

ENDURANCE RIDING AND THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN HORSE

By Dean Moon

When many people think of the Rocky Mountain Horse the first thing that comes to mind is the natural beauty of the horse. The numerous solid body colors found in the breed, the long flowing mane and tail captures the eye. The pleasure and comfort of the four beat natural gait of a Rocky brings a new experience in the saddle to many riders. Soon after their introduction to the Rocky, people become spellbound with the horse's disposition and attraction to humans. Many other attributes will become apparent as a new owner enjoys the horse.

The trail rider quickly recognizes the endurance of the Rocky. Long trail rides in rough country for most of these horses is like a walk in the park. If you and your Rocky enjoy a long fast ride, you may wonder how you would do participating in the competitive sport of endurance riding. If you love trail riding and are competitive, it is something you might consider. There is nothing like the thrill of the finish line, even if you don't place first.

In competitive endurance riding you will encounter various breeds, but the sport has long been dominated by the Arabians. As Rocky Mountain Horses have begun entering the sport they have not only shown they can be successful but could, over time, challenge the dominant breeds. Those who have been members of the RMHA for a few years recognize the name Nuncio, the famed stallion of Rea Swan. Nuncio was not only a show Stallion that won the 1994 and 1995 Master Stallion Conformation Championships but also competed in numerous trail and endurance rides, including the annual one-hundred-mile Rockcastle Saddle Club Trail Ride. In Rea and Nuncio's first NATRAC competition, they placed third with a score of ninety-seven out of a possible one hundred points. We've read about Lori Clark and Chili Pepper, in past issues, who received numerous trail-riding awards in the 1990's and performed well in the show ring. In the last issue of the Rocky Mountain Horse magazine, we could feel the excitement of Patricia Clark's "The Little Horse That Could" in their first Limited Distance AERC ride.

To become one of the growing number of Rocky Mountain Horse owners who love the trail and the excitement of competing, join me in my experience and discover the enjoyment and learn a little of how to become involved.

I saw my first Rocky Mountain Horses at a neighbor's ranch in 1992 when a half dozen Rockies came to meet my wife and me as we walked our new property line fence. We were surprised at their friendliness as they pushed and crowded each other to get closer so we could scratch and pet each one. We were hooked and I purchased my first Rockies, that same year, one from Rea Swan and a second from the late Carson Masters. These same neighbors had a couple Arabians and introduced me to the sport of endurance riding. I soon decided to try endurance on my Rocky.

That was 16 years ago. I took a break from "competition" in the middle of my endurance career for several years while spending time with my sons in their "sport" of Kart racing but kept in tune with training rides. I now have a couple thousand miles in endurance and limited distance competition including 100's, 50's, 30's, and 25's, and thousands of additional training miles.

My Rockies have carried me to a few awards including, two top 10's, one 5th place in a tough scenic ride near Yosemite national Park and three 1st place awards in my weight division, a hand full of top 20's and 3rd runner-up in a top 10 best condition judging after a tough 50 mile ride. My daughter, Natalie, usually rides with me and has won a number of first place junior awards. Natalie completed a number of 100 mile one day rides before the age of 18 on her Rocky.

So can a Rocky Mountain Horse “compete” in an endurance ride and what does it take to be successful?

First, what defines an endurance ride? For the purpose of this article, I define endurance riding as rides sanctioned by the AERC (American Endurance Riding Conference) founded in 1972 as a national governing and record-keeping body for long distance horse riding. An “endurance” ride must be at least 50 miles in length per day; a “limited distance ride” must be at least 25 miles in length per day. In reality, a 50-mile endurance ride is a race. There is a first place winner, a top 10 finishing order from which a best condition judging takes place and an award is given. Often there is also an award given for first place in each weight division: feather, lightweight, middle, heavy, and junior. However, the “motto” of the AERC is “To finish is to win”. This is an appropriate motto, since just getting to the ride with a horse that is fit and ready to complete 50 miles in 12 hours or less is an accomplishment.

Arabians are the horse of choice by most endurance competitors; however, the Rocky Mountain breed can be successful. Not every Arabian will excel at endurance nor will every Rocky. I believe most Rockies are capable of being conditioned well enough to compete and have fun in endurance. That being said, the Rocky that will excel will be one who most importantly is a forward moving horse -The Rocky that “loves to go” and enjoys long rides and likes moving out at a fast pace. Good conformation is helpful but not essential.

My “best” endurance Rocky loves to go fast and far. To date the best we’ve done is 5th place in a moderately tough 50 and judged 3rd out of the top 10 for best condition. Not bad for a Rocky against 9 Arabians. The best advice I can give is use common sense when choosing which Rocky might excel in endurance. Even if your horse is a show champ with great conformation, if your horse needs to be pushed to continue at a reasonable pace after 10 miles or hates hills, or is prone to thumping, or other metabolic issues, this horse is probably not the best candidate. Of course, not many horses are perfect for endurance, and most will have an issue to deal with and that’s OK. For me success in endurance means competing on my Rocky with a good chance of finishing with plenty of horse left and having fun doing it!

So in addition to your willing horse what do you need to compete in endurance? It is very beneficial to have a horse that is trained in the basics. By this I mean both ground and saddle work. That’s not part of our discussion here but don’t skip the basics of training and jump into endurance. It’s tough to train bad habits out of an endurance horse.

Assuming you are working on the basics with your horse and you are ready to try endurance, where do you start? You will need to start training and conditioning rides. Your horse must be at

least 4 years old to compete in limited distance rides and 5 years or older to compete in 50's. If you're riding a 3 year old, just ride and have fun. Not too far and not too fast. Just build up the miles and your horse. Get your horse accustomed to every obstacle you can find.

If you're riding a 4 year old or older, start with the "LSD" method (Long, Slow, Distance). Over time your horse will become an athlete. Many of the training principals that apply to people who run will apply to your endurance horse prospect, except you'll condition your horse to go much farther than most runners. It is useful to use an equine heart rate monitor. "LSD" doesn't mean walk for 15 to 30 miles. Start at whatever mileage your horse is accustomed and go a little farther and then a few rides later a little farther, etc. Just build a foundation. Vary the speed during your rides. Walk, slow gait, faster gait, and, yes, here comes the controversy, canter too. You can finish a 50-mile ride without cantering, but you will be more competitive if you canter occasionally. Occasionally cantering my horses has built up muscle that improves gait.

Use the heart rate monitor to check your horse's progress. My horses have a resting heart rate in the mid to upper 30's. With the horse's tack on and just before I mount, the heart rate is about 45-48. The heart rate is 68 to 80 at a walk; working is 90 to 135; cantering is 115 to 125; full run up a long hill is 165 to 185.

Rarely will I let the heart rate go above 200, and then only for a short period 30-45 seconds. You may have noticed the heart rate dropped at the canter. This is not a misprint. At the beginning of conditioning a gaited horse for distance, it is common for the heart rate to be higher during cantering than it is at a gait. As the horse begins to build up stamina and endurance, this reverses. The horse's body appears to learn an easier way of traveling at speed. I say appears, because I'm not an expert, just sharing my observations while conditioning Rockies over 16 years of endurance riding.

Basically, if I look down at my watch and see a heart rate of 120-135, and we are moving out, I'm happy. A well-conditioned Rocky can move out with a heart rate at 125 for many miles with out resting. However, you do want to take walk breaks and let your horse recover. Your horse probably won't start the conditioning at these numbers. The idea is to build the horse's stamina up to these numbers. During your rides, your horse will benefit from some "interval training". Walk, gait, then canter at a good pace for a period of time, then recover at a gait or walk; then speed up again for a period of time and repeat.

Some of the top endurance riders in the country have suggested, and I agree, a good conditioning program includes riding 3 to 5 days per week. Depending on the horse's condition level, make one of those rides a long ride of 17 to 30 miles. Of course, this is not always possible with busy schedules. I can't keep this kind of schedule, so I do a variation of this and do the best I can. Once you start participating in endurance rides, they become a big part of your conditioning. Then you won't need those long training rides, and can just do some short rides in between the endurance rides.

A brief note about tack: Tack for endurance riding could be a whole other article. Tack is very important. Lightweight is optimal. A saddle that fits your horse with no signs of sores on a 15-

mile pleasure ride may cause large sores at 50 miles.

Before you enter your first competition, try to ride the same trails that the ride will be held on. If that's not possible, try to ride trails with similar terrain. This will benefit both you and your horse. When you feel you and your horse are ready for your first ride, you may want to try a limited distance ride first, just to get your feet wet.

Some experienced riders have said that competitive trail riding "ruins your pleasure horse". It's been my experience that this depends on your horse, and the amount of training and groundwork you are willing to put in along with and during endurance riding. For me, it's not the sport of endurance that ruined a horse for pleasure riding; it was my lack of knowledge and limited training time.

So the answer to the question I asked at the beginning of this article is yes, Rocky Mountain Horses excel in competition, and you and your horse can have fun in endurance riding. Remember, "to finish is to win". That to me is being successful at endurance riding on my Rocky.

Resources: for endurance riding:

American Endurance Ride Conference P.O. Box 6027 • Auburn, CA 95604 • Toll Free 866-271-2372 • 530-823-2260 • Fax 530-823-7805
E-mail: aerc@foothill.net • www.aerc.org

Endurance Tack: www.cooltack.com

Endurance saddles: www.bozsaddlery.com

Endurance web sites: www.aerc.org, www.endurance.net
