

Are Endurance Riders Athletes? By Jerry Zebrack, M.D.

My friends who have no connections with horses believe that an endurance ride is akin to riding an ATV—bouncy, hard on the butt, but not physically taxing. Both have four attachments to the ground and give off a lot of gas. You can tell either one to go, to stop, to wait while you get off and have a snack. (Does this sound familiar?)

I strongly believe that endurance riding is equal to other long-distance sports. My personal poll of individuals who have done multiple sports agree with me. Jackie and Al Beaupre (ultra marathons), Paulette Schneider (marathons) and Ralph LaPera (ultra-long distance cycling) would all agree that running a marathon under equal levels of difficulty and circumstances would be similar to a 50-mile endurance ride or a 100-mile bike race.

The Tevis is certainly equal to a 30-mile ultra marathon or a 200-mile double century bike race. This would be true even if you were riding a top endurance horse. Unfortunately I only have “normal” horses, and all the rides I do seem to be designed to be “challenging.”

What is the point? If endurance riders are athletes, then why don't we treat ourselves as such? At every marathon there are aid stations every few miles with water, sports drinks and encouraging volunteers. Bicycle racers have their aid stations as well; in addition, they carry nourishment with them and consume it constantly.

What to endurance riders do? We eat pre-ride dinners of fatty red meat washed down with beer and wine. We have a quick breakfast of coffee and donuts, and then we are off. We top off the ride with hamburgers, tri-tip and lasagna.

Our horses are well-nourished like the athletes they are. However, riders like me usually wobble around with bloated guts.

Foods are composed of three different components: fat, protein and carbohydrates.

- **Carbohydrates** are the key for muscle energy and are stored in the muscle in a form called glycogen. When needed, glycogen is broken down into simple sugars for immediate muscle power.
- **Protein** is used to build and repair muscles, along with other body structures.
- **Fat** is used to store energy, but is very slow in releasing this energy and thus not very useful during hard physical activity.

It has been shown that choosing complex carbohydrates as at least 50% of all your food for three days before a long ride will allow your sinews to be “topped off” with glycogen for storage, thus giving you the best preparation for the event.

Examples of complex carbohydrates are fruits, brown rice, whole-wheat pasta and vegetables. During the ride, it is optimal to take in a liquid drink that is between 5% and 10% simple carbohydrates (a combination of sucrose, glucose and fructose) with electrolytes.

You can make this yourself, but a sports drink is more convenient to obtain and use. It is best to take five swallows every 15 minutes or at least 20 swallows every hour. This allows your muscles and heart to get a constant stream of energy without depleting every last bit of your sugar storage.

After the event, you need to reload your glycogen storage in your muscles very quickly. Optimally, you should start reloading at 30 minutes. This should be a meal of carbohydrates and protein with very little fat. It may be hard to believe but lowfat chocolate milk fits that bill perfectly (and the Holstein cows of America strongly endorse that concept).

If you would like to cross the finish line looking like the person your horse would be proud of, I would urge you to do the following:

1. Three days before each ride, you need to eat at least 60% of your meals as complex carbohydrates.
2. During a ride, constantly take in fluid, electrolytes and simple carbohydrates.
3. Immediately after the ride, have a meal of complex carbohydrates.
4. Avoid fat like the plague.