

If you ride, thank a ride manager

By Laura Hayes, AERC Vice President

I spent a cold but sunny early winter day at the Rushcreek Ranch last month. Ranch manager Lyle Sherfey drove me around the hundreds of thousands of acres the ranch owns in Nebraska's panhandle region. We looked at possible routes for the Rushcreek Reunion ride that the ranch hosts over Labor Day each year. This season it will be extended to a three-day pioneer ride.

Besides being in awe of the landscape and the ranch with its sand hills and canyons, and forever in love with the amazing horses they produce, I gave thought to the work that it takes to put on a good endurance ride.

Here we were, some 10 months from the ride and the ride manager is studying the trail and thinking hard about where to take the riders that would be most scenic, offer the best footing, and be most convenient to manage.

Thought was given to whether riders prefer loops or away vet checks, whether a horse or rider in trouble on a far loop could be helped by vehicle, and even the number of gopher holes likely to be present. Some special aspects of the landscape are too wonderful to not be included, but it will take careful planning to get to them and back to a vet check.

I don't think Lyle is unique in his planning. Most ride managers go through the same process every year, or at least at some point in their planning. As he pointed out, Rushcreek is fortunate in that their ride is run completely on ranch property and doesn't require landowner permission or special permits.

For some rides, the permits are the biggest hurdle to overcome and must be applied for and approved months ahead. Forgetting to dot an i or cross a t could result in disaster. Having one land manager upset could cancel all plans or cause awkward reroutes. In some areas of the country, land access has been denied entirely on trails that were once available, causing some traditional rides to be retired forever.

Ride managers navigate that maze of detours and still bring us the events to compete in that define our existence as endurance riders. It is said that everyone should manage one ride to realize first-hand the work that is necessary and to fully appreciate the long-range planning and thought that goes into that. It is probably not practical for everyone to experience, but getting a taste of it as a volunteer is important and encouraged.

Seeking out and sincerely thanking the ride manager after a ride is important also. A hand-written note (yes, they still make those) after a particularly well-run ride will go far in promoting the thought of a repeat and just might trigger euphoric recall phenomenon that must set in before they can even think of doing this all again.

Without those members who want to lay out a trail, set up checks, hire control judges, bribe timers and pulse takers into volunteering, arrange meals and fill out reams of paperwork -- I can't even list here all the things that go into managing a ride -- we would be up the creek without our paddle, and there would be no events.

I can assure you that Rushcreek will have a wonderful trail for their ride in September. I know because I've seen the thought that is going into it. Consider putting on a ride and sharing your favorite trail this year. It is not for the faint of heart, but then, neither is endurance! Happy trails.