

THE UNWRITTEN RULES OF TRAIL AND CAMP ETIQUETTE

All sports are governed by a set of formal rules that participants must be familiar with. In endurance, the rider must note the sanctioning organization and abide by their rules. In the Northwest rides are now sanctioned by either AERC or EDRA. AERC rules are contained in the AERC Rules and Regulations book which can be found at www.aerc.org under the "Competition" tab. Rules for EDRA sanctioned rides are found at www.equinedistanceriding.com under the "About" tab. Regardless of whether rides in the Northwest are sanctioned by AERC or by EDRA, those rides are recognized by PNER. Rules governing PNER are found at www.PNER.net under the "About" tab.

In addition to the published rules, there are often a large number of unwritten rules, norms and expectations that most riders play by. While violating these rules won't necessarily get you disqualified from an event, they can lead to a ride manager asking you not to return to their ride again, hard feelings with other riders, embarrassment, and situations that are unsafe for the rider and our equine partners. Often these outcomes emerge simply because someone doesn't stop and think about the consequences of their actions or are unaware of the effect a decision might have on others. The purpose of this article is to help new riders learn and remind seasoned riders about the unwritten rules that help assure that everyone has a safe and great time in camp and on the trails.

1. Pre-Ride Registration

More and more rides are asking riders to pre-enter the event. If the ride flier says pre-entry is required, that is exactly what it means. You can't just show up in camp and expect to ride. You can, however, call the ride manager and ask if it is possible to come even though you weren't able to pre-enter. The manager will either give you permission to come or may place you on a standby list and notify you if a rider who did preregister cancels. The reasons for calling the ride manager are two-fold. First, the ride permit may limit the number of riders and/or vehicles that can be in camp and/or on the trail. If you just show up, your presence may put the entire event in jeopardy, and the ride manager may have no choice but to tell you to leave. Second, the ride manager may have relied on the number of pre-entries when making any number of decisions: the number of vets, awards, porta-potties, volunteers, dinners, etc. If you just show up you can put a big monkey wrench in those plans, and negatively impact the entire ride.

Just as you should call before just showing up at a pre-registered event, you should also call if you decide not to attend after sending an entry. When you don't inform the ride manager, they can't fill your slot if entries are limited to a set number. This irritates everyone; the ride manager has now lost an entry included in their budget, and the wait-listed rider who wanted to attend misses out because the ride manager thought the ride was full. Pick up the phone - ride managers understand that stuff happens.

Many ride fliers ask for but don't require a pre-entry. That doesn't mean you should shrug it off. Nor does it mean you should just pre-enter every ride just in case you might want to attend. Our ride managers work extremely hard for us. They invest enormous amounts of time, energy, and MONEY to put on rides. The least we can do is lessen their workload and their financial risk by completing a suggested pre-entry whenever we are able to do so. In addition to helping the ride manager make decisions regarding awards, vets, etc., pre-entries allow ride managers to get all the rider data entered into whatever program they are using to track placings and to submit results to AERC, PNER and/or EDRA. If you have never had to do this sort of tracking, let me tell you it takes a lot of time and it is so much nicer to have most of it input before getting to the ride site.

For the same reason, make an effort to ACCURATELY and COMPLETELY fill out the ride entry. Imagine having to look up the horse number for 30-50 horses because the rider didn't fill it in. Imagine having to figure out what the horse's real name is when the rider just puts the horse's barn name on the entry. If you have to make a change in the horse (or rider) after sending in the entry, do it before you get to ride camp if possible. It helps assure that the results will go in correctly and will facilitate checking in at the registration table.

Finally, please realize that oftentimes ride managers leave for ride camp well in advance of the ride. If you are trying to reach them but they don't answer, leave a message but don't assume they will get it. In addition, try to reach the co-ride manager, the ride secretary (if there is one), or send a message with another rider.

2. Ride Camp

Be mindful of the overall space available in ride camp. If it's small, fence off no more space than your horse requires. If it's large, leave room between your rig and the rig next to you. If you are saving space for others, block off only what you need. Be aware that even if they aren't marked off, there do need to be lanes for vehicles to get in and out; don't pin in a rig - they may need to leave in the middle of the night to get a sick horse or person to medical care. Try to park in an orderly fashion; if every rig parks facing the same direction far more rigs can get into camp. Of course, this isn't always possible, but at least be aware.

If you are riding an LD consider parking further away from the vet area and leaving the closer spots for riders on longer distances - they will have more holds and will be up much longer than you. If your horse is anxious, paces, paws, whinnies all night or is aggressive toward other horses, park on the edge of camp and leave plenty of space between your horse and others' horses -- even if being closer to another horse may calm your horse. You have no idea what that disruption may mean to the performance of that other horse or rider. If you need

a buddy horse, ask your friends to camp next to you, and work with your horse at home so he comes to camp ready to be a good camper.

Throughout the weekend, keep your ride camp clean and be aware that things you leave outside your trailer may be a hazard to riders navigating through camp in the dark and for horses that may get loose. If you are setting up a tent, for your safety, be mindful of where you locate it.

Be respectful of people camped next to you after dark; they may be getting up early in the morning to start a 100 and want to get to bed early. If you use a generator, please turn it off by dark. If you are up earlier to start a longer distance, try to be as quiet as you can.

Don't "borrow" stuff from another rider or rig without permission unless it's truly an emergency. Most riders come with just enough supplies for their horse and are distressed to find that someone else helped themselves to it. If you need something, ask. Almost always someone will be able to help you find what you need. Endurance riders are helpful that way.

Practice having your horse stand quietly in a mock vet line before you get to camp. Remember that the vets are within their rights to refuse to vet a horse that is stepping on them or running them over. If your horse is wound-up and not being a good citizen, take him out of the vet line and back to your trailer and work with him. Come back to the line later. Do not slow vetting or place other horses/riders in harms way. Teach your horse to have his gums checked, his legs examined. Be sure he stands when someone is taking a heart rate. When in line PAY ATTENTION to what is going around you; it's easy to get chatting and end up with two horses kicking each other or you. Practice doing a trot out, CORRECTLY so the vet doesn't have to ask you to trot out multiple times. (Approach a ride camp neighbor who doesn't look busy, or ask a volunteer to direct you to an experienced Junior or Young Rider or a newly educated Greenbean rider the day before for tips on how to handle trot-outs.)

At the ride meeting, listen to the ride manager. You may have done the ride before, but many have not and need to be able to hear. The trail, the order of the loops, start times or hold times may have changed. If, like me, you hate ride meetings, send someone to get the necessary information. It won't be the ride manager's fault if you get lost because you weren't aware of the information given at the ride meeting.

If you decide to stop midway through a ride (a rider option pull), be sure to let the vets and ride management know. I once spent hours on trail looking for a rider who had loaded up and was driving home.

Even if the final trot-out and vetting was nearly perfect, once the ride is over, make sure to check on your horse frequently. Watch to be sure he/she is eating

and drinking. Horses can get into metabolic difficulties hours after a ride. If it's cool and you blanket, be sure to check frequently to be sure your horse is warm but not over-heating. Horses can continue to radiate enormous amounts of heat after they are done competing. Likewise, if you came in when it was nice and warm, check your hard-working, tired partner to be sure he or she is still warm enough as it cools off in the evening.

At many rides, the permitting agency requires that no manure/hay be left at the ride site. So, no matter what a pain this is, if ride management asks you to clean up and take your manure with you, be prepared with tools to do it. If you fail to clean up your camp one of two things happens. Either the rider manager or another rider will end up having to do it. Ride managers and riders don't forget when this happens. Remember, what goes around comes around, and you may find yourself on the receiving end of something you didn't anticipate. The other thing that can happen if camp is not cleaned is that no permit will be issued the following year and the ride won't go forward. How awful would it be to know you were the cause of that happening! Be aware that the use of hay bags not only makes your job easier but also makes for less waste. Having a nice big muck bucket handy already lined with a garbage sack prevents double handling manure - just don't fill it too full; they get heavy quick.

3. Trail Etiquette

A. Warm up

Before the ride starts, you are expected to give your number to the starter so the ride manager knows who went out on trail. If you've decided not to go out or are going out late, remember you need to relay this information as well. Most riders check in while mounted and warming up before the start of the ride, but you can just walk up and take care of this if you think it is safer for you and your horse.

During this warm-up period be particularly aware of what is going on around you; horses are fresh, and it's easy to have or cause a wreck. Try to keep your horses away from other horses, especially if your horse is wound-up. If the group warming up is going a particular direction, try to ride the same direction rather than going against the group. During your warm-up period, be sure to check your cinch! Nothing is more dangerous for every rider and horse than when someone's saddle slides underneath the horse during the start of a ride.

B. Trail Is Open

There is no requirement that you start as soon as the trail is open. Many people choose to let the folks who are seriously competing that day time to trot out of sight before they depart. You will often hear experienced riders talk of "finding a pocket". This simply means finding a spot at the start where they are not in a large group of horses. A lot of energy can be wasted by fighting to control your

horse at the start if they are not trained to remain calm in large groups of horses. The bottom line is you should do what is best for you and your horse. If you choose to leave camp well after the start, try to leave at a reasonable pace; remember that others leaving late may be trying to work with their horse on a nice relaxed, quiet start, and having someone race by them doesn't help them achieve that goal. If someone in front of you is having difficulty with their horse, ask them if it's ok to pass or if there is anything you can do to assist them. No one wants to see another rider injured when simply slowing down for 30 seconds will prevent that.

C. Tailgating/Kicking

NEVER EVER tailgate the horse in front of you; he isn't there to slow your horse down. Tailgating can result in either a pulled shoe or a terrible injury if the back horse reaches up and steps on the front horse's hind foot. The rule is that you should be able to see the bottom of all four feet of the horse in front of you as he travels down the trail. If you can't, you are too close. This rule is also for your own protection. Many horses who never kick will kick if tailgated long enough. When that happens, it isn't the fault of the horse that kicked. It is your fault.

Speaking of kicking, you may come upon horses with ribbons in their tails. Red ribbons signal a horse that may kick. Green ribbon may signify a green horse and/or rider. And yellow or orange may signify a stallion. The bottom line - ribbon in the tail means to use caution or the encounter might not end well for you and your horse or the other rider and their horse.

ALWAYS warn another rider before going by his/her horse. This is a basic safety issue for everyone involved. Young and old horses alike can startle and bolt if they are surprised by someone passing them. So, if you find yourself behind a horse that is traveling slower than you are, politely ask for the trail. Make sure you can pass safely and that there is enough space to do so before going by. When asked to yield the trail, always do so as soon as it is safe. Giving way is just good sportsmanship. If someone comes up behind you, ask if they want by. They may say "no" or may ask to pass on the right or left. When passing, be specific about where you plan to go so the rider in front knows how best to assist you. If your horse kicks, warn the passing rider and then make sure to get your horse well off the trail and point their butt away from the other horse. Give riders as much warning as possible before passing; they may be putting a water bottle away or zipping a jacket and need time to get their reins. If you hear someone ask for trail, give some sign that you heard them.

D. Stopping on trail

Unless it's an emergency, always move well off the trail when you need to stop for some reason. Stopping and blocking the trail backs up horses which frustrates riders and can create any number of potential hazards. If you stop to

render aid to another rider, don't tie your horse in a spot where he can block the trail even partially. If necessary, move forward until you can find a spot where you can safely tie your horse and then walk back to the other rider.

If you see a rider stopped and off their horse, slow down and ask them if they are ok. Again, treat the pair as a safety issue. Do you really want that horse coming up behind you without a rider because you wouldn't slow down while the rider remounted safely?

E. Leap Frogging

Be aware that repeatedly leap frogging the rider in front of you can be very, very irritating. In some circumstances, it is inevitable, say, for example when one horse moves faster on the uphill and the other moves faster on the downhill. In other instances, it is totally unnecessary. In particular, don't trot by the rider in front of you and then slow down or stop to graze -- do that before passing.

F. Loose Horse

There may be times that you come across a horse that has lost its rider. In some instances the horse may be coming toward you, and in other instances it may come up behind you. Your safety and the safety of your horse are your top priority. Your second priority should be the safety of the other rider and the horse. Yes, in some instances having to help a rider and/or their horse may mean that you don't finish as high in the placings as you otherwise would have. But also remember that someday you could be the one separated from your horse and desperately hoping that someone will help you both.

Be careful about trying to stop a horse that is running in a panic; such horses can run straight into other horses or people resulting in serious injuries to everyone. If you can't stop the horse, take careful note of where you saw him so you can tell the rider and ride management where to look. If, however, you can safely stop or retrieve the loose horse, stop and think carefully about the best thing to do next. There is no "right answer," it will depend on the circumstances -- how far is camp, how far in back of you do you think the fallen rider is, are there people in back of you who will assist the rider or is the rider a tail end rider who is now horseless and totally alone on the trail, can you safely pony the horse back to the rider or to camp, can you call camp for assistance, is the rider likely to be injured, if you tie the horse are you sure that he won't break loose and become a hazard to other horses and riders or become lost or injured, can you precisely direct ride management to the horse, if you pony the horse forward is the rider going to have a very very long walk to get to camp, etc

G. Gates

Many rides in the NW have gates. In some cases, ride managers find volunteers to man the gates. A heartfelt "thank you" to those folks goes a long way. Sitting

out by a gate all day long is boring work, and it's nice to be appreciated. If, however, you find yourself opening and closing gates throughout the day, the rule is simple: if the gate is open when you get there, leave it open. If it is closed, close it behind you. Failure to follow this rule may place the ride at risk since many rides occur on property where grazing cattle are wandering. Ranches tend to refuse permission to use their property if they have to round up all their loose cows after the ride.

If a group approaches a closed gate together and one rider gets off to open the gate, the rest of the group should ride carefully through the gate and wait for the gate person to remount before riding on. The rule makes common sense: you leave the gate in the same order you arrived. If one rider is already off and has the gate open and another rider is approaching but not yet at the gate, it is up to the first rider if he wants to stand there and hold the gate open or close it. Just remember that just because you have the right to close the gate doesn't mean you should. Ask yourself what is to be gained. Sometimes, if the second rider is not particularly close, the first rider will yell that they are leaving the gate open but the second rider must close it. This is appropriate.

H. Water

The importance of staying hydrated is of paramount importance to all endurance horses. Because your conduct at water sources can mean the difference between a horse drinking or not, you can find yourself in big trouble with other riders if you don't use good judgment coming into, using, and then departing from water.

If you approach a water source and another horse is drinking, try to let that horse finish before you let your horse in. It's also fine to ask the rider if your horse can come in (assuming there is plenty of room), but then comply with their wishes. If they indicate you may come in, try to do slowly and calmly. Don't let your horse use the tank, or another horse, as a scratching post. If you are going to electrolyte, move away from the tank, electrolyte, and come back to rinse your horse's mouth. If you want to cool your horse at the tank, be mindful that at some rides sponging out of the tank may be prohibited. If it isn't, be considerate of the other horses coming up behind you who still need to drink. When getting ready to leave a water source ask the other riders if it's ok if you go. You may be asked to stay while a horse finishes drinking. Be a good sport and stay. When you leave, try to "sneak" away. In other words, leave slowly and quietly so as not to disrupt the other horses.

Natural water can present several hazards in the form of bogs, steep embankments and slippery rocks. Always be alert and cautious when approaching a creek, stream or river. Practice crossing water before you go to a ride. Don't expect a fellow rider to help you get your horse across water unless you've made an agreement with them well before the ride. Leave plenty of room between each horse crossing a large body of water so there is a margin of safety

if something bad happens. If possible, don't block the water crossing while drinking or sponging; move up or downstream.

If other horses are drinking, don't let your horse play in the water. Pawing is not cute --it's disruptive. Practice sponging in moving water before the ride so your horse doesn't panic as the sponge bobs along in the current and perhaps moves under them. Be careful about letting your sponge get too close to another horse.

Ponds can be boggy, and there are times when you must weigh the benefit of taking a chance with a bog or passing it by and waiting for the next water. Listen to warnings given by ride managers; they usually know if footing is safe or not.

I. Vet checks

The number one rule at vet checks is to be polite to the vets, pulsers, and other volunteers. Arguing with the vets and yelling at the pulse takers will, at best, infuriate your ride manager and, at worst, will get you disqualified from the ride. The vets are there doing their very best to protect all our equine partners. The other folks are volunteers who are doing their best as well. Be patient and kind and always, always say thank you. Rides don't happen without them.

At some rides pulsers will tell you that you must move away from the water tanks before they will pulse your horse. Even if they don't, try to do so. The obvious reason is that pulsing at the tank prevents other horses from having access to drink. It also creates a potentially dangerous situation with too many horses and people in too small of a space. The other reason is that pulsers hate to stand all day with wet feet! Don't laugh until you have volunteered to pulse and experienced wet soggy feet for 8-10 hours!

Sometimes pulsers are trying to get a number of horses through. In that case wait to ask for a pulse until you believe your horse is down. If your horse isn't down, expect that the pulser will move on to another horse and then come back to you. If there aren't other horses the pulser may simply stay with your horse, but it isn't required of them.

If the wind is blowing it can be very difficult for the pulser and vet to hear the horse's pulse. You can help speed things along by using your body to help block the wind. Also recognize that some horses have heart beats that are naturally very hard to hear, so be patient if it is taking the pulser longer to get your horse's pulse taken. They aren't deliberately trying to slow you down.

Teach your horse to stand quietly when being pulsed; it is difficult to get a pulse when the horse is moving or scratching. Pulsers are not obligated to take a pulse if they feel unsafe doing so. The same is true of the vets; they are not obligated to do an exam on an unruly horse.

If you have been riding with someone and the horses have become trail buddies, consider keeping the horses together until both of them have pulsed down. If a buddy horse leaves, it may delay how fast the other horse recovers.

Once you have pulsed, determine where the vet is and if there is a line of horses waiting; sometimes it is not all that obvious. Move to the back of the line and be polite to those in the area. Remember, vet lines can be hazardous so pay attention to what your horse is doing and how close he/she is to other horses.

If you have completed your ride and are waiting for your completion exam, it is considered good form to allow horses who are continuing on to go to the vet first. In many instances, riders who are still on trail but are doing lesser distances or who aren't concerned about their time will let the longer distance riders go in front at the vet line. Every 75 and 100 mile rider greatly appreciates this gesture. Remember that these riders and horses have a limited time to eat and rest before they head back out, and they would rather spend it at their trailer.

Although ride managers do everything they can to stagger when riders will arrive at vet check, lines will and do occur. Be prepared for this to happen. Have a stash near the vet area that you can grab if you need to stand in line. Include some horse food, a blanket for the horse if it's cool, some food and drink for yourself. And above everything BE PATIENT. The vets will get everyone through as fast as they can.

If you are at an out vet check, near the end of your hold gather your crew bag and other stuff and find out where ride management wants it to go. It is up to you to deposit your supplies where it needs to go, not ride management. Sometimes you will put it in a trailer, other times you will just stack it in a particular spot. Remember that someone else will be either loading or unloading your gear so be mindful of how heavy it is.

J. The Finish

Endurance riding is a competition. For some, they are racing against other riders and their placing is important to them. Other riders have a specific goal and don't care what place they finish as long as they meet their goal. For others, the only goal is to enjoy the day, the trail, their horse, their friends. The great thing about endurance is that all of these are totally appropriate. It's up to you!

Regardless of which group you fall into, as you ride in and out of camp, figure out where the finish line is. If you would consider racing to the finish to secure a placing or just for the fun of doing it, examine hazards around the finish line. Is there a fence right after the finish line, what is the footing like, are there trailers with kids and dogs at the finish? It is fine to race, just make sure you can do so safely.

Sometimes ride manger prohibit racing to the finish because they cannot establish the finish line in a location where racing would be safe. In this case you can either reach an agreement on the trail about the finishing order or you can agree to have a "race" well before getting to camp. In other words, you can all agree that on the count of three you are going to race to the big tree. The order at the tree is the finishing order.

Often, even very competitive riders would prefer to reach an agreement on trail about the finishing order rather than race. This is because they recognize that racing has risks; it's a great time for a horse to be injured. In this case, the group will usually try to decide what is fairest. If one horse led and pulled the other horses for most of the day, they may agree to let that horse go in first. If one rider waited for another at a vet check, that rider might go in first. It's up to the group to decide. If you don't want to agree, that is fine. Just be honest so the other group members can decide if they want to race you or will just let you go in.

Summary

There is a lot of material in this article. When in doubt, just be patient and polite. If you aren't sure what the expectation is, just ask. Most everyone will be happy to show you the ropes. Realize that how you behave will be remembered far longer than what your placing was that particular day. We all share one common goal: to have a safe and joyous experience on the trail with our equine partners.