

# Lessons from the other side of the vet line

When a veterinarian takes a turn at riding, she has to remind herself to think more like a vet

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I would be hard-pressed to decide what I enjoy more, vetting endurance rides as a control judge or riding the events as a rider and competitor. Both are hard work and long days, and both are rewarding and come with lessons learned. Oh yes, I learn as much from working the control judge check line all day as I do as a rider.

When working as a control judge at rides I quickly realized something interesting. I'm technically the same person with the same brain when I'm in the role of an endurance rider. But somehow all that good advice I had for myself when I was a control judge flew out the window when I put on riding tights, a helmet, and had my own horse in hand.

For example, Mel-the-Vet wants Mel-the-Rider to not feed her horse in the vet check line because then the horse is chewing when she checks the mucus membranes. Mel-the-Vet is tired of having her fingers almost gnawed off. Mel-the-Rider is convinced that a hungry horse needs to be fed and what's the big deal with a little hay in the vet check line?

If I could ever get Mel-the-Vet and Mel-the-Rider together for a cup of coffee, here are the things that Dr. Mel would want Rider Mel to do differently at rides (or continue to avoid doing). Leaving a good impression during the vet check boils down to two really simple things:

**Trot well, and stand still for the rest.** No, this doesn't come naturally to all horses, but consider it another endurance horse skill and do the homework.

**Be calm.** The best-looking and behaved horses seem to have riders who are projecting calmness. Take a deep breath before stepping into line.

**Be organized.** It helps the calmness part.

**Trot in a straight line.** This makes a huge difference. I can't emphasize this enough. Before starting to run, pick a point and run straight towards it. Don't change your mind halfway and take off at a tangent, or make some weird figure-eight. It's an out-and-back, not a racetrack oval. When you reach the other side, turn the horse around and run straight back to the veterinarian on the same line you went out on.

There are excellent resources on how to properly execute

a trot during a veterinary check through AERC's website. If told to go to a certain point, such as a cone, go all the way to the cone. Due to space limitations in the vet check areas the trot-out can be short at some rides. It can be a real surprise to have to trot the full length of an official trot lane. Do it anyway.

**Don't let your horse rub on the veterinarian or scribe.**

It makes the horse look like a jerk, its heart rate to go up, and makes it difficult to do a good exam. Having the horse rub on the rider is slightly better, but is still not ideal because of the last two things. Rubbing was my number one pet peeve with my now-retired mare, Farley. She picked the vet line to do it in because she knows Mel-the-Rider was more likely to let it go because she didn't want to make a fuss during the exam.

**Keep the horse's head facing straight ahead during the exam.** The position of the head can affect some of the parameters and the veterinarians are trying to be consistent. Bonus: if the horse's head is still and facing forward it also isn't rubbing.

**Have less stuff on the saddle, or at least tie it down better for trot-outs.** Having stuff bouncing around and off the horse isn't fun.

**Keep buddy horses out of the way.** It's fine to have one around for moral support, but use common sense and keep it outside the vet box if possible.

**Have someone else trot the horse if Mel-the-Rider can't do it well due to stiffness or injury.** It really does make a difference on how the horse presents.

**If you see or hear lame steps while trotting the horse, keep going for the full trot-out.** It may not be consistent, which is an important consideration on whether the horse is fit to continue in the competition, and the veterinarian will be able to give better information of what might be going on.

**Don't haze, and don't let the crew haze the horse unless it's actually needed.** Some organizations that do endurance-type competitions don't allow hazing of any kind. Make sure you understand your organization's rules. Even with organizations where a wave or a shout is allowed, as the vet I'm not deaf and blind to what you just did. It gets taken into account when I'm scoring the horse.

A horse that is being hazed in the first couple steps of the trot-out is also more likely to do something unexpected that might get someone knocked over or stepped on. Yes, a young or inexperienced horse might need a pop on the rump with the lead line or reins to start the trot-out. Phase this out eventually.

As a veterinarian I've actually been hit with the buckles on the end of long reins, and had a lot of near misses, because of riders swinging them back without warning. If you are going to do this at least warn the veterinarian and scribe to stand back. The trot area can be tight, and there's less room than you think to wave stuff around.

**Don't get too negative.** When my horse gets poor scores at the vet check I figure it's inevitable that it's just going to get worse. I'm going to get pulled, and there's nothing I can do that's actually going to make a significant difference between this checkpoint and the next. Actually, that is absolutely incorrect. You can really have a horse that looks better at the next check. It won't always get worse! Your best chance at this magically occurring phenomenon is to *slow down*.

Yeah, I know you think you are taking it easy. And that your next loop will be slower, but the trick is to *slow down more*. If everyone around you has slowed down and you are riding with the same pack (albeit slower), you probably haven't slowed down enough.

Sometimes that means you have to get off. Sometimes it means spending extra time in the hold. Sometimes it means spending extra time at every single cooling opportunity to help the horse manage heat better.

Combine that with a slower pace on the trail, and that's probably "slow enough." It makes an amazing difference, and it's the number one thing I will remember (hopefully) when I'm on the other side of the line as a rider.

**If a vet says, "You should stand for best condition," then do it if you can.** Don't argue with them about weight and time. If they say it, they mean it.

**Don't ask the vet for directions.** Lastly, veterinarians usually have very limited information on loops, mileage and ribbon colors, especially if there are several distances with loops all out of camp, and everyone is at camp at once. Always ask a question to the person who is likely to give you the most accurate information, such as ride management or designated volunteers.

Now I just need to go and practice my trot-outs, and not let all this fly out of my brain when I take my stethoscope off and put my helmet on!

Dr. Melinda Newton invites you to visit her blog and website at [drmelnewton.com](http://drmelnewton.com).