

Changing Attitude: LD = Luxury Distance

By Sky Evans

Before I started in endurance I thought 25 miles was a huge accomplishment. I didn't know any endurance riders, so there was no one to scoff at my naivety! Then I did it and was amazed at how the miles flew by. At my first limited distance ride, I actually slowed down at the end, letting riders pass, so it wouldn't be over too soon.

I learned it wasn't how far you went, but how much time you spent in the saddle. I wanted more time! Doubling my distance would give me that time. But I knew I wasn't ready, nor my horse. So I spent my first year learning the sport by doing LDs before moving on to actual endurance miles. That was a year well spent; the learning curve for endurance is steep. LDs allowed me to learn without the pressure of tackling 50s.

I found that 50 miles is a challenge, both to myself and to my horse. The more years I spent at endurance, the better prepared I was for all the challenges. Not only the challenge of the trail, but the challenge of finding the right balance between conditioning and competition. After seven seasons together some issues arose that convinced me that it was time to retire my horse to limited distance.

I can honestly say I grieved giving up 50s. It was a painful decision. With my experience and her base I decided that if I had to do LDs then at least I would top ten. She loved to go fast and frankly, so did I! Flying down the trail at the front of the pack is fun -- don't let anyone tell you different -- but only if your horse is fit, conditioned and ready to go. Speed brings its own set of concerns.

Part of what pushed me to challenge myself with fast LDs was not wanting to give up our "status." I had personally experienced some endurance riders looking down on limited distance riders. Would those riders look down on me too? For me, it was more about riding all day, enjoying the trail and getting my money's worth from my time, effort and energy.

Fifty miles may be hard work but it's fun. Though it's all about perspective; to a 100-mile rider, 50 is probably a walk in the park!

I played mind games with myself: "Well, maybe she can do an easier 50?" Or, "Maybe if I used a different electrolyte?" or, "We should have a riding buddy." But I knew the answer already. I had my supplement/electrolyte/probiotic regime down. I already tried easier rides, riding buddies, solo rides. We still had the same issues. At this point I could no longer justify 50s, and the cost to my horse seemed too high a price for her to pay.

Another endurance rider said to me, "Your mare likes to go fast, she just doesn't like to go all day!" So true.

So there I was, same story as I started with -- finishing at the speed I liked, but over all too soon. In reality, though, I was fooling myself with the need for speed. I had rationalized that if I couldn't challenge myself with distance, I'd challenge myself with going fast.

But somewhere along the way, I realized I wasn't having so much fun. Now I was watching my back and the riders around me. I hurried when I didn't want to, I passed riders who were friends (no time to be friendly) and hustled to keep my top ten spot.

Now that I was a front runner, it was a whole different game. It felt different to be in that position -- it's no longer an endurance ride, it's an endurance race.

What happened to that "just glad to be on the trail" feeling? What happened to the time I would slow down to make the ride last longer? That's what I loved about 50s. I knew I wasn't racing, so I could enjoy the day. I wanted to finish at a certain pace. Not too fast, nor too slow. It had to be "just right." I call this the Goldilocks principle. It's a whole different fairy tale when you're running for top ten.

Parked next to me at one of my fast LD rides was an out-of-region rider. She had come up from California to ride the 100. This was her first ride since Tevis on the same mare and it impressed me like crazy! I have yet to go beyond 50 miles, so anyone who does back-to-back 100s is amazing.

The California rider did more than ride 100 miles that day: she gave me a new outlook on doing limited distance. She told me of another rider in her region who, after a long endurance career, had switched to LDs. That rider calls it "the luxury distance." She sleeps in late, takes as much time as she likes, finishes early and enjoys the heck out of it. Every luxury distance mile!

It was like a bell going off in my mind. Luxury distance. Funny how a word can change your perspective. Not limited . . . luxury. Just being able to go to a ride is a luxury . . . to own a horse is a luxury. To ride a safe, sound, wonderful partner and friend is a luxury. All those other perks -- sleeping in, having the afternoon to hang out in camp, volunteering, visiting friends -- luxury!

If you want to change your world, then change your mind. Suddenly it was OK to be doing LD. I didn't have to race to do LDs. I was sacrificing my enjoyment of the trail for a top ten placement. Just by changing the name of limited distance to luxury distance made all the difference in the world to me.

It wasn't a step down, it was a step sideways. I didn't have to prove anything to anybody or even to myself. This was the perfect distance for my horse and I had to not see it as "coming to terms" but as still being able to participate in a sport I love with a horse I love. It was OK to luxuriate in that fact!

If you find yourself thinking an LD is not as grand as the higher mileage, remember what it was you loved about endurance in the first place. Don't limit yourself with the word "limited." It's time we start thinking of it not as limited but as luxury -- a choice morsel of the endurance world.

The luxury is about time well spent with a trusted partner on the trail, enjoying the journey and not the destination. I'd forgotten that about endurance when I got caught up in LD competition. It's not always about the finish line and your placement. A little luxury in life makes life worth living.

Sky Evans of the Northwest Region has been involved with endurance since 2001 and plans on continuing with luxury distances (at least until her new horse is ready and able to "go all day"). This article was originally published in the March 2013 issue of Endurance News.