

Conditioning For Your First Endurance Ride

The purpose of this paper is to provide a practical guideline to help the beginning endurance rider condition his horse for his first 25-mile competition. Before starting, it is important to point out that the time frames and work levels suggested will not be suitable for every individual. How quickly you can progress depends on many factors. The innate metabolic ability and structural soundness of an individual horse are the primary limiting factors, but the state of his health and fitness when you begin will initially play a part. It is up to you as a trainer to use your own judgement to determine how to apply the principles of conditioning to your horse.

As a preliminary, be sure your horse has been recently wormed and has his feet in good working order. A plain flat steel shoe is usually the best choice for footwear. An extremely obese or thin animal is not a good candidate for endurance work.

With most healthy, mature horses, you can reasonably expect to take part in a limited-distance level endurance ride after three months of steady conditioning. You should not be thinking of winning at this point. Indeed, the limited distance ride is designed to acquaint the novice rider and/or horse with long distance riding, and possibly provide a stepping stone to the open rides. A pace of six to seven mph (if the weather is mild and the trail is not too difficult) is a reasonable goal.

The backbone of any conditioning program is long, slow distance work (LSD). It is jogging for horses, involving a steady rate of energy expenditure over increasing distances. It is aerobic work, meaning that the body is able to perform at that level without going into oxygen debt. LSD teaches the body to use more oxygen, increasing both its ability to carry it to the cells and also to extract it once it gets there. As training progresses, the maximum rate at which the heart can perform aerobically moves upwards (from around 120 to 150 or so beats per minute). In other words, the fitter the horse becomes, the faster he can go without becoming fatigued.

When you begin your conditioning program, you should buy a stethoscope and learn to use it. You can get one from a drugstore or through your veterinarian. To take a horse's pulse, put the stethoscope behind and slightly above the left elbow. You should hear a faint lub-dub sound. The resting heart rate for most horses is between 32 and 40 (the lub-dub sound counts as one beat). If you are having trouble finding the pulse with the horse at rest, go for a brisk trot or gallop and try again immediately. After exercise, the beat will be louder and faster (probably between 72 and 90). How quickly the pulse drops after exercise is the single best indicator of fitness, and this is why endurance riders and endurance rides put such high priority on keeping track of it.

When you first start conditioning you don't need to be overly concerned with pulse rates, because the work will be slow enough not to produce great cardio-vascular stress. However, as you progress pulse recovery will become increasingly important. It is a good idea to start from the beginning with checking your horse to get a feel for how your horse's pulse changes with various levels of stress.

As an endurance rider you will also need to develop a feel for how fast your horse travels at different gaits. Most horses walk between two and three mph. The speed of the trot varies greatly: some

horses travel at six or seven mph, while others are comfortable going almost eighteen mph. A good way to determine how fast you are going is to find a place to ride where you can measure the distance. The outside rim of a large field is often convenient. You can rent a surveyor's wheel if you don't have a vehicle to use for this purpose.

Assuming you have a mature, fully broken but unfit horse, you can begin by going on slow trail rides. Five miles or so is a reasonable distance, and at a walk this will take one and half to two hours. If you are confined to a small pasture for your riding, you can start by alternating between a walk and a trot to average four to five mph. Gradually substitute more trotting for some of the walking periods and increase the distance you ride. On the days when you ride faster, go shorter distances and vice-versa. By the end of the first month, you might be able to go as far as ten miles in two hours.

Vary the places you go to ride and change your routine as much as you can. In the early stages of conditioning you will not have many options, but as the horse becomes fitter, more variety will be possible. For one or two days of the week you should incorporate some arena work into your program. Practice, for example, making prompt and smooth transitions from gait to gait, or riding circles and other figures. Such exercise offers variety as well as improving suppleness and obedience. A target work schedule after a month's conditioning is suggested below:

Monday:	off
Tuesday:	off
Wednesday:	jog 5 miles at 6 mph; 20 minutes of arena work
Thursday:	trail ride 10 miles over hills to average 4 – 5 mph
Friday:	jog 5 miles at 6 mph
Saturday:	jog 4 miles at 8 mph; 20 minutes of arena work
Sunday:	2-hour trail ride to average 4 – 5 mph

During the second month you can do more trotting and cantering, always paying close attention to how your horse seems to feel. A bright attitude and a relaxed gait doubtlessly means that the horse is enjoying himself. Everyone has the 'blahs' from time to time, and conditioning is not always fun, but if the horse's basic personality seems to be changing for the worse, or if he gets a little gimpy, or isn't eating well, you had better take time to find out why.

By the end of the second month, you should be able to do up to twelve miles in two hours. This is not a highly demanding pace, but you will find that any walking will greatly reduce your average speed. The most energy efficient way to cover the distance is by keeping a steady pace from start to finish. This is similar to putting your car on 'cruise control' for maximum gas mileage. It is useful to teach your horse to go for extended periods on a loose rein at a trot because this is primarily what you will be doing at rides. For conditioning purposes if you want to make your horse work harder, you can alternate between gaits to achieve the same mileage in the same time frame.

If possible, you should ride over hills at least a few times a week. The beauty of hill work is that it produces high pulse and respiration rates without having to go fast. Frequent speed work can be very destructive. Not only is it risky from the point of view of soundness, it can also produce an over-anxious, tense horse that is difficult to control. This holds true even when you reach a much more advanced level of conditioning.

As the program gets more demanding, it becomes more important to vary the workload from day to day. Always put in an easy ride after a hard one. If you miss a day or two, don't try to make it up by working twice as hard the next time out. A lost day is just that. For every day you miss, consider that your schedule gets two days behind. Be sure that the first day back after two days off is a relatively light workday, with a longer than average warm up period. Azoturia, or 'tying up', is a common consequence of working a horse too hard after a vacation.

In the third month of conditioning, if everything has been going smoothly, you should increase your maximum distance up to twenty-five miles at least once before the targeted competition. In the first part of the month, you might try a ride of fifteen miles at five to six mph. The second week might include a twenty-mile ride at that speed, and the third week a twenty-five mile ride. If possible these long rides should be over trails. Doing laps in the field will get the job done, but it is boring and might make the horse sour. Besides, you will be encountering various obstacles on the trail, and it is part of the training to teach the horse to handle every situation. A theoretical workweek in the third month of conditioning might go as follows:

Monday:	off
Tuesday:	off
Wednesday:	5 miles at 10 mph
Thursday:	15 – 25 mile ride at 5 - 6mph
Friday:	5 miles at 10 mph
Saturday:	10 miles at 8 mph cross-county
Sunday:	30 minutes to 1 hour arena work

By now you should be getting pretty familiar with the use of the stethoscope, and you will probably be finding that your horse's pulse will usually drop to the 60's within a few minutes of dismounting. If, after doing five miles at ten mph, your horse takes up to ten minutes to recover to the sixties, chances are he is still not ready for competition.

The last week before the ride you should ease up with your program so that the horse will have his best chance to come into the competition fresh. It is a common mistake to panic and overdo the last week before a ride! Your last hard workday should be Tuesday or Wednesday, with only a five-mile jog daily until the ride. Be sure to exercise your horse once you get settled Friday afternoon. He will need the opportunity to loosen up after the trailer trip.

Hopefully, this paper will have given you a reference point for beginning a conditioning program. As in most other enterprises, a true love for what you are doing, coupled with a disciplined and thorough preparation are the best ingredients for success. For further information, we recommend the following publications:

- AERC Endurance Riders Handbook*, American Endurance Riders conference (1991)
- America's Long Distance Challenge*, Karen Paulo (1990)
- Go the Distance*, Nancy Loving
- The Complete Guide to Endurance Riding and Competition*, Donna Snyder Smith