

2016 Rattle Snake Round Up Competitive Trail Ride
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The drive started out at 8am. From the farm we had to drive about 6 hours to the Writing on Stone Rodeo grounds so because horses need an hour of rest for every hour that they are on the road, we started out early. The drive was easy with sunny skies and no wind. We arrived at around 2 pm and because we were nice and early, we were able to pick a good campsite for us and our horses. There was a chinook wind blowing so we angled our trailers parallel to the west wind to give our horses some shelter.

Then, first things first, we unloaded the horses, tied them to the trailers and started setting up their temporary paddocks. According to our rules from TRAC the paddock size cannot exceed 200 square feet. So this means no larger than 10 x 20 feet or 60 feet in diameter. I currently use electric tape for my fencing because I am using my panels on the farm. Electric fence works great for those sensitive type Icys but the unsensitive intelligent ones often will walk through it. Having your horse get loose at the ride is not fun. Often there are miles of wilderness around and the horse will sometimes take advantage of that.

Panels are the safest option but make sure to either attach chicken wire or square hole garden fence to your panels. Icelandics love to reach through the panels and eat grass. They can actually walk the panels across a field doing this. My mare Hrima is a sensitive type and has no interest in testing the electric tape. I have a portable fencer to electrify everything. It runs off solar panels but there are some that run off batteries. Once the fence was up, Hrima went into the pen. The grass was a good distraction for her while I set up the fencer and filled her tub with water.

Hauling water is very common. If it's not too far away, I will just haul buckets of water and fill her tub full. But life isn't always so easy. If the water is far away then I found the easiest way is to unhook my truck and drive the buckets and tub over to the water station. Usually it's either a hose, a water truck with a large pipe and valve, a river or a large water trough. Some people bring little fold away carts which make things alot easier. Once the water for Hrima is full I then go for a walk locating the office, porta potties, vet check areas, and food areas. I had paid my fees early(usually most ride managers demand early entries) so I went to the office to fill out my info and sign the waivers as well as pick up my map, vet check form, booklet and number. On the vet check form you have to fill out if you are light weight, heavy weight, or junior. Light weight goes up to 190lbs and that is including the weight of your saddle and pads.

The vet check form is what you give to the vets when you go for your initial vet check. Every rider starts off with 300 points. As the vet checks and the ride progresses, points can be deducted for bad manners, mental alertness, high heart rate, high respiratory, etc. The booklet is something you keep for the P &Rs(pulse and respiration checks) The vets will log in your horses pulse and respiration at each check into this book so it is

very important not to lose it. If a rider does lose this book, they don't get their miles logged into the records and they are not eligible for placings. The map gives you a general idea of the ride you are about to embark on. And there are no numbers to pin onto your back or attach to your bridle. What you do is take a marker (you can buy them at feed stores that also cater to cattle or pigs) and draw the number onto your horse's butt. Both sides. This is so that it's easy for the vets to see the numbers.

So once the paperwork is all done, it's time for the vet in. For a CTR the horses have to be clean and brushed. Points can actually be deducted if your horse isn't clean enough. When I take a horse in for a vet check, I always hang out in the vet check area for a while. The reason is, with so many horses around and so much going on, it often bumps up the heart rate. Especially in Hrima's case who came into heat that day. She was nickering to all the horses and excited to see them all and her heart rate and respiration were up. So knowing this, we stood around for about 10 mins just letting her take in everything and calm down. Luckily she did for the most part.

The vet checked over her thoroughly. Manners are important at this point. If your horse is moving around, not wanting the vet to touch them, neighing to the other horses, acting up, etc you get points deducted. So manners during the vet checks are very important. Hrima has never liked people other than those she trusts to touch her so this was homework for us. It took training with strangers and rewards to get her thinking positively about vet checks. One thing I did is take her to two endurance rides before hand. With positive reinforcement and experience she now doesn't mind the vet checks and stands quiet and still.

The first thing that is done is checking the pulse and the respiration. The vet listens to the horse's heart rate using a stethoscope and then listens to gut sounds and watches the horse's flanks for respiration. For CTR the horse's heart rate cannot be higher than 12 beats per 15 seconds. If it is, you get points deducted. I have heard of horses seeing other horses leave the area and their heart rates shot up to 13 beats. So again it's important to bring your horse to events so that they are used to it or expect at your first few events your horse's heart rate may be high. I took Hrima to the endurance rides first for this reason. Her first ride was very stressful for her unfortunately. Her resting pulse was at 14 beats and it was because she was so excited and stressed. Luckily endurance allows your horse to have a heart rate of 16 or less so we didn't have points deducted. At this check she was at 10 despite being in heat. Her resting pulse at home is 9 beats. For respiration, the maximum respiration is 10 breaths per 15 seconds. Anything after that and points are deducted. Hrima's was at 4. Her normal at home is 2-3.

The horse needs to be ok with getting their gums checked for capillary refill and mucous membranes (this tells the vets if the horse is stressed from dehydration, guts not working right, overly tired, pain, etc). The vet will carefully open the side of the horse's mouth and touch the gums. Many horses don't like this so it is important to teach your horse that this is ok. As well the vet runs their hands all over the horse feeling for bumps, scratches, blemishes, wounds, or muscle soreness or atrophy. They test the back for

back pain, some take the horses temperature, they feel the tendons for swelling or blemishes. All through this the horse is expected to stand quietly and calmly.

During this time the rider needs to tell the vet about any blemishes that the horse has. Splints, scars, ruffled hair, cuts, etc all have to be mentioned. The reason is, if the vet misses something on the initial check and then notices it on the final check, points will be deducted. So it pays to know every inch of your horse before hand. Once the vet is finished, they will ask for a trot out. What we have to do is trot away from the vet and then back to them. Immediately after we jog a figure eight. What the vet looks for is lameness, quality of movement, and the energy level of the horse. Again it's important to have good manners. If your horse trots beside you all excited, tossing their head and jumping around, they have to do the same thing at the last vet check after 25 miles of hard work which isn't likely. Most horses are tired and sedate after their ride. If your horse is not as high energy as at the beginning of the ride, you lose points. So it's best to have your horse jog beside you quietly in the first check and again in the last check. Hrima knows this well and generally is quiet during the trot outs. Afterwards the vet asks the horse to back up and then that is pretty much it. At this vet check, Hrima scored perfect scores for everything. It was a good start.

After getting her settled it was time to set up my sleeping quarters for the night and eat dinner. The day of the ride starts very early. For novice 25 miles we were starting just after 8am. That meant a 5am feeding. Intermediate riders start usually 40 mins earlier and open riders even earlier. If you are camped next to an Open rider, you will probably hear them feed their horse at around 3 am. Sleep on ride night is usually tough to come by.

At around 8pm it was time for the ride briefing. This is a meeting for everyone to be at for trail info, ride times, any extra rules, and to discuss the trail map. It is important to write some of these things down because once you are on the ride, there is no one to ask out there! Often hazards will be talked about such as places with loose wire, big holes in the ground, very steep parts of the trail, goat trail areas with steep drops, etc. As well the ribbon markers are discussed. Each ride manager sets things up a little differently. At the last ride I was at the ribbons were very well marked and when there was a turn, there would be three ribbons side by side with the direction to turn as a different coloured ribbon. So for example if you were suppose to turn right, the left and middle ribbon would be the same colour as the other trail ribbons and the right ribbon would be a different colour. At this ride, three ribbons side by side meant turn. Ribbons can be a pain because they can blow away or get eaten by cattle.

After the ride briefing, it's time to go to sleep. Or try to. There are usually alot of horses calling to each other, banging around with their buckets, etc. At one ride I was at, it was located on an elk farm so the elk would come close by and start bugling. 5am feedings come with spectacular sun rises during the summer and if you have everything set up the night before, then feeding and pen cleaning only takes around 15 mins. After that, you can get some more sleep. I make sure to set two alarms always. Just in case.

I usually wake up around two hours before my ride and start getting ready just over an hour before my ride time. This gives me time to pack for the day, tack up slowly and do stretches and things with Hrima. The weather was suppose to be very hot that day so I braided Hrima's mane to help keep her cool. A chinook was rolling in so the winds were getting strong but amazingly enough it started to rain lightly and a beautiful double rainbow painted the western sky. It was a good luck omen.

After tacking up I went to my friends trailers and waited for them. Wanda, Julie and I ride together for every ride. Our horses are similar in pace as are our goals and our personalities click. Wanda has a 5 year old arabian gelding that she is slowly conditioning for longer rides and Julia has a 20 year old thoroughbred that has just found his niche. All three of our horses are fairly new and green to the sport.

When everyone was ready we headed over to the start line. We called out our numbers and warmed up our horses while we waited for our 1 minute warning. Once the warning was called out, the three of us gathered for our start. The lady called our numbers to start and away we went. A great thing to teach a horse is to find their speed and gait that covers miles but is the least exhausting. Hrima had learned this over time and because of this, we were usually the leaders. Julia and Wanda's horses often trot too fast which exhausts all three of them too early so Wanda and Julia park their horses behind Hrima which keeps a good pace for all three. The ideal is to go 5.5 miles per hour for Novice 25 mile which is a medium trot speed or a medium tolt speed. As well Hrima is the least spooky when the horses are fresh. She tends to just go along and not look at any of the hazards that are on the trail. Typical Icelandic. Dependable as the sunrise. The wind had gotten stronger and I could see that the chinook cloud was going to stick around for most of the morning at least which was great news for us. It meant cooler conditions and the strong wind would whisk away any sweat. Perfect weather.

The first loop had alot of long steep hills to go up and down so we had to do alot of walking and then make up time on the flatter areas. The beauty of having tolt is that on the down hill slope we could tolt and make up time without all the concussion that trot creates. Also on this ride are alot of rattle snakes so its important to watch out for them. The ribbon markers did not do a good job this ride. The ribbons were for the most part tied to blades of grass and with the wind flattening the grass, it hid the ribbons often. So I think we lost the trail around 10 times or more. Being the lead horse means I couldn't really enjoy the beauty of the scenery because of having to watch so closely for the ribbons. But getting lost is worse. The ribbons were also sometimes tied to rocks, tied in bushes, flags sticking out of the ground, tied to fences, etc. Keeping a close eye out for them was really important. If we lost the trail, I would shout out "no flags" and then the three of us would branch out looking for the next one. There was a couple of times where the flags were on the same fence for going two directions. It meant we had to go up one side of the fence line and then do a hairpin turn and go up the other side of the fence line. So basically common sense had to be used along with tracking the foot prints of the horses ahead of us.

There was one hairy spot where we had to go down onto a flat white rock and then immediately up a 2 meter cliff that had places where the dirt had eroded away. Hrima and I chose that route while my friends went up the other path. Their path turned out to be easier. Hrima did awesome though. She went down on the rock and then leapt up the wall in several lunges. I have no idea how she did that climb but she did and my friends were yelling "wow holy *h#t!!!" "She is amazing!!!" Another spot came up where it was a steep drop down a goat path with places where we had to scramble down over boulders and do hairpin turns while on the steep downhill slope.

Hrima of course lead the way but there were several riders behind us. Now the rules of this particular hazard are that you always give the rider ahead of you plenty of space to get down safely. You never go one behind another down something like this because some horses cannot hold their balance and can go running and crashing down the steep trail. As well often horses are not trained properly to descend down a steep hill and they just do what we call "a man from snowy river run" where they half gallop/half slide down steep hills. This is very dangerous for the rider, their horse AND the horse in front of them as a collision can happen. And this is what happened to Wanda down that trail. The rider behind her had no control and her horse came running up behind Wanda's horse. Wanda heard her coming and had to force her horse to leap up the embankment off the trail and then find an alternate route down. And then....a little bit of an argument ensued between her and the other rider. So it's also a good idea to yell to the next rider behind you " Give Me Space". This ride is a treacherous ride and it pays to be prepared. This is also a good example of making sure you ask people what the ride is like before riding in it. This way you have an idea of whether the ride is in your comfort zone or not. As well it gives you help with planning on what your horse needs to be trained to do. This particular ride we were on has resulted in several horse and rider injuries including serious injuries where the rider had to be air lifted out. There was even a death that happened at this ride this summer. A horse took its rider straight over a cliff where they plummeted to their deaths. Always check with a seasoned rider as to the difficulty of the ride. After 11 miles of several steep up hill and down hill climbs, we had circled around and we were back at camp for our first vet check.

As we came in, we called out our numbers and from that moment on, we had 10 minutes to let our horses pulse down and come down in their respiration. In that time period each rider does what works for their horse. There are a lot of tricks that lower the heart rate of the horse. Hrima tends to pulse around 13-14 beats per 15 seconds and drop slowly. Grazing can cause the heart rate to stay the same or it can even elevate the pulse depending on the horse. For Hrima this is the case. Her pulse will stay at around 13 beats per 15 seconds which will cause point deductions. Wanda's horse drops his pulse regardless. Each horse is different when it comes to their heart rate or anything else. What works for one horse might not work for another so its best to try different ideas until you find a solution.

At the one minute mark, someone will yell out your number(along with others) and say "One Minute!!" The riders then have to raise their hand high in the air until a P & R person spots you and walks over to take your horses pulse. And as exhausting as it is,

you have to keep your arm up until that happens. Often alot of riders come into a vet check all at once so it can get very busy for the P &R people. I have sat at a vet check for a half hour before just waiting because 25 other riders had come in together. Do you get that wasted time added to your time allowed? No. You have to make it up on the trail. Making up time is a pain because instead of being able to go at the pace your horse does best at, you have to push it faster and for longer until you are around optimum time. This is more exhausting on your horse.

After the pulse and respiration we went to the vet check. The vet listens for gut sounds, checks the hydration, capillary refill, mucous membranes, and quality of movement. After the vet check we took a quick bathroom break and then quickly headed out for the second loop. We were a bit behind so we needed to keep up the medium pace for alot longer than we normally do. The second loop was easier. Less steep climbs and easier grades. The hills were more rolling. So we were able to make up more time.

However, 1-2 miles into the second loop, Wanda received a call from her husband that her older mare at home had gotten kicked and was bleeding internally. She would have to be put down. Wanda broke down into tears and had to get off her horse. We all stood together in silence while Wanda wept for her special horse. Julie suggested she ride back with Wanda and I continue the race. But I shook my head and said no. We stay together. If we were to head back, it would mean we would be too far behind to finish in optimum time. I wanted to give Wanda some time to decide what she wanted to do. If she wanted to go back, then we would all go back together.

Some of the drag riders came up behind us. (Drag riders are usually positioned in dangerous areas, positioned where the trail is not well marked, at random places on the trail or behind the last riders to make sure no one gets lost or gets into trouble or gets left behind) They suggested they take Wanda back to camp and we continue on but Wanda said no. She wanted to continue. Julie argued with her but she insisted. I stayed quiet. If it was me, I would want to loose myself in a good ride rather than go home to camp.

Once Wanda was ready to go we realized that we were actually now very far behind as far as optimum time. By about 20 mins. So we really had to move. We cantered for a good mile or more straight, and then walked and rested, and then cantered again for another mile. It was good going with mostly flat or slightly rolling stubble field. Part of the reason I set that pace is because I knew it would make Wanda feel better. The feeling of galloping across an open field with what looks like the grand canyon dropping off beside you and the wind in your face...it's a feeling like no other. Afterwards we were all smiling. Wanda included.

We dropped down into the canyon again and enjoyed the view and then climbed back out and went along the plateau for a bit, and then back down we went. Several times we did this. Our horses were fairing really well. We had some water breaks for them and let them graze sometimes. The wind kept us cool. We came to the horse thieves canyon. An area where the horse thieves of the past would keep the horses they stole. We crossed some what I call "icelandic crossings" where I can duck low branches and miss

them but the riders with the big horses get hit by the branches. Having a short horse is really handy sometimes.

In the middle of a hill we were climbing, it clicked into my head that I bet there was a hidden vet check after that hill. We were at around 17 miles which was approximately where the usual hidden pulse and respiration checks usually were. I told my friends and they agreed so we then proceeded to very slowly walk up that hill. It was around 1/2 mile long and quite steep. Sure enough right over the ledge was the P & R. I hopped off Hrima and didn't let her graze. I just asked for her head to come down and we waited the 10 mins. She was breathing hard after that hill climb and I was expecting her heart rate to be quite high. But it worked. Her heart rate was only one beat higher than normal. Respiration was lower than normal. It was at 2 breaths per 15 seconds. Luckily with Hrima, I never have to worry about respiration. Her breathing normally drops to normal in one minute or less. Since the others were still getting their P & R checked, I could let her graze for a while. Once everyone was done, we took off once again.

After several more climbs, we were finally on the home stretch. It was mostly flat or down hill from there to camp. When we reached the two mile marker, we realized that our pace was way too fast. We were 1/2 hour early. So before the marker we stopped, hopped down and let our horses graze. Once we cross the two mile marker, we have to keep forward momentum. So we cannot stop for any reason and we cannot get off our horses. If we come in too early, we get deducted points or we could even get eliminated. The ideal time to arrive at the end of the race is 15mins before or 15 mins after. Any earlier or later than those 15 min windows, and points are deducted. There are more points deducted for an early arrival. The goal is to cross the finish at the optimum time which for our group was 5 hours and 35mins from our start time. So because we were so early, we sat and waited and our horses had a nice break. It takes somewhere around a half hour to do 2 miles if we do Hrimas usual walk which is around 4miles per hour and a bit of trot. Wanda has a GPS watch that tells us how fast we are going, how many miles we made and our average speed. This helps us huge so we can time our arrival to an exact time. When we were maybe a mile from home, Julie was taking pictures and she dropped her phone! She had to get off to retrieve it. Wanda and I continued on in a very collected walk/shuffle to keep our forward momentum going but not leaving Julie far behind. It worked.

We continued to take a bunch of pics of each other through the hoodoos, enjoying the last of the scenery and enjoying the last mile of the season knowing that there would be no more rides until next spring. It was a great moment, knowing that we had succeeded. We had finished the hardest ride of the year and our horses were doing ok. All that work, all that conditioning, all that planning, and all that time spent, we did it. Our horses were sound. They were moving forward with energy. We did it.

We strolled into camp at a leisurely pace and as we passed the finish line, we called out our numbers. We had 10 mins to pulse down. This time I let Hrima graze for her five minutes and then just as a pre caution, I asked for her to stand with me with her head down. She pulsed slightly higher than her resting normal and respiration of course was normal. We now had 1 hour before our final vet check. I took Hrima back and let her eat

a light meal. She drank her fill and then rested while I started cleaning her up. She had mud and sweat stains in the usual places and with the strong winds, I didn't want to give her a bath and risk her muscles seizing up so I took out my curry comb and went to work. I just finished when it was time to go back.

We went back for the vet check. Hrima's heart rate was again good, hydration was perfect, mucous membranes were perfect, capillary refill perfect, alertness perfect, but we lost points on quality of movement, and Hrima had some small wind puffs develop from the ride. This was the first time the wind puffs had shown up. At the last ride we were at we had issues with her over heating under the saddle pad and having a bit of swelling at the girth. (The only way to really tell if your tack fits your horse is to do 25 miles or more) This we rectified by pulling off the saddle at every vet check and adding a sheep skin to the neoprene girth I used. This time everything was great tack wise, but now something was slightly straining her legs. So back to the drawing board now for her feet. It might be that going bare foot is the answer. She was about 1 week past when she needed a reset so the extra hoof length and the hard dry ground might have caused this. After the vet check I took Hrima back to our campsite and looked after her. I put her blankets on as the wind was cold, I gave her lots of hay and extra food rich in electro lights and energy and made sure her water was full and then I left her in peace.

We did amazing for our first year in CTR. Each event we entered into we were in the ribbons and we were competing against the arabians who are really bred for this. Our horses are smaller, have shorter strides and often higher resting heart rates. They have thicker skin and thicker hair, thick heavy manes and tails that trap in heat. They are a cold weather breed competing in the heat against horses that are bred for this. The fact that we placed at all is a great feat. Especially in the hardest ride of the year.

We stayed the second night and the next morning we received 4th place out of 40+ riders. I was so proud of my mare. So proud of everything she did on that ride and what she handled. After a disappointing spring where she was kicked by another horse which damaged a tendon in her hock, after two months of careful re conditioning she came back and was able to do three CTRs and each one she placed. And in each one she got better and better. When I think back to the nervous girl I started with and look at what she has become, it's better than winning any ribbon. All those hours spent together created a bond between us much more than it ever was. Hrima depends on me for companionship at these rides. She always nickers to me and loves to be close. If the other horses were away from their camp and Hrima started to stress because her friends are gone, I always made sure to stay with her to keep her company and she would calm right down and relax.

And that is the beauty of this sport. It can be about what is important to you. If its about winning ribbons and hi point placings, there is plenty of that. But some people ride in CTR because they want to compete against themselves. To better their own scores and to learn. And some people just like the opportunity to ride beautiful trails with their favourite partner. Those that don't make it to the ribbons are never looked down on. A well known quote for distance riding is "To Finish is To Win".

My goal for Hrima in the Rattle Snake Round Up was to have a consistent heart rate through out the whole ride, to not have any tack issues, to have her less tired than at the previous rides and to finish. We achieved every one of those goals. Did we get stares and people questioning an adult riding a pony....yes. A cowboy actually scoffed at us as he walked by. So it felt pretty good to walk up and receive our ribbon. And it felt really good to watch my little mare out walk all the riders around us. We even out walked the cowboy. And it felt pretty good handling the difficult terrain with ease. Watching the big horses struggle with their energy levels, spooking and bucking while I quietly toodled along on Hrima, loving her more with each moment. Even better knowing that next year we will be back and with our 2016 rides under our belts, we will be stronger than ever.

For those that are interested in competing in CTR or Endurance, make sure to check with your provincial club on rules and regulations. Every province is a bit different, especially in CTR. Also feel free to send me an email if you have any questions about anything. I am more than happy to try and help riders enjoy this wonderful sport. :-)

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