

Safety & Etiquette for Endurance & LD Riders

Why safety and etiquette? Too often, as this sport is growing so fast, new riders and even seasoned riders embarrass themselves by not dressing their horses properly or by doing something that makes other riders furious. Often this is simply because they don't understand the unwritten rules and norms of the game we play. Recently, accidents have occurred which could easily have been prevented with some education.

This article is written with the hope that both seasoned riders and novices will end up with a common understanding of both the unwritten rules and the safety issues that will help them enjoy this incredible sport even more than they already do.

There are currently several good books specific to endurance riding but few of them, if any, address the unwritten rules and safety issues of one of the fastest growing equine sports in the world. More often than not it is becoming evident that these things need to be documented. These are rules that, if broken, can make you very unpopular with both other riders as well as ride management.

I try, when I go to a ride, to never become a problem for other riders or for ride management. Remember that you will be seeing the same riders at most of the rides you attend in your region, and "what goes around comes around" was never more true than it is in this sport. I understand that some things are unavoidable and stuff happens, but if you plan ahead and do your homework many of these things might be avoidable.

Etiquette at the ride

There are many things having to do with the ride that can make you unpopular with ride management. I come from a large region where one needs to pre-enter most rides. I understand that this is not always the case. If you have to cancel, let ride management know ahead of time. If you need to make changes in horses or riders, do it ahead of time. This will facilitate the check-in procedure.

When you arrive at base camp, be respectful of space. Don't fence off a huge area when space is limited. If you are saving space for other riders, don't take more than you need. Practice the vet check and the trot out. Watch your horse while in line waiting for the vet check. This is a good time to get you and your horse kicked.

Don't visit, or if you do, don't forget about your horse. If ride management asks you to clean up, be prepared with tools to do it. The use of hay bags not only makes your job easier but also makes for less waste. Be respectful of people camped next to you after dark. If you use a generator, please turn it off by dark.

If you intend to start the ride late, let the number takers know. If you pull from the ride, be sure to let ride management know, especially if you do it someplace other than a vet check. They could spend hours looking for you!



At the ride meeting, don't visit with your friends. Listen to the ride manager. You may have done the ride before, but many have not and need to be able to hear. As a ride manager, I generally write up a description of the trail, and at the ride meeting, I try to point out the dangerous parts of the trail and let riders know about any last-minute changes. I am as guilty as others, as I want to visit with friends I have not perhaps seen for a long time. Try to be respectful of others and helpful to new riders.

MERGING TRAFFIC

Riding the ride

The start of the ride can be the most challenging and dangerous part of the ride. Horses are excited, it is cool, and riders may be nervous. Horses that are very quiet going out for their training rides at home can be quite excited as the riders gather to call out their numbers at the beginning of a ride. While you wait to start, keep your horse away from others. This is also a good time to get you and your horse kicked. Do not tailgate; the horse behind can easily pull off the shoe of the horse in front. It also makes you very unpopular with the rider in front.

If you intend to ride through at a moderate pace, stay toward the back. With green horses it is good to wait until the dust has settled and then start them out slowly. Sometimes my horses do many miles before they even realize this is a competitive sport. It is much easier to speed up later. This way their brains will not get "speed burned." If you are starting late, however, remember that the LD riders may be coming up behind you, and you want your horse to be settled before they reach you. If you start a green horse in front, you can do lots of damage to the horse's psyche. I try to put about 250-300 miles on a green horse before letting them find out about the speed issue.

If you find yourself behind a horse that is traveling slower than you are, politely ask for the trail. Do not tailgate while you are waiting to get by. Generally, I ask approaching riders if they would like to pass. They may say "no" or may ask to pass on the right or left. Be specific so the rider in front knows which way to go. If it is a single-track trail, you may ask the rider in front for the trail at the first opportunity. They should pull over and let you pass. If your horse kicks, please warn passing riders so that they can give you a wide berth.



Narrow trails and cliffs

The important thing on narrow trails with cliffs on one side is to keep moving forward. Stopping causes traffic to back up and can cause horses to fall or jump off the path. If an accident occurs, do not stop to help until you can get to safety, tie your horse and then return to the injured party. If you see a rider stopped on the trail in

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front of you, slow down and ask them if all is OK before you continue. If off their horse, they may need you to wait while they mount. Ask them, as many horses will not stand quietly, particularly at the start of a ride.

Pull off the trail if you need to make a tack adjustment. The best would be to check all tack and equipment before the ride starts so you will not have to stop at the start of the ride.

Getting through gates

Some rides take place on ranches and private property that require gates be opened and closed by the riders. Remember, the rule of the West is to "leave a gate as you find it." If a rider dismounts to open a gate, other riders ride through the gate and wait for the gate person to remount before riding on. Mixing up herds of cattle can cause the land owners grief and riders to lose the use of some beautiful trails. Some rides are fortunate enough to have marshals on the trail to open gates for you and possibly to take numbers. Be sure to call your number loud and clear and to thank them for being there. This is true also if the ride is fortunate enough to have ham radio support.



Water stops and crossings

Ride management will either provide water in the form of tubs or troughs or there will be natural water in the form of lakes, creeks, rivers, ponds or sometimes just puddles created by rain water. Each of these sources has its own rules of etiquette. If troughs are provided, you are not to sponge out of them. Often sponges and buckets will be provided for sponging. Sometimes you may use your scoop to pour water on your horse, but this depends on how precious water is. On our desert rides, this is generally not allowed. It is usually one of the issues discussed at the ride meeting so it is important to be there.



Often a rider is concerned that his horse has not been drinking. If you approach a trough where a horse is drinking, try to let him finish before you let your horse in. Chances are if you let your horse drink before the other is through, he will quit and it may be the first drink that horse has had all day. Be careful that your bit hangers or shanks do not get caught on the sides of the troughs. If your horse is using the container as a rubbing post and not drinking, move out of the way so that others may drink, and then return when they are through.



Natural water can present several hazards in the form of bogs, pipes sticking out, slippery rocks and so forth. Always be alert and cautious when approaching a creek, stream or river. Do not let your horse stand at the edge and drink as there could be people lining up behind you. Try to encourage your steed to move forward or downstream to allow others into the water. Again, if you come up on a horse that is already drinking, let him finish.

Ponds can be boggy and there are times when you must

weigh the benefit of taking a chance with a bog or passing it by and waiting for the next water. These again are things that will be pointed out at the ride meeting or illustrated on the map so that you will know where the next water is located.



Be certain to practice crossing water before you go to a ride with water. If that doesn't happen, get to the ride early so that you can practice before the ride starts. Don't count on your horse to follow another horse through. Often they tend to want to jump the water obstacles which can be dangerous to you, your horse and others. You are probably better off on the horse than off. It is definitely worth traveling to where you can practice prior to the ride. Don't just expect it to happen.

At the vet check

Vet checks can be the cause of much discontent. Remember most of those helping are volunteers and doing their best. At my rides, a rider can be disqualified for being abusive to the help. In most cases, ride managers try to use experienced help, especially for the pulse checks.

If you cannot ride a ride for some reason, volunteer to help. Endurance riders are by far the best help as they understand what is going on and can generally take a pulse a little faster. I often have to depend on crews, or riders who are not riding, to help with my rides. Experienced help can really make a difference to the riders and to the flow of a ride. At the same time helping with a ride is a great place for new riders to see what it is all about. Be patient! At vet checks, be polite and thank the volunteers for their help.



Safety issues

It has become apparent to me that just the way one handles the horse prior to the ride, during the ride during the time at base camp, and on the trail, can prevent many unnecessary accidents. I realized, while teaching an equine science class, that horsemen do many things while working with and around horses to save their lives each day. In the course of riding some 20,000 career miles, I've been the observer of and sometimes the participant in unnecessary accidents. Most of these comments are based on actual incidents.



Tying the horse

Improperly tying the horse is probably responsible for more injuries than any other one thing. Even if they are properly tied, they can still get into trouble. If horses are not eating, tie them short. Or better yet, arrange for them to eat while tied short. While saddling or grooming either tie them short or not at all. If they need to eat and drink from the ground, tie them just long enough to barely reach the ground. Be sure there is nothing on which they could get the rope caught as horses

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will happily discover some way to injure themselves.

I generally try to tie hay bags and buckets high and when saddling and bridling, I untie the horse and place the rope over my arm or have someone hold the horse. This is especially true where green horses are concerned. I realize that many horse trainers may not agree; however, it may prevent a pull back, broken halter or snap while at ride camp.

Getting saddled

Several accidents occurred last year because saddles slipped. Personally, I use a breast collar and crupper at all times, whether riding in the hills or the flats. I leave both on my saddle so they are always there. When tightening the girth, do it slowly and gently. Leave it loose at first, but secure enough that the saddle will not fall if the horse takes off or spooks. While you are doing other things to get ready, gradually tighten the girth and before mounting, tighten it again.

It's a good idea to have someone hold the horse while you mount, as horses can be excitable at the start of a ride. When mounted, bend the horse in each direction, making sure that they are responsive to your aids and do not let them take off until you are ready. Once you have started, frequently check your girth. A good rule of thumb is not to do anything at a

ride that you have not tried at home first. This can apply to both your horse's clothing and your own. Anything new can cause irritation, both to your horse and to yourself.

Summary

I feel that I have barely touched the surface here and am sure that as time goes on more issues will rear their ugly heads. If you have other ideas that could be added to this, I would love to hear from you (e-mail me at FireMtArabians@aol.com). My intention is not to discourage you if you are just starting out, but to make your experience a good one.

This is truly a wonderful sport and a great group of people. Most endurance riders enjoy helping new people and showing them the ropes, so to speak. Do not ever hesitate to ask your neighbor in the next rig for help. The primary reason I have stayed in this sport for so long is the people it tends to attract. It is the proper management of these issues and your horse's issues that will ensure that you enjoy your ride.

To finish is to win definitely means more than just finishing the ride. You win in many ways: meeting wonderful new riders, seeing beautiful trails, bonding with your equine and feeling the success that finishing the ride with your horse in great shape can bring you. Happy trails!

-Jackie Bumgardner