



SEPTEMBER 18, 2015

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## From Trail Ride to Endurance: Not Such a Big Leap

Endurance riders may covet the discipline's reputation as an extreme sport, but the American Endurance Ride Conference's "gateway" event, the 25-35 mile limited distance ride, is well within the reach of most well-conditioned trail horses.

As the usual stepping-stone to endurance riding, limited distance rides are popular with those new to the sport, riders with new horses, and young and older riders. Some who join AERC move up right away to the endurance distances of 50, 75 or even 100 mile rides, while many are content to stay with what is often called "luxury distance."

Riders have six hours to complete a 25-mile ride, although placings are given and the top ten finishers are able to compete for the coveted best condition award given out at each AERC event. Equines of all types are welcome in AERC rides, as long as they are 4 years old for LD, 5 years for 50-75 mile rides, and 6 years old for 100-mile rides. AERC's motto means everything to participants: "To finish is to win."

AERC's Fall Special allows new riders to join for the remainder of the 2015 ride season and all of the 2016 season (12/1/15-11/30/16) for \$88.75. "We're also welcoming new 2016 memberships, which are \$63.75, a 15% discount off the renewal price thanks to sponsorship by EasyCare Inc.," said AERC Executive Director Kathleen Henkel. "You have to call the office to take advantage of the Fall Special—866-271-2372—but you can join online for 2016 through our [www.aerc.org](http://www.aerc.org) website."

Members of the organization range from 5 years old to early 90s. As with many horse sports, membership skews older but, according to Henkel, "We are seeing an influx of younger new members in the last year or two which makes us quite positive for the future of endurance riding."

"I am so happy to have found a group of people that put their horse first for once and go out of their way to help newbies like me," said new member Maria Phillips. A mentoring program, a new rider handbook, educational materials and a subscription to the monthly

Endurance News magazine welcome those new to the nonprofit organization, which has been going strong since 1972.

"I've ridden jumpers and hunters since the age of 9, and I was converted into a die-hard endurance enthusiast by a wonderful mentor who invested an entire year into getting me trained up," said 20-something rider Parry Kietzman. "Mentoring is what made all the difference to me and I hope I'll be able to pay it forward some day for some other young kid."

Jessica Brewer Cobbley, a new-to-endurance rider, best summed up the sport:

"It's a very much individual sport on the trail. Just you and your horse and maybe a partner or two, but in camp it's relaxing and telling stories and hanging out. It's people helping other people, it's competing against yourself, it's all hands on deck to provide the best of everything for the horses.

"It's groups just for newbies, where experienced seniors hang out just to answer questions and help you come along. It's people reaching out and taking you under their wing, answering your questions, giving advice, talking you down off the ledge, getting you through, cheering their guts out when you succeed, huddling with you when you fail.

"It's control judges telling you your horse looks great. It's a cold bottle of water at the end of 10 hours of dusty trail. It's volunteers holding your horse so you can pee, or your hair so you can vomit. It's the ride meeting, and the ride sharing, and the completion awards that aren't worth \$10 but are priceless and irreplaceable.

"It's the trails you would have never seen, the achievement you would have never guessed you had in you. The pride in your horse, the gleam in his eye, the fog, the dawn, the steam, the sweat, the sunshine, the rain. Triumph and overcoming and enduring, and loading up to go home while you pull up the calendar to find your next ride.

"It's addictive, indescribable, painful, exhausting, exhilarating, freedom and achievement."

If that description intrigues rather than repels, contact the AERC office to receive a "Discover Endurance Riding" booklet or to sign up for membership.

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