

Riding & Training Safely

Training for your first AERC rides doesn't just include miles on the trail; here's a blueprint for the other vital part of your training regimen

BY CAROL GROSVENOR

Carol Grosvenor, from the Central Region, wrote an article for the Summer 2012 AERC Extra. She aimed this article at novice endurance riders and anyone riding a green horse. We have so many "Green Beans" joining AERC, we have decided to pull some of Carol's excellent advice into this month's Education Update.

AT MY FIRST 25, I rode out with two other newbies, and we decided to do a delayed start, but even with the delay, we ran into problems, and a lot of those weren't of our own making.



Our horses got very excited, so we needed the late start. We got lost a couple of times before we even got out of camp, we kept running into a few people who were having problems with their horses—spinning, rearing, bucking and general hysteria, and a couple people who were on the ground trying to work out the problems before attempting to get back on.

In the next rides, I saw similar things, including horses that got loose and ran through camp. Riders should take full responsibility for their own actions and those of their horses. We will sometimes push too hard, not push hard enough, get scared or angry, or

simply not know how to handle a situation. We are not born knowing these things, but horse safety and skills can be learned.

Our horses depend on us to make the right decisions on their behalf, and other people do, too. Most of the ideas in this article relate to specific incidents, often learned in the school of hard knocks.

Training Concepts (and Tricks)

I have always felt that training is far more important to your safety than your insurance policy. It actually is your insurance policy. By "training" I don't mean just miles and miles of legging your horse up. Of course, we have to do that to prep for endurance riding, but regular obedience training cannot be left out in the training of a sane and manageable endurance horse—flatwork, obstacles, loading, standing still, standing tied, etc. If you do it well, you may never make a trip to the emergency room.

There are many basic skills that every rider and rider combination should be able to do well before attempting to ride endurance.

Basic Skills Before Competing

One should be able to ride at walk, trot and canter uphill and downhill over uneven terrain with a group of four or five other horses, and also alone. If you're a novice rider, take riding lessons from a reputable trainer who will train you in and out of the arena. If you can find an endurance or eventing trainer, preferably who has been through a rider/training certification program, that person should be a good choice.

Dressage training is also very good experience, but it doesn't use a half-seat

(also known as two-point, jumping seat or huntseat), so it isn't enough. I believe the half-seat is the most effective, efficient, and least-tiring seat for endurance riding. To ride in a half-seat for any length of time, you will have to practice.

Learning the half-seat: You need to know how to post a trot and ride a forward (two-point seat) properly. This is important because it takes weight off your horse's back and lightens his load. It provides for much less concussion on your spine and your horse's back. If you're doing a lot of long rides, and you do not post or ride in a half-seat, you will end up with pain in your lower back. If you always ride in two-point or a half-seat, you can ride pain free for years.

"Two-point" refers to two points of contact with the horse. The two points are your feet. Your buttocks (the third point) do not touch the seat of your saddle, but shouldn't be very far out of the saddle. Think of the fabric



Carol and her Appaloosa mare, Ladybug, practice lunging in open land at the Parris Haynes Equestrian Center in Killeen, Texas. Photo © Chris Hurd.

touching the saddle, but not your weight. Your heels are slightly lower than your toes, and your ear should align vertically with your heel. The angle of your back and hips changes depending on the speed and the terrain. Your head, shoulders, face and eyes are all forward. Don't look down, slump, or roll your shoulders forward.

Negotiating obstacles: You should be able to negotiate obstacles (hills, water, narrow trails, logs, mud, etc.) you may find in the area you will be riding. Talk to the ride manager or others who have done the ride to learn about the terrain.

Spend time familiarizing your horse with terrain, types of obstacles and footing. Spend

V-MAX

EQUINE HEART RATE MONITORS

On Your Wish List?



Garmin® GPS and V-MAX® Adapter Kit



GARMIN

Dealer Locations, YouTube Videos & User Guides available at:
V-MAXEQUINEHEARTRATEMONITORS.COM

time on challenging or scary obstacles such as a wooden bridge, being around cattle and other livestock, creek crossings, and going through many kinds of gates before the competition.

The whole first year a horse is under saddle is an adventure.

Lungeing in open land: Be able to lunge your horse obediently in open land at a walk, trot and canter and have the horse able to willingly stop on the lunge line. Many people start horses in a round pen, but for trail riding and endurance, you need to be able to lunge in open land so that you can calm a horse down before a ride, check for lameness, check his mood, train voice commands, and enhance straightness and obedience. If you can't do this, he's not ready for an endurance ride, so stay home and practice.

Stopping your horse: It is vitally important to be able to stop your horse and have lateral control over him at all gaits. Stopping sounds awfully basic, but it can be very difficult when the horse is highly excited. If you can't stop him on the lunge before you get on, don't get on. Either start out on foot and get on when he calms down, keep lunging until he is stopping, or go home and keep training.

Horses should be ridden in the most forgiving tack as possible, but it is common for the horse who goes perfectly at home in a D-ring snaffle to need a Pelham and a martingale on an endurance ride. Running into someone else to stop your horse doesn't count! As crazy as that sounds, I've seen people do it as their main stopping technique. However, finding riding buddies usually becomes a problem.

Mounting a young horse safely: This may appear as a no-brainer, but a rider is at the most risk while trying to get on the horse and a lot can happen in those few seconds. Mistakes may be not checking and tightening the girth, not using a breastplate, not having assistance and not teaching your horse to stand before you mount and after you're in the saddle.

Training before a ride: Don't worry about your ego! Worry first about your safety and the safety of your friends and the horses. All horses and riders start out green; for everything there is a season. It takes a horse about two years to become reasonably safe, and about four years to become extremely reliable in almost every situation.

The whole first year a horse is under



Ladybug and Carol have mastered downhills through much practice. Photo © Chris Hurd.

saddle is an adventure. It takes a lot of wet saddle blankets. It is far safer and efficient to never make big mistakes or correct any small mistakes immediately.

Riding enough: Green horses need at least three training sessions per week, and at least one session should be all groundwork. The others should include a few minutes of groundwork. I've seen endurance riders train mainly riding very long, hard, fast rides, but I think that causes greener horses to end up being less obedient and stiff.

Mix up some of your trail training with standard arena training—lateral work, turns, disengaging, cavaletti, jumping, obstacles, backing up, working cattle, etc. It makes for a better behaved, less spooky and flexible horse. Even 15 minutes on the lunge line will help reinforce your training and verbal commands.

Disengaging the hindquarters: If a horse begins to buck, bolt, spook or rear, disengaging the hindquarters can save you from a disaster. Practice it until you can do it well. You

will use it to improve your horse's flexibility, not just to reprimand bad behavior.

Discipline: A horse works best if he likes you, but he *must* respect you. He needs to know you aren't mean or angry and you will never lose your patience or your temper, unless he does something terrible, such as bite you. A punishment must always be in keeping with the crime

Controlling the environment: Practice, and practice in a controlled environment, then add more stimuli. This will make a safer and more reliable mount. Initial rides need to be in a supportive environment. Add another horse, a dog, bushes and rocks along the trail, loud noise, cars, etc. slowly and carefully to gain his confidence.

Rougher terrain may make the first trail rides easier: A moderately hilly, rocky and winding trail behind a solid lead horse makes your horse focus on the footing and gives him more to think about. Expect a green horse to be unsure how to negotiate trails. With time, patience and balance, this will improve rapidly.

Horses never forget the lessons of their youth and all the training and time will pay off. Be safe and happy on trails. ■



Call
for your free
catalog

Lightweight Rain Poncho

an ultralight, waterproof,
breathable non-woven
polypropylene material..

And Quiet.

With its own carry pouch.

Green, Blue, Tan

One Size

\$16.95



We test itSo you don't have to

314 Dutch Ravine Ln

Newcastle - CA 95658

(916) 663-9278 inquiries

www.theaustralianconnection.us

aussiconn@yahoo.com

AERC member since 1981 - #2225