

The Art of Pacing the Distance Horse

Just what does “the art of pacing” mean? Mathew MacKay-Smith liked to say that pacing a horse is like squeezing a toothpaste tube—if you are careful, you will get the most out of the tube and still have several brushings left. If you squeeze too hard, you won’t have anything at the end.

If you were to ask Valerie Kanavy, Stagg Newman, Steve and Dinah Rojek, Maggy Price—they will all say that they learned pacing from the “long slow miles” of competitive trail rides, especially three day 100 mile rides. Like AERC pioneer rides, the object is to have a horse all the way through to the end. But competitive trail riding and multi-day rides are not available to all riders and there are those that complain that they are too slow, too nit-picky, too unexciting for what they see as endurance riding as a sport.

Discouraging the herd instinct

Dr. Jim Baldwin, chair of the AERC Veterinary Committee, who has headed up the AERC investigation into horse fatalities, observed, “Many times a horse gets caught up in ‘the herd’ and runs beyond his ability. The horse appears fine on the trail, but once into the hold where the adrenaline rush stops, the horse is in trouble.” In his opinion, more frequent holds would break up the herd and allow those that could compete at that pace to continue on while those that had slower recoveries to drop back to a pace better suited for them on that day.

We all need to understand that the adrenaline surge that comes from the horse’s instinct to run with the herd can mean a particular horse may run at a faster pace far longer than that horse is really capable. Many rides are going to an earlier first hold as an extra safety measure to give horses a chance to eat, get rehydrated, and get separated from other horses. An alternative is to use a stop and go early in a ride such as what was done on the 2001 Pan Am to separate horses. In those rides where there is not an early hold, the rider takes on even more responsibility to see that her or his horse is not pulled along by other riders at too fast a pace.

All horses are vulnerable

“What has become clear,” stated Dr. Baldwin, “is that it is not just the new rider or the LD horses or the front runners that get into trouble. There are many more horses that are ridden beyond their ability for that day that tough it out to the finish line and even get a completion. The lesson we should be paying attention to is that any time a horse is ridden to the point that it can only walk on trail and shows no more interest in the competition is a horse that could get into trouble.” This is where pacing the horse comes to light. When there is nothing left in the toothpaste tube . . . a mistake was made and the rider should learn from that.

The truth is that sometimes our sport rewards bad behavior. Where is the glory of winning or even completing a ride when afterwards the horse must be treated for ride-related issues? AERC finishing criteria is “fit to continue” and perhaps that needs to be revisited. Dr. Baldwin is advocating that any horse that must be treated within one hour of finishing would not receive completion. FEI has a similar two-hour rule. This has not stopped casualties at the FEI level, but Dr. Baldwin feels that the rule makes a statement to the rider.

Learning to pace

So how does one learn to pace the distance horse? Kathy Brunjes, a member of the 2002 World Championship team, offered, “Well, the first thing I am going to tell you is that the front of the ride is not the best place to learn pacing. Not that the front riders don’t have a ‘pace’ in mind for their horses, but it is going to be their pace, not yours. If you have to repeat it a hundred times . . . keep telling yourself to ‘ride your own ride’!

“The key to pacing is having control of your horse,” said Kathy. “Oh, sure! Just how does one control a young horse in a mass start of 50 horses in the dark? It’s not going to happen. So, your choices are to start later, fight with your horse and hope you gain control, give up and let the horse run, or spend the time to teach the horse to ride your ride. How much time that will take depends on you and the horse, and what your ultimate goals are. The end result is what you have to keep in mind, and pacing from the start will help you achieve that end result, be it a win, top 10, or completion.”

Even the hottest, most competitive horse can learn to relax and pace himself if given the opportunity. Starting last, or in the back of the pack, or with a steady buddy is sometimes the answer for the anxious horse. The compromise you make is that you allow the horse to go, but since the pack isn’t “running” with you, you can slowly gain on and pass horses and find yourself at the first hold not far behind the front. The trick here is to find the pace where the horse does not feel he is being outrun so that he is relaxed enough to pulse right in at the hold. The rider has to have some idea of how fast the horse can go without blowing himself out on the first loop or fighting the rider so hard that he is exhausted by the time he hits the first hold.

Julie Suhr, AERC Hall of Fame member and author of “Ten Feet Tall, Still,” shared her views. “Being able to pace your horse is truly the key to successful endurance. Instinctual behavior on the horse’s part is to go with the herd regardless of its own abilities. This means the pace is controlled by others and not what you, the rider, prefer. Consistency in your commands

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will teach the horse to self-pace and it becomes almost rote behavior on the horse's part without instructions by the rider. Then you have your dream horse. He stays pretty much aerobic and you do not have to play catch-up later down the trail for having winded him earlier.

"Training by yourself in the beginning, without your horse being distracted by others, is frequently the key to gaining control," advised Julie. "Depending upon the horse's personality, it comes easily with some and with others it is a constant battle. The object is to get the horse to trot out well on the flat, ease up on the downhills and slow or quicken the pace according to the demands of the uphill without regard to what the other horses within sight are doing."

Riding at home, either alone or with some trail buddies, may not be enough to teach pacing under ride conditions. Find something like fox hunting or roading hounds or a hunter pace or competitive trail riding that involves a lot of horses in a relatively controlled situation. The object is to teach a horse how to deal with a pack of horses moving at a controlled speed. The rider will soon figure out what works and what does not work and that information can be wisely used at the next endurance ride.

Using a heart rate monitor

The heart rate monitor is a wonderful tool for learning pacing. The proper use of the heart monitor deserves at least a column in itself if not a chapter in a book. Proper use requires much practice in training and in competition so that you know your horse. What follows are just a couple of the basics.

First, if you cannot figure out how to use the High/Low alarm, then keep your eyes on your watch. Set a pulse that you do not want to go over, such as 150-160 bpm, and do not go over it, no matter what. Weather is going to have something to do with the pace you can go, but it is not going to take long before you learn how your horse works.

Hills are an especially good place to watch the monitor. A steady jog all the way up as opposed to cantering halfway up then walking may just show you how you should be riding in competition.

This is not to say that you should not exceed a maximum heart rate, which is fine as long as it is not an extended period of time. What you are looking for is how to find the optimum pace in which your horse is working comfortably and aerobically mile after mile. Most of the time you should be well

below the 150-160 rate noted above, probably between 110 and 130, depending on the horse. To do this you must know what your horse's average pace is at the trot and at the canter on good terrain for the type of weather conditions you are riding in. As your horse develops through conditioning and competition, the optimum pace may increase in speed while the heart rate will stay the in the horse's normal range.

Stagg Newman, a seasoned AERC and FEI competitor, explained his heart rate monitor methods. "Early in a ride the horse will probably be working 10 to 20 beats higher than normal because of excitement and because the body is not fully warmed up. After 30 to 45 minutes the heart rate should drop to the normal range. If it does not, you may be heading for trouble later in the ride. And if later in the ride after the horse has been working in the expected range for many miles you see a rise of five to 10 beats—immediately ask why," said Stagg. "If you are climbing or on more difficult terrain, then that's expected. But if there is not such a reason, then your horse is telling you via the heart rate that he needs to slow down, perhaps even walk for a while. Riders that heed these subtle signs and adjust their pace finish rides well. Those that do not pay attention find they are frequently pulled."

Finding the right pace

It takes some experimentation with your horse in regard to setting the right pace for him. Debi Gordon used to put CBS Redman out front and keep him there because he hated riding with other horses. Once there, the horse settled into a relaxed pace and won countless rides with apparent ease. Stagg Newman keeps Super at the back of the ride to start because he needs a less competitive situation early in the ride so he can settle into his pace. He can then increase his speed until he is up front. Steve Rojek stayed just behind the front of the ride because Hawk didn't like to go first or alone. As long as he was with a reasonable horse, he knew Hawk would settle into whatever pace was set.

The secret of all of these riders is that they were smart enough to learn to pace their horses so that the horse was relaxed even while running. That pays off in the hold when it comes to pulse recovery and overall presentation to the vet. And it pays off when you are riding a horse that is able to optimize his abilities because he is riding his own ride.

—Susan Greenall

Endurance News articles by Kim Fuess entitled "Using Negative Splits to Improve Your Performance" in the July 2004 issue and by Deirdre Monroe entitled "How Long Does It Take to Complete a Ride?" in the October 2004 issue provide more technical information. Both articles are available at the AERC web site, www.aerc.org.