



# How to deal with HEAT

Part 2 of 2 Parts

By Heather Smith Thomas

Riders make their way over the dry terrain at the 2009 Death Valley Encounter Pioneer Ride in the Pacific Southwest Region. Photo © Karen Chaton, [www.enduranceridestuff.com](http://www.enduranceridestuff.com).

If your horse is mildly overheated, halt your ride and remove the saddle. Sponge him with water, especially over the major blood vessels, and provide shade. Walk him in a big circle if there's a breeze, to cool him on all sides.

Once he seems cool, check him again 15 minutes later, and again 30 minutes after that. If he is not completely cooled out (temperature still elevated, his body retaining internal heat), he'll break out in a sweat again. If that happens, walk and cool him again.

After any strenuous workout in hot weather, check him again several hours after you've cooled him and put him away, since some horses may also be at risk for colic or laminitis after working in the heat.

If the horse is severely overheated (heat exhaustion progressing toward heat stroke), stop riding him as soon as he starts showing signs of trouble and move him into the shade if possible. Have someone call a veterinarian—to give the horse large volumes of IV fluids to restore what's been lost and to help restore proper blood circulation.

While waiting for the vet to arrive, try to lower his temperature. Keep the air moving

around him with fans, or manual fanning. One of the quickest ways to cool him is to put cool or cold water—or even ice—where major blood vessels are close to the body surface—such as the jugular groove.

“If you wet that area, this will do more for him than if you wet his whole body. The blood is flowing through there like crazy. So keep the jugular groove wet, with cool water—sponge it on, sponge it off, sponge it on, etc.,” says Barney Fleming, DVM, a long-time endurance vet and former president of AERC.

“Another good place to keep wet is where there are big blood vessels on the belly. These are very close to the surface, especially if the horse is hot. They will be standing out prominently, to try to dissipate heat. If you keep

water on those, and on the jugular groove, you will pull more heat out of the horse than if you put water over his muscles,” says Dr.

## Beware of heat stroke

Signs of heat stroke may begin as sudden, unexpected fatigue. The horse can't keep going in a normal fashion, and begins stumbling. Pulse, temperature and respiration rate are elevated. He may become anxious and start behaving in an irrational or erratic manner, due to overheating of his brain. He may be excited or depressed, or disoriented. Rectal temperature may rise as high as 106° to 110°. Skin will be hot and dry, since he has run out of fluid for sweating. He may be oblivious to his surroundings, and has difficulty moving.

Unless the condition is quickly reversed he will collapse, go into convulsions or coma, and die.

—HST

Fleming.

It's never a good idea to wet the whole horse in an arid climate. If you chill the big muscles, they will contract and constrict the blood vessels, and actually hinder the dissipation of heat.

“In the East, where humidity is always higher, you can dunk the whole horse in water and get away with it, or pour cool water over his big muscles, because it's not evaporating very fast. But if

I have a horse with heat exhaustion in New Mexico and I dunk him in cold water, he will cramp up,” says Dr. Fleming. “This defeats the purpose and puts him into a more dangerous category,” he says.

"The big muscle masses have a lot of heat in them and it needs to be dissipated, but in low humidity conditions you don't want to speed that heat loss too much. You can do it over the blood vessels, as fast as you want to, but don't douse the big rump muscles or the horse will cool too much too fast," explains Dr. Fleming.

In a humid climate, however, you can keep applying cool water all over the horse and keep scraping it off, since the water warms up immediately once it's on the horse. Scrape off the warm water and apply more cold water. After a short session of cool-water cooling, walk the horse briefly, then apply cool water again. Keep alternating the walking and cooling, since moving helps promote blood flow to the skin and air movement aids evaporation (unless the humidity is too high for evaporation).

Keep checking the horse's temperature. It should drop about 2° within 10 minutes. Once it starts to drop, slow down on the cooling program. Stop using cold water as soon as his temperature comes down to 101°, or when the skin over his hindquarters feels cool after a walking period, or when his respiration rate drops below 30. Definitely stop if the horse starts to shiver; this means you've gone too far with the cooling.

### **'If you keep pushing the hot horse, you may push him over the edge.'**

**-Barney Fleming, DVM**

"This is a good reason to have a thermometer and continually monitor the horse," says Dr. Fleming. "Once the temperature starts dropping, slow way down on whatever it is you are doing to cool him. You can actually go too far and get a collapse of the blood vessels, and put the horse in worse shape."

Don't use ice packs over the muscles, since this constricts the surface blood vessels and hinders blood flow to the skin, which retards the cooling process. If you use wet towels over the neck or head, continually pour cold water on them. A wet towel left in place without constantly adding cold water will soon warm up and act as insulation, retaining heat.

Dr. Fleming says, "If you know you will be taking your horse to a competition in a hot environment, clip the hair over the jugular groove, or even over the belly vessels. But

don't clip the neck or the back, especially if you live in an environment where it may be still winter or spring. The horse will still need his hair coat. But if you're going to go work in a warmer region, the horse will be able to dissipate a lot of heat before he ever gets into trouble with heat exhaustion, if you've clipped the hair over the jugular vein or belly veins. Then when you get back home and it's cold, that little bit of hair loss won't bother him at all."

The legs also have a lot of exposure for blood vessels. There's not much muscle in the horse's legs—not much covering those vessels. "Wetting the legs with cool water, including the feet, can help cool an overheated horse. There's a lot of blood circulation through the feet. If there's a stream nearby, just walk the horse out into the stream. Stand him in the water and then use the water to keep his jugular vein and abdominal veins wet and cooling. A lot of blood goes through the feet, and cooling them will also help reduce the chance of founder," says Dr. Fleming.

"Overheating is a very serious problem in horses, but caught soon enough it is very easily corrected. If you stop the horse's activity, you are stopping the production of heat,

and then all you have to do is get rid of it," he says. But if you keep pushing the hot horse, you may push him over the edge."

### **Avoiding overheating**

Since dehydration (from continual sweating) is a big factor in the risk for heat exhaustion, make sure the horse always drinks plenty of water. Also make sure he is properly conditioned for his work. A fit horse has a much more efficient cooling system than the soft, out-of-shape horse. The muscles of the fit horse are working to best efficiency and he doesn't get as overheated to begin with. His sweat will be clear and watery rather than thick and lathering; he's not losing as many crucial electrolytes.

A horse that's in shape won't be as adversely affected by working in the heat as a soft horse, but you should still be careful not to overdo him. During a heat wave, avoid doing strenuous workouts during the hottest part of the day. Ride early in the morning or late evening, if possible. Mornings are usually best; the air is not as warm and humid.

Do strenuous work in short stints, alternating with periods of walking or rest so the horse can stop sweating so heavily for awhile.

He can work longer that way, with less risk for heat exhaustion. Take time to warm him up a little before doing more strenuous work.

If the day is hot and he's been sweating, let him drink as much water as he wants. At a competition or on a long ride, give him an opportunity to drink whenever you get a chance. Drinking during work will *not* cause colic or founder, as long as the water is not ice-cold. If the water is cold, it may cause stomach/intestinal spasms. Also, the blood supplying his muscles will suddenly rush to his stomach to try to warm the large volume of cold water, leaving the muscles short-changed—which may cause muscle cramps.

If the only water available is really cold, fill some buckets a few hours ahead of time and let the water warm up before the horse needs to drink. It's always best to let a horse drink, but if water is cold don't let him tank up, advises Dr. Fleming. Give him several frequent opportunities to drink, without overloading his stomach with cold water.

You want the horse to drink as much as possible during a hard day's work. "The more he drinks, the more he replenishes his reserves for sweating, and the more urine he produces. The more he urinates, the more heat goes out of the body. A gallon of urine is coming right out of the body core and bringing a lot of heat with it. Seeing a horse urinate is a good sign," Dr. Fleming says.

Monitor your horse's vital signs and sweating during hot weather, and know when to slow down. Get a thermometer and know how to use it. "Find out what your horse's normal resting body temperature is. Some horses are 99° while others are always 101°. The horse that is 99° all the time has a better chance to go farther before he overheats into a danger zone; he has a couple degrees to go before he gets to that other horse's starting point," explains Dr. Fleming. "If you have a horse that's 101° all the time, he doesn't have as far to go before he gets into trouble."

An ordinary rectal thermometer works well for taking temperature, but some of the newer versions are handier. "Those little push-button electronic human thermometers are great. I've been using one of those for years," admits Dr. Fleming. "You punch a button and stick it in the horse's rectum until it beeps. The advantage to these is they don't break. You can carry one in a little pack and it lasts forever.

"The drawback is that they don't reach way inside," says Dr. Fleming. "You can get

## How to Deal with Heat . . .

continued on page 24

it wet with water and insert it in the rectum and push it in another half-inch—making sure it's well seated, since it's short—and it's fairly accurate, but just remember that what it reads will be a little less (about 1°) than the horse's core temperature.

"If the horse's temperature is 103° you know he's borderline on safety because his core temperature is hotter than that. This is still a safe point to stop, however, and try to reverse the climbing temperature," says Dr. Fleming.

### Feeding in hot weather

The type of feed a horse is eating can make a difference in how much he's affected by hot weather. Horses tend to generate more body heat when there's a high level of protein in the diet. Horses working hard in hot weather generally do better if they are on a low to moderate level of protein—grass hay instead of the richest alfalfa, for instance, and a minimum of grain.

"Grain-fed animals produce more heat in the muscles. A lot of roughage is better for the hard-working horse in hot weather. For every pound of roughage a horse eats, he'll take in 10 pounds of water," says Dr. Fleming.

The roughage acts as a big sponge, making

the stomach a large storage area for fluid. The horse won't dehydrate as quickly.

"The big colon full of hay and water absorbs body heat, but does not create heat while the horse is working. The muscles are continually producing heat as he exerts. If the horse has a belly full of hay and water, he has less risk for overheating or dehydrating," says Dr. Fleming.

### Electrolytes and heat

Crucial body salts are lost through sweating, especially sodium (one of the components of ordinary salt). Access to salt is very important in hot weather, since a horse may lose up to one-third of a pound of salt per day in his sweat. It's easier for him to eat loose salt than block salt, especially if he needs to replenish a lot at once. Always use plain salt in hot weather, rather than mineralized salt (such as a trace mineral salt block).

A horse's salt requirement, aside from what he needs for general body metabolism, is based almost entirely on how much he sweats, whereas his need for certain trace minerals remains relatively steady and independent of exercise and hot weather. If you only give him mineralized salt, he is

being force-fed extra minerals to accommodate his salt needs. This can sometimes be dangerous, since some of the excess trace minerals are not as easily gotten rid of by the body and may reach toxic levels. Iron, iodine, selenium, etc., can be poisonous if overfed, for instance.

The electrolyte minerals such as sodium, potassium and calcium, however, may be given safely, to replace what's being lost. A good electrolyte product may help the horse combat the effects of excess sweating. "If the horse is still drinking as he's working and heating up, small doses of electrolytes can be given. If he's just hot because it's a hot day, or getting ready to overheat [working] or already overheated, if he's drinking, give him electrolytes," says Dr. Fleming. "But if he's not drinking, it's not a good idea to give him electrolytes, because this will pull water out of his body systems to keep things in balance and neutralize the electrolytes."

Be cautious—you can make the situation worse if you give electrolytes to an already dehydrated horse.

Heather Smith Thomas is an Idaho rancher, rider and author of such books as "Storey's Guide to Raising Horses" and "The Horse Conformation Handbook" ([www.storey.com](http://www.storey.com)).

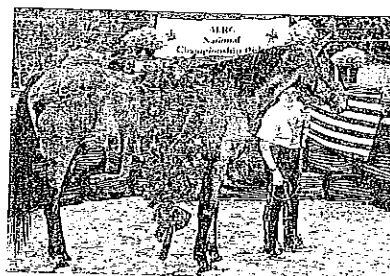
## new rider advice & lessons learned . . .

Put your time in before you go fast. I hate to see people who up after doing 25's and win 50. You don't learn this sport over night. I run and when I ride I think, can I run in sand? Can I run up hill fast??? What about running downhill fast, how will my knees feel? Can I go fast week after week, with no rest? Can I go fast if I'm not in very good shape??? Think about what you are asking your horse to do. —Beth Kauffmann

I believe in the "two years or 1,000 miles of competition before going fast" theory. I stuck to that with Shayne and again on the horse I'm bringing along now and it seems to work well for my horses and me. When I started endurance riding I heard that phrase a lot and many people were pretty religious about it when bringing up a new horse. It has really stuck with me even though I don't hear it much anymore. I need/want/like my horses to last a long time and I believe that this is one way of stacking the cards in my favor to make that happen. I don't creep along the trail by any means, and I do spend a great deal of time conditioning my horses for the rides. But, I try to be conservative/middle of the "pack-ish" for the first two years or approximately 1000 miles. I have also learned to be focused but flexible; that competition is not only about coming in first, and that nothing lasts forever.

Don't let your competitiveness carry you away. Put the horse's well being before your own. If you think your horse is off...he is. And, realize that at this time next year (or possibly even next month) no one is likely to remember, or care, where you placed at this ride or any other ride. So, take advantage of opportunities as they come but don't spend your time worrying over placings at a ride or push too hard to try to make something happen. The things that people will remember are how you treat others and how you treat your horse.

—Suzanne Pinder



Only you can truly know your horse and his limits; riders need to be constantly aware of the "little signs" that vets might not catch in a two-minute evaluation, and be honest with yourself as to what you can ask of your horse on that day. —Anne Ayala

Ride a horse that you truly enjoy spending time with. Learn to ride really well. Learn everything there is to learn about your horse and let success come with time. Most of all, respect your horse for the truly outstanding athlete and friend that he is. Enjoy the time you have with your horse, you won't have him/her long enough. Enjoy the trail, enjoy your friends, ignore the bad things that happen and thank the ride manager for his or her time and effort. Try to always finish with gas left in the tank and a happy, healthy partner to take home.

—Robbi Pruitt

# How to stay out of the deep weeds

**TREATING A HORSE WITH A METABOLIC PROBLEM** usually takes some time so I get a good chance to talk with the rider. Together, we try to figure out how he/she got into this situation. Riders are always asking, "How could this happen to me? What could I have done to prevent this?" The explanations are many and when looked at closely they usually boil down to a simple list of factors:

1. "Stuff" happens.
2. That day, the horse had a predisposing physical factor you were unaware of.
3. The horse was not ready to compete at that level that day.
4. The rider was not listening to the horse that day.

## 'Stuff' happens

So let's look at "stuff" happens. Accidents certainly happen and accidents can start a metabolic problem:

- Riders get off trail and cover 20 extra miles without water.
- Cows will drink the water tanks dry before the horses get there.
- Riders get sick, heat stroke, flu or an injury, causing the rider to make poor decisions with regard to their horses.

There are days when you are positive that Lady Luck made an unkind gesture as you started the ride. Bad things do happen to good people. When this happens accept the cards dealt to you with dignity and look forward to another day.

## Predisposing conditions

Issue #2, predisposing conditions, includes things that place your normally fit and properly conditioned horse at an unknown disadvantage—situations like:

- Your truck breaking down on the way to the ride and your horse having to sit in a hot trailer for 12 extra hours.



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Paying close attention to your horse throughout the ride can help prevent metabolic issues. Photo taken at the 2008 Run for the Border Ride © Henry Gruber, hg@hankshauser.com.

- Your horse may have been excited by a new neighbor horse or it could not see his/her new best friend, and spent the whole night whinnying and running circles in its pen. (It did 40 miles while you slept!)
- Your gelding did not eat a bite last night because he is in love with the mare in the

next pen who happens to be in heat.

- You traveled to a ride 900 miles away, for the first time, and could not find any suitable rest stops.

These types of misadventures cause your horse to start a ride dehydrated, leaving you unaware of impending and fast-approaching disaster.

Other factors that lead to issue #2:

- Your horse's feed was changed just before the ride.
- The horse got its vaccinations earlier in the week.
- Your horse was exposed to influenza earlier in the week and is just a little bit sick as the ride starts.
- A horse can wake up on the wrong side of the stall and decide to fight you the entire first loop and exhaust itself.
- A horse can develop diarrhea during the ride.
- Its hair coat is longer than you realize.

The list goes on and on. Most of these factors are not perceived as a problem until after the wreck has occurred. Sometimes you don't even know they happened! These are the things you learn by experience. Any change in routine before a ride can possibly set you up for metabolic problems.

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Don't override your horse. Don't train every day; let the horse recuperate and let the horse rest after a ride. Relax, take more time during a ride and let him eat a couple of minutes longer. Don't get caught up in a race. Remember you have two brains to tell to slow down and yours is the easy one. Relax some more. If you are doing something that works don't change it. If you start doing FEI, don't let it dictate which rides you go to and when. Make it fit your schedule, not you fitting the FEI schedule. I've also learned something through circumstances but not by a lesson. I had small babies and was pregnant when I bought Zen. He came second in my life. Because of this I was not able to override him or bring him along too quickly. I thank my kids for keeping Zen sound. I'm sure I would've been out there training him too much and going to too many rides. They still keep me from overriding him and they are 13, 11 and 8. Lastly, if you are in doubt, opt for rest rather than training. Horses keep their conditioning a lot longer than we do. I've learned this out of necessity a couple of times.

—Marie Mallon

Listen to all input from vets, pay attention to your horses well being, ride according to your horses ability on that day with the amount of preparation he has, have goals but play it by ear. Train with experienced riders. Try CTR first to learn all the ins and outs of trail care and pacing. Start with an experienced horse. Don't be afraid of a little fat reserve on your horse, especially for 100s.

—Judy Houle



### Competition matters

Issue #3, "Your horse was not ready to compete at that level that day," is also a long list. It can simply be that you rode too fast or too far for the conditions that day. Often the trail has conditions you and your horse were not ready for: deep sand, too much mud, too steep a hill, weather too hot, too far between water stops, not having enough water stops, etc.

I usually find these factors are accidents. Few riders intend to cause a metabolic problem, but riders often do not realize what the trail is going to be like or what the weather conditions will be. These are factors that you cannot adequately prepare for so you need to learn to think on the trail and adjust your ride strategy before you have a problem.

There are times when poor decisions on the rider's part create your horse's problem. A rider brings a horse that is not conditioned enough for the ride or the "old campaigner" who is suddenly pulled out of retirement (the spirit is willing but the body is no longer able). Another poor decision is seen when a rider gets caught riding with a horse or group of horses going faster than your horse normally goes. This is really quite common.

As a rider you really need to know what pace your horse can safely work at and stick to the pace he/she has been conditioned for. The saddest for me is the rider who is out to win something and knowingly pushes the horse faster than it was prepared to go. (Don't let your "competitor ego" get the better of you.)

Know your horse, especially before you try to push the envelope if you ever do. Take it slow until you know your horse is ready both physically and mentally. That means bones and tendons, not just heart rate recoveries. Your horse will "feel" ready way before bones and tendons really are. You also need to keep in mind that horses are unpredictable, and you never really are in complete control. Heed any subtle sign that something isn't quite right. Especially during an endurance ride. Gut instincts are usually right.  
—Julie Barnfather

Have fun and enjoy the trails and companionship. Be REALLY nice to the vets and volunteers. And if you're lucky enough to have a crew, be REALLY, REALLY nice to them. Get off and walk or jog awhile and you'll have more empathy for what your horse is doing.  
—Sue Mullen

If you have more than one metabolic pull or problem for every 20 starts, this could be you!

### Not listening to your horse

The last situation, "The rider was not listening to the horse that day," is almost always a part of the first three situations. Most of the time when a horse develops a metabolic problem there were some early warning signs. As my oldest daughter Shannon would say, "I just knew I was getting in deep weeds!"

As I have treated horses, riders will go over what happened prior to developing colic or exhaustion and they realize there were usually early warning signs. Signs are usually subtle. The horse may have had the same "little problem" before and got over it. Sometimes the rider knew a problem was looming and thought their horse could "tough it out."

There are many reasons people give for failing to heed the warning signs. Most of the time riders are just not listening to their horse.

### Remember EDPPMF

The early warning signs can be summed up in an acronym coined by a great veterinarian, Jamie Kerr. Northwest riders know this one by heart. EDPPMF stands for Eating, Drinking, Pooping, Peeing and Moving Freely. If your horse is not doing any of these then something is wrong and you need to stop and figure it out!

To understand why this simple acronym is so powerful, think of how long your horse will be on the trail. What would your horse be doing if it were home in the pasture for that length of time? It would be EDPPMF! There is no reason the horse should not be doing these things while on the trail. In fact it is absolutely essential that your horse is doing these things while on the trail! Do you know your horse's GPH? SPG? PPPH?

**Eating.** Usually it is loss of appetite that riders notice first, but ignore. Many people report that their horse quit eating about two vet checks before it was pulled (we get a lot of time to discuss what went wrong while fluids are running). Riders think their horses are just being picky, or there wasn't the right hay or its new best friend left it behind. These assumptions are usually wrong.

If you, as a rider, had worked so hard you wanted to puke, you would be a picky eater too. But then you would puke and everyone would know something was wrong. However, because a horse physically cannot vomit, we think it is just being picky. Many times, if you recognize this early warning sign in your horse and stop your horse you can possibly eliminate the need for veterinary treatment.

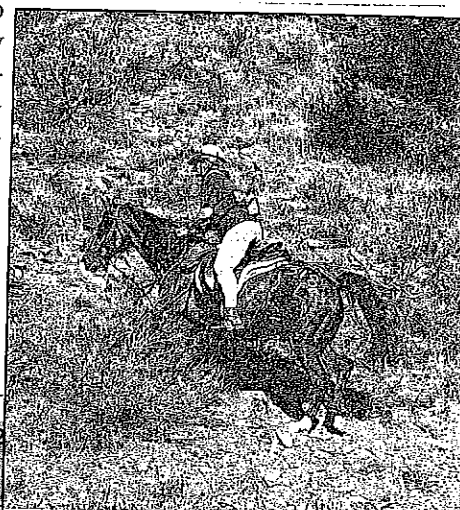
Sometimes, if the conditions are right, you may be able to rest, allow the horse to resume eating and then get back on the trail (usually at a much slower pace). Ignoring a loss of appetite is a big mistake! Missing this sign will at least cost you a completion; at the worst it can lead to the death of your horse.

**Drinking.** Drinking is essential to staying in the ride. You need to know how much your horse is drinking, in gallons per hour (GPH). Do you know how many swallows your horse takes to empty a gallon bucket—swallows per gallon (SPG)? Do you know how many swallows your horse takes when you stop for water? How many gallons of water does your horse normally drink in 20 miles?

If you do not know these things, you need to do your homework and have them figured out before the next ride!

If you can realize when your horse is slowing down on drinking then you can make adjustments to your pace and slow down before you have a problem. As a matter of not-so-common courtesy, please do not leave a water stop until the other horses at the water stop have had their fill.

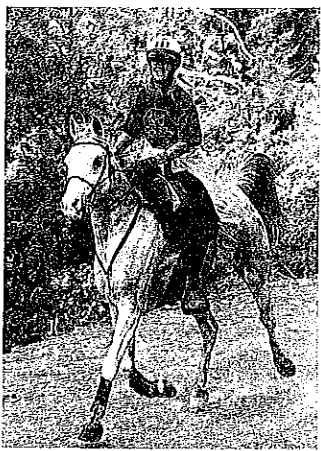
**Pooping.** When trying to uncover the mysteries of "How did I get into such deep weeds?" I often ask personal questions like,



Ride slower than you think you should. Ride smart, ride your own horse, don't let others influence you; don't find out your horses breaking point!  
—Micheale Tristam

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Ride your own ride. Don't get caught up in the pack. Ask for help. Enjoy yourself. Check to see if your horse is enjoying him or herself. Stop along the way and graze's just for a couple of minutes. Probably the most important thing I have learned is that if my horse comes home with me in the trailer, everything should be ok. As long as I've got my horse, there's always another ride, another day. —Marci Cook



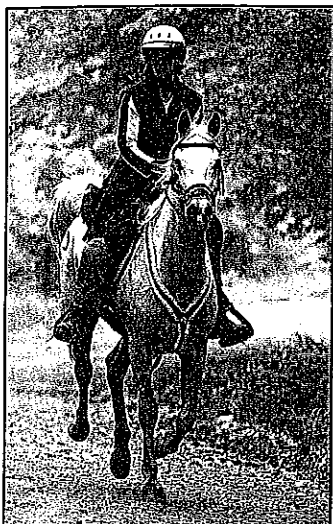
Do more training on control before going to rides; pick the ride for the horse. Don't get caught up with riding someone else's ride, I'm still having problems with that. —Kathy Crothers

Take it slowly, slowly, if you want to do endurance on one horse for many years. Listen to what your horse is telling you—they have bad days just like we do. You know your horse better than anyone else—does trust your own judgment. Trust your horse, he probably knows more than you do when it comes to getting down the trail safely. It doesn't matter where you finish as long as you finish. And it really doesn't matter if you don't finish, as long as your horse is OK. You can learn a lot from other riders and vets—listen. —Adele Youmans



Top 10 is not important. Going faster may just lead to a pull. Don't use external monitors, listen to your horse and yourself. —Joan Ruprecht

Find a mentor—learn as much as you can from their experiences. Take your time when choosing your partner in this sport—look for the right physical attributes and personality that you wouldn't mind spending many hours with. If possible have a veterinarian familiar with endurance evaluate your prospect. I started riding much smarter when I made my goal to have a shot at BC at every ride. It allowed me to be competitive but not override my horse. I've been much happier with how my horse is at the end of a ride since I made this my goal. —Lynne Gilbert



Know your horse like a book. At the slightest change in behavior or habits, pay attention. All horses are different; one condition program for one horse may be too much or too little for another horse. Balanced and correct shoeing is so important. —Cindy Young



Learn all you can about the horse, any little sign that could tell you all was not right, and mainly have fun! —Dolly DeCair

You can never know enough. Always listen to your horse. Keep an open mind but don't blindly follow. Ride your own ride. And most important, to finish is to win. Take riding lessons. Find an experienced rider or two to hang around and ride with. —Shannon Loomis, DVM

Don't be afraid to quit a ride if it's too much for your horse. Be a tough rider, don't whine. —Judy Long

Take the time to get a good base on your horse before you do fast riding, like two years base before you try to top 10 on 50s and use each ride as a stair step for your next ride.

—Joyce Sousa

Take it slow; enjoy each day with your horse as if it might be the last. Ride your own ride; pay attention to your horse; watch vital signs; use common sense.

—Jennifer Klein

Do your homework. Don't run the snot out of your horse. If you think you have to ride all the time, have two or three horses.

—Irving McNaughton



Almost every ride has at least one surprise waiting for you (good or bad). If you go out to have fun, you are rarely disappointed, and if you place well, it is icing on the cake. When you take time to understand your horse, they will make you a better person. The world is much more exciting when you are riding your horse, so don't sweat the small stuff in life; your horse already knows that, and that's what makes them such great partners. Maintaining your health so you can ride produces big rewards in all other aspects of your life. Never be in such a hurry on the trail that you cannot offer help to another rider in need. You don't have to ride fast all the time, but you should ride smart. —Linda Cox

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## A Thing Called "Flow"

A concept that was explained in order to help understand what it means to be fully immersed in an activity – where time becomes irrelevant and everything is about being in the present moment. It is an idea originally brought about by a man named Mihaly Csikszent-Mihalyi. It is called "flow".

Flow is a concept everyone has experienced at some point in their life. It is otherwise known as being in "the zone". It is the feeling of total immersion in an activity. Usually it is while doing something we have chosen ourselves (although it can occur at anytime in most any activity). Time ceases to exist. We are not worrying about the future or thinking about the past. We are completely engaged in what we are doing.

Flow is achieved when we are doing an activity, physical and/or mental and there is a reasonable balance between the skills that we have and the challenges we are taking on. When starting to learn a new activity you will usually have little skill. Skill develops over time and with practice. So to start off you will want the challenge to be fairly low for it to be appropriate to your skill level.

As soon as you get better and your skills have developed a bit more you will need to increase the challenge. If you don't push yourself a bit more at this point than you are likely to become bored with the activity.

But if you push yourself too hard you will stress yourself out. You will feel nervous or anxious and you will not be able to enjoy whatever it is you are doing. You need to challenge yourself but not too much all at once.

If the challenge is too high and the skill is too low there will be anxiety. If the skill is too

high and the challenge is too low there will be boredom.

Flow is something that just happens without us necessarily making a conscious choice. But it can also be cultivated with a little bit of work. We can shape our experiences to attain flow on a more regular basis.

It starts with awareness; by taking some time to look at the activity that we are engaging in. To see what the challenges are that we might come across. And then by honestly taking stock of our skills and predicting how well we will be able to meet those challenges. If we mentally prepare ourselves in advance we will have a better sense of when to push ourselves harder or when we might need to hold back and take things slower.

Although this concept is easiest to understand in terms of physical activity it applies to all facets of life. Flow is something that happens to us while working, being friends, cooking dinner, washing the dishes or walking in nature. In fact, it is said that every opportunity has the potential for flow; it is just a matter of us waking up to the possibilities.

When we are in flow, we shine. And when we shine, we pass this along to others. It is infectious. People are at their best when they are engaged in an activity that they love. They are almost always willing to share their passion with someone looking to learn.

What is your passion? How do you tap into flow? Dive in. Explore the depths. And pass it on!