

# MOTDRA

Middle of the Trail Distance Riders Association

## Give Distance Riding a Try

Tired of going around in circles? Would you like to spend hours with your horse instead of minutes? Can you camp-out and ride in all weather?

Then distance riding might appeal to you! It is more than just trail riding. It is for people who really like to spend time on their horses, who really want to know an animal and learn about nutrition, fitness, and metabolics.

Two most popular kinds of distance riding are competitive trail riding (CTR) and endurance. A Mid-western organization, the **Middle of the Trail Distance Riders Association**, sanctions both and gives awards for accumulated miles and points. In a nutshell, the differences are this:

**CTR** is a timed event. You are given an ideal time to finish, usually at a 5 to 7 mile per hour pace, with a short window on either side of that time. **MOTDRA** judges the horse solely on its fitness at the end of the ride. That fitness includes the lameness, trail wounds, the horse's attitude, and metabolic parameters. The vet is the judge.

**MOTDRA** CTRs usually include 15-mile limited distance and 30-mile open divisions. There may be further divisions into weight classes. Juniors, under age 18, compete in their own divisions.

**Endurance** is a race. There is no minimum time, but there is a maximum time allowed for completion. Rides less than 50 miles in a day are called limited distance. Endurance rides are 50, 75 or 100 miles a day. A 25-mile ride allows six hours for completion. A 50-mile ride allows 12 hours. Mandatory rest stops are deducted from that time.

### Do I have to ride an Arabian?

No. Arabians have unique physical characteristics that help them excel at this sport, but other horses do well, too. It is important for a horse to move efficiently, with a powerful rear "engine," and long, comfortable stride. Heavier bodied horses may need more rest and longer cool-down times. You can compensate with good nutrition and conditioning.

### How do we condition?

Three letters. LSD. No, not 1960s drugs. This means long, slow distance. Get used to doing the miles. Start out

at 2 to 4 miles a ride, several times a week. Then add miles. Then add speed work.

Teach your horse to eat and drink on the trail. A horse that won't drink can get dehydrated. A horse that won't eat will have poor gut sounds. A horse has to learn to take care of himself.

Train your horse to trot out at the vet checks. If you have a gaited horse, explain that to the vet. The vet wants to see a trotting pace to check for lameness. Teach your horse to stand still and relax when his pulse is being taken.

### What should I feed my horse?

Distance experts shun heavy sweet feeds and go for lots of hay and roughage. Beet pulp mashes are favorite feeds among distance riders. They give the horses complex carbohydrates that sustain them for hours and also supply valuable liquids.

### What about electrolytes?

This depends. In very hot weather, horses do benefit from electrolytes, and **MOTDRA** allows electrolyte use on the trail and at vet stops. Some riders dose their horses with electrolytes at every ride, others only occasionally. It is important that a horse drinks water if electrolytes are administered.

### Do I need special equipment?

Following is a list of good equipment to have.

- A saddle that is comfortable for you and your horse. It can be western, English, Australian, or a specially-designed endurance saddle. Endurance saddles have lots of D-rings for hanging stuff.

A saddle-fit problem may not be noticeable in a short arena ride, but will show up after hours of trail riding! Many dark-colored horses have white patches of hair on their backs from ill-fitting saddles.

- A good bridle. Biothane is nice. Halter-bridles are nice. At vet checks, you can take the bit out of the horse's



*MOTDRA founder Marybelle Cooper and Azy at the trot-out.*

mouth and use the reins as a lead rope. Leather or nylon bridles are OK too, but not as easy to clean.

- Water bottles. Carry at least one to drink from and one to pour water over the horse.

- A sponge on a string. Dip this into streams and ponds and squeeze water over the horse.

- A fanny pack or cantele bag. Put horse and people snacks, a hoof pick, car keys, a pocket knife and roll of vet wrap and your trail map in it. Enclose the map and your rider card in a zip-lock plastic bag. Some also carry a compass and whistle.

- A riding helmet. Helmets are mandatory for riders under age 18, but optional for adults.

- Riding tights or breeches with no inner seam. If you want your thighs shredded like hamburger, wear jeans. Even the guys wear breeches or tights for distance riding. Or they wear pantyhose under jeans.

- Wide stirrups. There are several brands made for distance riding. The extra wide base keeps your feet from aching over the long haul.

- A cushy saddle cover. This isn't a necessity, but it is nice to have.

- A rain slicker - we ride in all weather.

- Necktie coolies. Those are wonderful inventions that you soak in water and wrap around your neck on a hot day to keep you cool.

- A sweat scraper. Many riders hang one on the saddle. It is the evaporation process that cools the horse. Scraping the water off helps.

- An E-Z boot. As the ad says, carry an E-Z boot or get a sense of humor.

- Camping gear.

### What to expect when you arrive.

After you unload your horse and set up camp, find the vet check. The vet will go over your horse head to tail as the secretary makes notes on a form.

Your horse will get a number drawn on his rear with a cattle crayon. The vet will give your horse a good going-over. He will ask you to trot your horse out for 125 feet, turn circles right and left, and trot back. After vetting in, there is a ride meeting and maybe a potluck dinner. The ride manager talks about the map and trail hazards, sets times and pace. The vet sets the pulse criteria.

### On the trail

Be prepared to mount up early. The longer distance riders will leave at dawn. In a CTR, horses usually are sent 30 to 45 seconds apart. In endurance, everybody goes at once, although you can wait until the crowd passes and catch up later.

The horses are fresh and sassy in the morning. They know something is up! Your trail will be marked with brightly colored survey ribbons and sometimes with plastic plates or signs.

About halfway on a CTR, you will come in for a vet check. This is a mandatory rest stop. The vet or volunteers will take pulse and respiration after 10 minutes. Endurance also has rest stops. In CTR, the rest time is added to your ride time. In endurance, it is deducted from the total allotted time.

In endurance, the pulse is taken immediately after you arrive into camp and your horse has 30 minutes to meet criteria.

That's it. You continue the trail ride and come back to camp. A CTR manager may throw in a surprise vet check. At the end of the ride, you come back to camp, do a final vet check, and wait for the results and awards!

It's fun, but be prepared to learn more about yourself and your horse than you ever imagined!

### Where do I start?

Start by joining an organization such as **MOTDRA**. Learn by doing.

There are several good books on the subject. Two of the best are: *Go the Distance - the Complete Resource for Endurance Horses*, Nancy S. Loving, DVM, 1997. You can order the book direct from Loving, 2160 James Canyon Dr., Boulder, CO 80302, \$26 + \$4 shipping. And, *The Complete Guide to Endurance Riding and Competition*, Donna Snyder Smith, publisher, Howell Book House.

You can surf the Internet for more information. A good site is <http://www.endurance.net/>. There is information here about the American Endurance Ride Conference and regional clubs.

The Upper Midwest Endurance & Competitive Riders Association (UMECRA), web page is at: <http://www.endurance.net/organizations/umecra.html>.

Both groups have nice distance riding manuals you can read on-line or download.



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