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Feeding for shorter distances

Most horses will easily complete 10 – 20km on their current feed/or pasture. Some horses will happily complete 80k on a pasture based diet with no added energy. There is no need to increase the energy in the diet unless your horse is visibly starting to lose condition – when intensity and/or distance is increased then energy will need to be increased. The feed must match the work. Each horse is an individual – if it isn't broken don't fix it! And KISS – keep it simple silly!

Foundation of the diet is good quality forage – hay or pasture. Vitamins and minerals can supplement or balance the forage - choose a mix that is designed for a forage based diet rather than a mix that is balanced within itself or designed to be a complete feed. A lot of pellets have the vitamins and minerals in the pellet, but needs to be fed at the recommended amount. If hard feed is required, high fat/high fibre/slow release energy is best, with medium protein around 12%.

Your horse is travelling at a constant pace for a long period of time (not necessarily high energy) and you want him to stay calm and relaxed - high fibre will maintain gut health and water in the gut. Do not overfeed your horse, not only avoiding metabolic problems but also keeps your horse calm, relaxed and manageable. Don't give him a heavy feed just before you go out, but about half 1 – 2 hrs before (for a 40 – 80km ride). Feed takes a while to digest (a minimum 6 hrs), so if you are doing a 10 – 30km ride, you will be finished before the feed takes effect. For training or doing a shorter ride, let him nibble on a hay net while you get ready. Dampened hay, wet feed are other ways of getting a horse hydrated (especially if at a hot ride, or not drinking), and giving these before training helps combat ulcers (lucerne is an acidity buffer).

It is important to keep feed in the gut when travelling to help prevent ulcers – fibre is good, such as hay or Speedibeet (fibre and water), as this also keeps the horse hydrated.

Remember that feeding can increase the heart rate, so you may decide to feed after the vet check if you think you will have trouble meeting the HR criteria, but if you want to give your horse something to pick on, dampened hay or grass will help the gut sounds. Paying attention to how you

strap your horse at home will help when strapping him at a ride – this will indicate how to manage feeding before or after the vet check.

Electrolytes for the shorter distances

Forage based diets are generally low in sodium and can be easily supplemented by adding common salt. Most pelleted hard feeds will have enough – need to read the ingredients.

Many electrolyte products that contain a variety of minerals in addition to salt, so you will only require these products if he is sweating profusely or doing longer distance rides. For training and shorter distance rides, just adding salt will be sufficient (and cheaper!). Start with small amounts (so they don't go off their feed), and build to gradually to 1 – 2 tablespoons/day. There are a few ways to supplement your feed –

- Coarse salt mixed in dampened feed,
- Salt or electrolyte powder mixed with yoghurt/apple sauce applied with a large syringe over the back of the tongue,
- Salt and mineral lick.

Don't electrolyte if your horse isn't drinking! This can cause more problems than are likely with too little electrolytes. If in doubt, don't electrolyte!

Many horses will not drink much on track in the shorter rides, but should drink something back at camp. At home offer them wet hay or sloppy Speedibeet/Maxisoy after a work session. Honey over the tongue/molasses in water will often encourage horses to drink. Get to know your horse and what will make him drink. Be aware of hot weather, if your horse has a thick coat, is overweight or is getting a nervous sweat as these will dehydrate your horse.

Training for the shorter distances - body

Most horses can easily do 10 – 20km on very minimal training unless they are very overweight or paddocked in small areas with little riding. Horses living in a herd situation will be moving around a lot can do this if ridden sensibly.

As well as cardiac fitness, you also need to be strengthening and conditioning ligaments, tendons and muscle and maintaining bone density. If your horse is confined, you may need to work him a little more to keep him supple and flexible and less likely to strain tendons and ligaments. Lunging, in hand active walking and swimming are also good alternatives if you don't have time to ride. Trotting in a sand dressage arena for a lesson can be more demanding than trotting on a hard surface. Dressage sessions are also good to teach your horse to use his body and go kindly at your line and pace, and to have control of your horse.

Train half the distance per week for the ride you are wishing to do i.e. if training for a 20km do approx. 10km per week etc. Carry a GPS and measure the distance you do in your riding lesson or next trail ride. Get to know your horses average speed in each gait – a walk is 4 - 8Kph, trot 10 - 18kph and canter 15 – 25kph. Get him moving at a comfortable, active speed – extended gaits are more tiring and wearing on his body than a steady, moderate pace.

Two to three days per week is plenty when starting out – long, slow distance (lots of walking with a little trotting). This is a good foundation and develops strength when speed is increased and is really beneficial to building up the whole horse. Remember the faster you work, the more likely you are to have injuries and create problems. Teaching your horse to go slow and steady is easier than having

him pulling and wasting energy. Break days are just as important - don't be afraid to give your horse a break if he seems tired or doesn't seem quite right/doesn't want to go – you don't want to push or stress him as he will sour which may cause behavioural issues, which is no fun for either of you!

If you have increased the speed or distance then give him a couple of days off to recover, and allow any minor damage to repair, recover, strengthen and condition. This becomes particularly important when training for longer distances – initially just increase the speed or the distance – not both at once. Go over your horse after a harder ride for any rubs, cuts, heat or swelling and look at his gait. Your horse will set the schedule!

Train how you plan to ride – don't forget you **cannot** go faster than 14kph (for introductory, intermediate, micro and mini-marathon rides, and novice status for 80 and 120km rides). Take your horse steadily at the start, so if you find your horse is feeling a little tired, stop and give him a green pick, or let him take time to nibble at hay at a checkpoint (if available). If he is still reluctant to travel after a spell, he is most probably tired, so learn to read your horse's signs. Also take into account the terrain you will be riding over, if you don't have access to hills, deep sand/ploughed paddocks can help. Ride to the conditions, if your horse is not hill fit, you may need to slow down and or get off and walk up hills. If there is a long or steep descent, then get off and walk down – it is much better for your horse's joints and balance. If it is a flat ride, he may not be used to going for long periods at a constant pace, so change diagonals to keep him balanced. Train your horse to stand next to a rock while you get on – it is easier on his shoulders than you dragging yourself on.

It will take about 3 years to build up a horse, depending on age and work they have done. Year 1 - 20 and 40kms and if going well an 80km at the end with a spell. Year 2 – a short ride or two, then get the next 2 x 80km done and turn the horse out for a good spell. Year 3 – look at going a little faster.

Training for the shorter distances – mind

Just as important for your enjoyment of the sport is the training of the horse's mind. To avoid pre-ride stress, practice as much as you can at home to –

- prepare your horse for the vet check (trotting out, getting used to rectal thermometers, stethoscopes etc,
- be in a temporary yard/tied up,
- train with a group if you can so he gets used to a group of horses,
- float to somewhere new, (floating, being saddled up and ridden somewhere new)
- encourage your horse to lower their head/rinse their mouth/drink from any water source (stop and wait for him to do so),
- ride at a pace you and your horse are happy with, and
- most importantly, build your horse up gradually so he learns to enjoy the sport.

Longevity starts here - build up a solid foundation with your horse in all aspects – physical, mental, education.

Physically –

- no speeding up hills (can be very tough on ligaments/tendons/muscles) or down hills (also tough on tendons/joints, get off and run down), build up from a walk over time,
- moderate, consistent spaces will get you further than fast/slow/fast/slow,
- aim to ride in a good frame – no hollowed backs, strung out bodies etc, and
- ensure good saddle fit and hoof care, body work/chiropractic work.

Mentally –

- keep training interesting and enjoyable (lunge, pole work, gymkhana, dressage lesson etc),
- don't push too hard (especially if overweight), and
- know when it's time for a break (mental or physical – it takes a good few weeks to loose fitness).

Education –

- where possible, expose them to riding in a group of horses or alone,
- get them used to passing or being passed (with good manners!),
- get them used to crossing water, and
- get them ready for the vet ring.

Note - Please read the Ride Etiquette Guidelines which have passing and drinking guidelines.

Most of all, have fun and use these as a stepping stone. Ask lots of questions, people re only too happy to help!

Resources

- Revised notes from the sessions go up on the NSWERA website nswera.asn.au/new-to-endurance/advice.html
- AERA Rulebook <http://aera.asn.au/national-rules/>
- AERA Ride Etiquette Policy <http://aera.asn.au/national-rules/> at the bottom
- CL 26 Rider Code of Conduct <http://aera.asn.au/new-site/wp-content/uploads/S1-General-Rules-Current.pdf>
- Session #1 “Floating/Membership/Entering a Ride and Pre-nomination/Horse Containment/Volunteering” for Membership and Horse Eligibility and Horse Containment.
- Session #4 “Vetting (HHD, HR trot out) and Tack Rules” for taking temperature and teaching trotting out for the vets.
- NSWERA Mentor Program and Step up Program - <https://nswera.asn.au/newsstories/latest-news.html>