a low point from which he will recover and pick up again later, but if there appears to be a downward spiral in the horse's interest in getting down the trail, slow up and give him a chance to recover.

If a horse refuses to do anything but walk, or simply stops and won't move forward, it's time to get help. If he becomes increasingly stumbly, he may be fatiguing—another indication to slow down, let him recover, and possibly avoid an orthopedic injury.

4. Drinking. The need for proper hydration for all horses is difficult to overstate. Water is necessary to keep all bodily functions going. The nervous system, cooling, gut motility and heart rate, to name a few, all rely heavily on proper hydration.

It takes time to learn a horse's drinking habits, and, if need be, to teach him new ones. Many of us have worried over a horse that won't take his first drink for 20 or 30 miles, and heaven is defined as a horse that will drink from any tank, pond or puddle that he comes upon.

Most riders use electrolytes, to some degree, to keep the thirst reflex functioning as well as keep the horse eating and able to continue working. If you're not comfortable with when and how much to safely electrolyte, ask an AERC vet or an experienced rider. They can give you tips on electrolyting that will help keep your horse drinking and wanting to keep moving on down the trail.

5. Desire. Sometimes a horse that clearly hasn't been ridden far enough to be truly fatigued may lose interest in moving down the trail. He may show no interest in tagging along with passing horses, and may need to be prompted frequently to stay in a trot. In the absence of any obvious metabolic distress (reasonable pulse rate, breathing, sweating, temperature to touch) he could be developing intestinal discomfort from some influence other than exercise, possibly indicating an oncoming colic.

AERC records indicate that it sometimes is the horse being ridden slowly and sensibly that can develop metabolic trouble, so the speedsters aren't the only ones who need to pay attention to how their horse is handling the demands of an endurance ride.

6. Urination. While a conditioned endurance horse will, among other things, develop the ability to retain his bodily fluids through more efficient sweating and heat tolerance, he will still need to urinate frequently enough to excrete the waste by-products of exercise.

Lack of adequate urinary frequency, poor volume, dark coloration, and straining to urinate are strong signs of dehydration, and definitely indications to slow down and start working on getting some water into the horse. Under these conditions, putting a trace of electrolytes on the horse's tongue to stimulate drinking may work, but avoid full doses of electrolytes until he drinks a sizable volume of water.

7. Eyes. Julie Suhr places much credibility in what the eye of the horse tells us. Does he have that "1,000-yard stare" borne of fatigue, or is he bright-eyed, interested in his surroundings, and looking for what's over the next hill? To loosely quote Julie, "The horse's eyes can tell you how he's feeling, if he has more to give, when he's done for the day, and what he thinks of you." Enough said.

8. Sweating. A working horse that is overheated and/or dehydrated and/or nearing exhaustion may stop sweating. This can be dangerous as his main cooling mechanism has been shut down, and his internal temperature may continue to climb, causing potential damage to internal organs and even death. This situation requires the horse to stop moving, be placed in shade if possible and cooled with whatever means are available. Such a horse usually benefits from veterinary attention.

These signs are all observable out on the trail, where we spend the most time with the horse on an endurance ride. The first letter of each of these indicators together spell: PAID DUES.

If your horse shows any one or more of these problems during a ride, best to at least slow down, and possibly seek veterinary attention. Tell passing riders your horse may be in trouble, and ask that they send help. Don't be shy about the welfare of your horse. He may have "paid his dues" for the day.

Listen to your horse and your own instincts. If your own "race brain" has taken over, shut it off and ask yourself, "What you would do if this were your best friend's horse?"