

# The Importance of Hydration in the Endurance

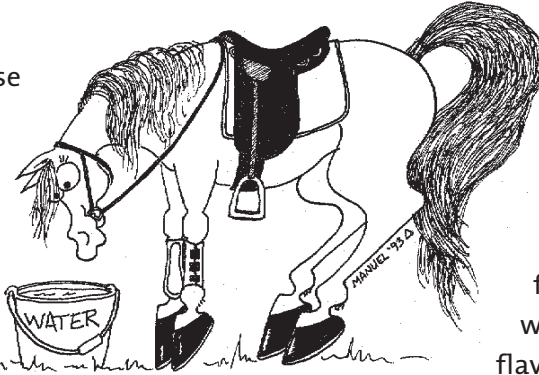
Perhaps the most important need of the endurance horse is proper hydration. Without adequate hydration, the horse can fail in performance, his life becomes threatened, or he can die. Water and proper balance of electrolytes is absolutely necessary for muscle function, including that of the heart.

Under casual circumstances, the horse usually takes care of himself, drinking in his pasture or paddock when he is thirsty. But when the horse is stressed, the natural tendency of taking care of himself changes. When traveling, the horse tends to refuse water when offered. At a ride camp, he is excited and may refuse or forget to drink. On the trail, again he may be too excited to drink, unbalancing his system dangerously. He may suffer either an electrolyte imbalance or his inner core may become overheated. A horse that is hot to touch but is not sweating is in serious circumstances.

The fortunate rider is mounted on a horse that puts his needs before his competitive spirit. The less fortunate rider will have to intervene on the horse's behalf with some carefully thought-out procedures. First, the rider should make sure the horse learns to drink on training rides. If the horse is not a natural drinker, do some training rides with a veteran horse that is a good drinker, as horses frequently learn by example. Do training rides that are long enough that so the horse gets becomes thirsty enough to drink from creeks, ponds, and/or similar other natural sources of water. When you arrive at a water hole after the horse has been out for a couple of hours, wait several minutes for the horse to drink. If necessary, dismount and loosen the girth so that the horse will relax and think about drinking. Use the same patient procedure in competition to encourage the horse to drink. This patience can mean the difference between completing with a healthy, happy horse and not completing, or worse, requiring a horse to be treated.

Before leaving for a ride, it is suggested that several small doses of electrolytes be given, so that the horse becomes

accustomed to the taste and procedure. Electrolytes, being salty, stimulate the horse's urge to drink and so he starts the trip in a well-hydrated condition. Offer water or have it in front of the horse during the trip. Upon arriving at the ride camp, make water available at all times. Two



methods of accustoming the horse to drink at the camp are suggested: 1) bring water from home so that he is not resistant to a new flavor, or 2) flavor water at home for a period of time before traveling, then continue to flavor the new water at ride camp with the same substance. Suggested flavors include soft drinks, flavored electrolytes or molasses.

On the trail, the rule is never pass up water! When riding with someone else, both riders should be courteous enough to stay and allow each horse to drink. It is particularly rude to water one's horse, then dash off down the trail leaving the remaining horse frantic because he is being left. This is also true when riding with a group. If in doubt, ask other riders if it is all right to leave them.

Small doses of electrolytes may be given, but only after the horse has had a good drink. It can be counterproductive, possibly even dangerous, to administer electrolytes to a horse that is already dehydrated. A horse can go into the "thumps" syndrome or even colic if too much electrolyte is given to him when he is dehydrated. If the horse refuses to drink, sponging him to cool him is helpful if the day is hot. Stopping and resting in shade for a period of time is more important than proceeding and endangering his life.

Some horses that are particularly resistant to caring for themselves may not be suitable for the sport of endurance, no matter how talented they otherwise appear. Rather than risk his life, one may either sell the horse and acquire another, or use the horse for some other purpose. Not all horses, especially just because they are Arabs, are suitable for endurance competition. It may be a case of trial and error before finding the ideal horse for you.

—Barbara McCrary