

## Horse Myths

*Traditions, traditional sayings and traditional practices should be allowed to die if they collapse under the prick of a legitimate challenge.*

Sitting in the pleasantly warm spring sunshine waiting for the 40km and 80km riders to return from their endurance ride I was asked if I would 'have a go' at an endurance ride. "I don't think so" was my reply. "Oh, why not?" was the response. And I thought, "They asked so I may as well give my honest answer".

"Well I don't think it is fair on the horses and I don't think the horses enjoy it".

In just a few seconds the undivided attention of the TPR and vet team was on me and I was bombarded with an onslaught of statements countering my previous uttering. As men are reputedly only able to concentrate on one thing at a time, I filtered this barrage down to the following:

"They (horses and especially Arabs) have been *bred* to run long distances".

"Of course they love to run; they do it *all* the time in the paddock".

"They are so keen to 'go' you have to hold them back for the first half an hour".

"They just LOVE it"!

"Look at thoroughbreds, they love to race too".

There are a lot of issues here and I could see my work was going to be cut out for a while. My first response was an apology for being a 'horse liberationist' and I then said that my feelings came from looking at the situation from the horse's point of view, not the human's.

Just because a horse *can* run 40, 80, 120 or 160 km at an endurance event or has been 'bred' to do this, doesn't necessarily mean that the horse would choose to do this if given a choice. A horse will only do these types of distances if he has a human on his back and he is *made* to run. The human is making the horse run these distances. Yes, we make our horses do many things that they would choose to not do, given the opportunity of choice, but endurance riding is at the extreme end of a horse's physical ability.

Similarly, a galloping horse only becomes a galloper if he has a human on his back or a predator representing a real (to the horse) threat, just as a dressage horse will only perform if made to and a jumping horse will only leap over an oxer if they are made to. If this were not true, then we would have horses doing piaffes, horses jumping out of paddocks and horses continually running around their paddocks. It just doesn't happen like that in the 'real' world.

Having said all that, I really love to watch my horses have a gallop in the paddock. It is such a rare event though. If I am not present at the particular moment, then the gallop is over and done with pretty quickly. Or if this high energy demonstration is not over and done within a minute or so, there is usually something wrong. Something is causing these horses to move; to run away. To say "a horse loves to run; they do it all the time" is just pure fantasy. It just 'aint true.

A horse will *sometimes* love to run. When they are in this frame of mind, they do it to keep warm, to play, or just have a hoon around a new paddock or to show off to a 'new' horse that's been introduced to the herd. A truly free domestic horse may only gallop one or two minutes or less a week, canter about five minutes a week and trot ten or fifteen minutes a week. The majority of the time they are grazing, snoozing or walking around.

An endurance horse is 'made' to trot many hours in a day. A galloper is *made* to canter and gallop, over distances far greater than they would prefer, be it in training sessions or a race, and a dressage horse is *made* to 'perform' for far longer than they would like. I also believe that jumping horses, and that includes eventers, hunters, show jumpers and steeplechasers, would, if given a choice, go around the obstacles put in their path rather than jump over them. When I use the word 'made' in this paragraph, I really mean 'forced'. Because if the horse doesn't do what the human wants, it is often beaten, kicked or whipped till it does.

A horse that 'just wants to go' is, in my mind, a scared, nervous or upset horse. The human's response to this usually involves hanging off the horse's mouth, sometimes for hours. Surely if the human and the horse had a true relationship, then the horse would listen to and understand the human when the he or she requested that the horse walked or trotted gently and under control.

It was the chief vet of the day who stated that thoroughbreds 'love to race'. He is a racehorse owner and does a lot of business with the industry. I put to him that if the horses didn't have a smallish human on their backs urging them on then the field would probably find the grass, under their shod hooves much more interesting. And I added, "Why is it, if these horses really *love* this activity so much, are they whipped and whipped hard?" "Would a 400 metre Olympian runner appreciate someone flogging them over the last two hundred?" "Oh, it's just to urge them on", he replied. One minute the horse loves to run, the next minute he needs 'urging on' (with a whip) to get to the finish first. "Would you like it if I used a whip on you like a jockey uses a whip on a horse?" was my next question. I got no reply.

The subjects of racing two year old horses, stabling, penning and general housing, mandatory shoeing and horse handling didn't get a mention. But I feel they do need to be considered by anyone with horse welfare in mind.

That afternoon didn't get any better from the endurance horses' point of view either. In the vetting ring I saw many red and rubbed raw withers and red sores and marks where saddles and bits had been rubbing. I saw many dehydrated horses. I saw one horse that had thrown a shoe off the right fore twice and did the last thirty five kilometres with one front shoe and one hoof boot that didn't fit. The boot rubbed several wounds on the pastern and heel area of that limb. And I saw many exhausted horses.

It sure wasn't about the horse.

To rub salt into the wounds, so to speak, some of the horses that did complete the 80km event were rewarded with yet another opportunity to be saddled up, mounted, lined up and with varying levels of urging (from polite to violent kicking), made to canter and trot to determine the 'fittest horse'. This is just what a horse needs after they have done 80km, isn't it? In my opinion this is just cruel, physical abuse of a horse!

At the 'pinnacle' of the Australian endurance circuit, the Quilty, recently run in Nanango, Queensland, over half of the two hundred and four horses entered in the 160km event did not complete. Eighty two horses were vetted out. This means that it needed a qualified vet to declare that these horses were not in a fit condition to continue or complete the event. Also only twenty three of the riders in the field could or would determine that their horse was not capable of carrying on.

In any competition, if over half the entries do not finish or do not finish in a fit condition, isn't there something wrong? If more than half the field in an Olympic marathon failed to finish, wouldn't questions need to be asked? The entrants in a marathon have a choice as to whether they run or not though. Horses do not, in any event or discipline, have a choice. So I think we could start treating the horse much better than we have done or do still.

These type of activities, it seems are all about the human achieving/winning and using the horse as a vehicle to satisfy their desire to compete and support their egos. If these horses owners, trainers, breeders and competitors would not treat their children that way, how can they justify treating their horses in such a way? From within the endurance sport, I'm sure many cannot or do not want to see life from the horses point of view. From the outside, from over the fence, the event I attended was quite distressing. And that's a real shame - for the horses.

I think we can do much better. And I hope we do.

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