

TRAIL RIDING AND CONDITIONING

BY LYNN KINSKY

THERE ARE FEW THINGS MORE ENJOYABLE THAN RIDING a well-conditioned and willing Peruvian Paso Horse out on the trail, going 10, 20, 30 miles or more, either for the pure pleasure of it or as part of a distance competition in the sports of trail trials, competitive trail, or endurance. The brio and heart of our horses, however, can easily lull one into mistaking horse enthusiasm for horse readiness. As humans we know WE can't go out on a weekend and walk 10 miles without some serious preparation, but our horses have no such insight – their well being depends on US, and how we manage them and condition them.

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Lisa Kelsey enjoying a ride with Cori Oclo. Photo by Juli Welby.



Before starting any conditioning program with your horse it is important to establish a baseline of where your horse is at physically – and record it somewhere (I like to maintain a training log, so I can see progress, or possible problems creeping in). A very good investment is to have your vet out to do a physical on the horse and standard yearly maintenance: vaccinations, worming, sheath cleaning (if a male), etc. Have him check legs and back for soreness – and watch what he does, so you can do the same check after each training ride. Become VERY familiar with what your horse's legs feel like normally – your feeling some heat that wasn't there before, or some swelling or tenderness, can save your stoic and enthusiastic horse from being asked to work when he really needs a little rest from work, or even some veterinary attention!

It is equally important to check the back for lumps, rubs, non-sweating areas (after a ride), and tender spots – a sore back can very well lead to leg lameness. As your horse muscles up and loses weight during a conditioning program, the saddle fit will change and you need to be alert to this and make adjustments to prevent the horse from developing a sore back. And pay attention to your own equitation, taking lessons or having another rider coach you if necessary. Not being balanced over the horse's center of gravity, sitting heavy or crooked in the saddle, not maintaining

your self-carriage – all will necessitate the horse having to work extra hard and in a non-balanced and potentially injurious manner. What one can “get away with” in an occasional light hack or 30 minutes in the arena, becomes a big deal as the hours and miles on the trail add up.

If you don't have a stethoscope, get one, as well as a watch with a sweep second hand, and learn how to take the horse's pulse. Place the stethoscope behind the horse's left elbow, near the girth line, and listen for the lub-dub. Count the number of lub-dubs in 15 seconds, and multiply by 4 – that's the number of beats per minute. 48 or less is normal in a relaxed horse. A resting pulse higher than your horse's baseline can indicate pain somewhere, or an infection that's brewing; monitoring their heart rate is a basic management tool even with non-working horses.

With the basics out of the way, it's time to hit the conditioning trail. The well-known Peruvian Horse owner and endurance rider, Julie Suhr, said, “Ignorance and enthusiasm are a bad combination,” by which she means that a lack of rider or horse experience, coupled with a natural tendency to want to get to a goal quickly can lead to classic training errors: pushing too fast, too far, too soon. Every injury that any of my competitive horses has suffered on the trail – sad to say – have been because of “pilot error”. I asked them to go too fast through footing that their tissues hadn't been toughened for, or through rough terrain



Opposite Page: Getting your horse used to a variety of conditions is crucial when developing good trail skills. Lynn Kinsky riding El Sinchi Roca in the Sage Hill NATRC ride. Photo by Diane Baley.



Top: As your horse's conditioning increases, increasing the difficulty of the terrain will also help develop their muscles and tendons. Here we see Lynn Kinsky with El Sinchi Roca on the Wickenburg, AZ NATRC ride. Photo by Jonnie Thompson.

Left: Kelly Powers with RDS Anejo and veterinarians, checking his vital signs at the vet stop on the 2004 Fire Mountain Limited Distance Ride. Photo by Lionell Griffith.

they hadn't gotten the balance and experience to handle, or up a steeper climb or a longer ride than they had been prepared for. They complied with my wishes and paid the price in a strain, tear or arthritis.

So what should a horse/rider team starting a conditioning program do? Go slow! WALK. The basis for any conditioning program is long, slow distance exercise. Each rider will have to assess their horse's readiness, but a reasonably safe start is with a 30-minute relaxed walk (approximately two miles) on flat terrain every other day. Check their legs and back after the ride and the next day. If the horse handles the week's work without stress, increase the workload: go a little further, or add some small hills to your route, maybe add a few minutes of gaiting. All increases should be gradual and accompanied by evidence that the legs are not experiencing any stress. As your rides get longer and more strenuous, you can check that the cardiovascular system is adapting to the stress by measuring how fast the heart rate drops to the

baseline after exercise. Hop off the horse, loosen the girth (or untack), wait 10 minutes and take the heart rate. You should be at baseline after 10 minutes of rest if the horse is fit for that level of work.

The important thing is to be aware that the different systems of the horse adapt at different rates. The cardiovascular system adapts the fastest – approximately three months. Muscles take three to six months, but tendons and ligaments take six to 12 months. And tendons and ligaments need to be exposed to varied footing in order to toughen and adapt in all planes of motion. To prepare properly, walk through hard footing, soft footing, through sand, up hills, down hills, over uneven rocks, and always do it in a careful and balanced enough manner that a misstep is avoided.

While you are doing this, look for different trail challenges that will require your horse to focus and balance and act in a deliberate manner. Even as you get the legs built up, the horse can undo all your good care by pan-

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Trail Riding

icking and rushing through a creek bed filled with small boulders, for instance. You need to carefully increase the challenges the horse has to face such that he can be successful in meeting them, and has the confidence and experience to cope with the next challenge. Common obstacles that a good trail horse must be able to cope with are crossing water, stepping over logs, going up and down rock staircases, negotiating twisting trails, handling narrow trails, backing precisely uphill, downhill, around things and accepting other trail users such as hikers and cyclists. A very important skill that you should encourage right from your very first ride out on the trail is to have the horse drink whenever it is thirsty and from whatever source it can find – even if it's a rain puddle. Avoiding dehydration on the trail is critical for both horse and rider!

None of this happens overnight, but with consistent conditioning and monitoring – and a bit of luck – an adult horse should be ready to tackle a 20-mile ride within four to six months. And you, as the rider, will have formed a wonderful bond with your horse, which will not be “just a trail horse” but your best buddy, worth his weight in gold! TPC