

Welcome to the world of Distance Riding –

There are two types of Distance Riding that are similar but different. Competitive Trail Riding/Driving (CTR/CTD) and Conditioning Distance Rides/Drives (CDR/CDD) in our region (Maine to W. Virginia) are sanctioned and governed by the Eastern Competitive Trail Ride Association (ECTRA). Endurance Rides are governed by a national organization, the American Endurance Ride Conference (AERC). This discussion will focus on Competitive and Conditioning Rides as the rules, format, objectives, distances ridden and other aspects are different from those for Endurance Rides. However, riders often compete in both disciplines and many Endurance riders and horses got their start doing Competitive rides. On the ECTRA website you can find the current rulebook and the Rider/Driver Handbook which has a wealth of information on how to get started and what to expect at a ride.

So, start with the horse that you have! Any breed, sex, size or type of horse/pony/mule over a minimum age can compete and do well. Does your horse enjoy going out on trail? Are they well mannered and reasonably fit? Are they comfortable riding with other horses or prefer to go out alone? Do you ride on a regular basis? All things to consider as you begin but just start where you and your horse are now. There are preparations you can make at home ahead of your first ride that will make the day go smoother for you and your horse.

Your horse will be examined at the pre-ride judging by at least a Veterinarian Judge and usually a Lay judge also...two different and new to your horse individuals. So practice getting your horse used to being touched on all areas of their body. Touch their face, lift a section of lip up and touch the gum. Run your hands along the neck, body, and legs on both sides. Work with them so they will get used to standing quietly and still for a few minutes for their examination. Of course, if they are anxious about any of this take your time and be careful.

After the "hands on" portion is completed you will be asked to trot (or gait) your horse straight away from the judges, circle in both directions and trot straight back to the judges. This part often takes the most practice at home, especially the circles. If you can't run for whatever reason you can have someone else do the whole trot out for you. Many riders run next to the horse on the straight sections but lunge the circles. So practice trotting (or gaiting) in straight lines and in a round circle at a steady speed.

The judges are not expecting perfection and totally understand when a rider and/or horse are new to this sport. They also understand that even if all goes well when practicing at home that the ride site is new and all the excitement with new horses and people etc. can be very distracting and your horse may forget what they practiced at home! The judges will be patient and often help with suggestions for future rides.

At the end of the ride, in 20 minutes for riders/ 30 minutes for drivers from your finish time, your horse's heart rate and respiration rate will be taken by a P&R volunteer. The goal for the heart rate is 44 bpm or below, but it has to be 64 bpm or

below within an hour to “complete” the ride. So, you should be able to or learn how to take your horse’s heart rate. There are heart rate monitors one can use but we also recommend having a good basic stethoscope so you can listen directly to the heart and count the beats. Your veterinarian can help you become comfortable with this. Again, this takes practice and some horse’s hearts are easier to hear than others, so don’t be discouraged in the beginning. It is good to know what your horse’s “resting” heart rate is at home not doing anything. Many riders will occasionally see how many minutes it takes after finishing a ride at home for their horse’s heart rate to return close to their resting value.

Again, welcome and Happy Trails!!

ECTRA Competitive Trail Ride/Conditioning Distance Ride Judging –

The founding principle of ECTRA is that any competitive horse should have an equal chance when competing with any other competitive horse. Therefore, the scoring by the judges was designed to determine the horse that has deteriorated the least from the event initial exam to the event final exam. ECTRA rewards the horse with the least deterioration, not necessarily the inherently stronger or more athletic horse.

In essence your horse is being evaluated against themselves not against the other horses.

The judging uses a numerical scoring system with both subjective and objective evaluations. Each horse starts with 100 points at the initial exam. The purpose of this exam is to determine the horse's starting condition. Points are deducted at the final exam for changes from the initial findings that indicate stress or loss of condition. Points are not added for conditions that have improved at the time of the final exam.

The judging is divided into several categories. Each judge is responsible for evaluating specific categories at both the initial and final exams. It is possible that they will share a category, such as lameness. Each judge has a score sheet and their scribe will circle the number or letter corresponding to the judge's finding and write down any comments or notations. At the final exam they will note or circle any point deductions on the score sheet. Every rider will receive a copy of their score sheet at the end of the ride so they have a record of their judging for the day.

The 5 judged categories are – Tack Area, Legs, Lameness, Fatigue-Mechanical and Fatigue-Metabolic. At the initial exam the Body Condition Score (BCS) of the horse is also recorded. In addition, the score sheet has a place to record the pulse and respiration taken at the hold (if there is one) and the final P&R.

Tack Area – this examination covers all areas touched by actual riding or driving equipment, such as saddle, bridle, breastplate, etc. The judge is looking for any related injuries, such as hair loss, heat bumps, abrasions, rubs, sensitivity, heat, etc. At final exam points would be deducted for new lesions, increase in severity of tenderness, etc.

Legs – Self-Inflicted Trauma – physical aspects that would be noted at initial exam are for example, windpuffs, scratches, interference marks, any swelling of joints, tendons or lower leg. At final exam points would be deducted if any noted areas worsened, became more sensitive or if a new trauma was discovered, evidence of wear and tear or stress on the legs.

Lameness – This is an evaluation of soundness. Horses are trotted in a straight line back and forth and a circle in each direction. The grading of any lameness is based on the American Association of Equine Practitioners scale, with Grade 0 being sound. Grade 1 (Difficult to observe) and Grade 2 (Consistent in some circumstances) are allowed to start the ride and the judges pick a number on the score sheet in each of these grades indicating their evaluation as to the extent of the lameness within the grade. At the final exam the trot is done and evaluated the same way. Here, Grade 3 (Consistently observable) is also included in the scoring

decision. Horses can get sounder during a ride and that would be indicated in the number choice by the judges, but once again points are not gained by improvement. Fatigue – Mechanical - This part is evaluated when the horse is trotting and also when one of the judges is doing their hands on exam.

Length of Stride (impulsion), Height of Stride (animation), Overall Body Carriage and Willingness are given A,B,C,D letters indicating, extreme, average plus, average and average minus. Toe Dragging and Coordination and Muscle Soreness and Muscle Tone are all given word descriptions. At the final exam a number/point deduction is chosen to indicate no change/very slight/slight/moderate or severe deterioration in each of these areas.

Fatigue- Metabolic – Skin Pinch and Capillary Refill Time are evaluated in seconds. Gum Color and Gum Moisture, Gut Sounds and Anal Tone are all evaluated using words that correspond to a number on the score sheet. The same number system is used at the final exam and points are only deducted if the number increases (indicates deterioration) and by how much.

Points/partial points will also be deducted based on the final P&R if the Pulse is over 44 or Respiration is over 24.

There infrequently can be points taken off for a behavior penalty or thumps penalty. (Thumps is the lay term for Synchronous Diaphragmatic Flutter, a condition associated with dehydration and electrolyte abnormalities and seen as hiccup-like contractions of the diaphragm or muscle twitching in the flank area). Also, time penalties are incurred for finishing over (or under) the time specified.

It should be emphasized that what is very important is that each judge is consistent from horse to horse in how they evaluate, judge and deduct points at a ride. If you go to different rides with different judges your scores could be different based on how each individual judge evaluates your horse...but that judge will be evaluating all the horses at that ride using the same criteria.

The Judging at Competitive Rides is meant to be educational and supportive, never critical and always with the horse's welfare of greatest importance. When you're just starting out questions are definitely welcome and encouraged!!