

# Competitive Trail Riding with the North American Trail Ride Conference

## Competitive Trail Riding

- encourages a true partnership between horse and rider
- educates horse and rider to help achieve higher skill levels
- promotes the performance of horses over the long term
- focuses on the health and safety of the horse
- helps train competent, happy, and willing horses
- promotes conditioning programs to help horses reach their potential
- fosters camaraderie in which riders consider themselves part of a family dedicated to their horses, trail riding, and spirited competition

## DISTANCE ONLY (DO) PROGRAM

**Want to try a CTR? Not sure about competing?** Join the **DISTANCE ONLY (DO)** program. You and your horse will experience all the benefits of CTR and gain credit for mileage ridden. You will receive the judge's information but will not be in the competition. If your horse is registered in a breed association, the miles may accumulate for you with your breed association also.

## HORSE AND RIDER ELIGIBILITY FOR COMPETITION

**Age:** Riders must be at least 10 years old. There is no upper age limit. Riders compete into their 70s and 80s!

Horses must be at least 4 years old for Novice and Competitive Pleasure classes; 5 years old for Open classes. Horses compete into their 30s! Some well beyond this age too!!!

**Breed:** All breeds of horses, ponies, and mules are eligible to compete!

## DIVISIONS

**Novice Division - for riders and horses new to the sport of competitive trail riding.** It affords an opportunity to familiarize yourself and your horse with the sport. Novice is timed at a slower pace than Open; between 3.5 to 5 mph, depending on terrain and weather. Most horses walk at around 4 mph. Competitors in the Novice Division ride no less than 30 but no more than 40 miles over two days, which usually translates to 4-1/2 to 6 hours of riding per day. There are three classes: lightweight (rider and tack weighs 189 pounds or less); heavyweight (rider and tack weighs 190 pounds or more); and junior for riders under age 18 (no weight classes).

**Competitive Pleasure Division - for experienced competitive trail riders** who prefer the pace and miles of Novice Division but, because of their experience, are no longer permitted to ride Novice. There are no weight classes.

**Open Division - for experienced competitors** who ride between 50 and 60 miles over two days at 4 to 6 mph, depending on terrain and weather. There are lightweight, heavyweight, and junior classes.

## CAMPING

Competitive trail riders camp in their trucks, in tents, in truck campers, in horse trailers (some fancy, some not-so-fancy!). Most of the time, horses are tied to the trailers overnight, either directly or to an overhead arm-type tether attached to the trailer. At some rides horses may be tied to camp hitching posts or to high-lines. The intent is for all horses to be stabled in the same manner for fairness in judging.

## TACK AND EQUIPMENT

To start, you do not need special equipment. Generally, you should start with what you have. After a few rides, you will discover what works for you and what doesn't.

**Saddles:** At a ride, you will see many different brands and styles of saddles--English, Western, Australian, endurance, and more. Why do riders select different types of saddles? The first priority is a saddle that fits the horse well, does not sore the horse's back, distributes the weight carried, and usually is fairly lightweight.

**Girths:** You will see girths made of every conceivable material. Again, the girth should not sore your horse or cause swelling or rubbing. Ideally, the girth should be loose enough to allow your hand to fit between the horse and the girth so that the horse can breathe freely.

**Breast Collars and Cruppers:** Many riders use breast collars to help the saddle stay in position while riding the varied terrain of competitive trail riding. Some riders use cruppers, especially if the terrain is mountainous or if the horse's conformation warrants.

**Halters, Bridles, Bits, Hackamores:** Use what works best for you and your horse. Make sure the equipment fits properly and does not rub. Many riders use a halter/bridle combination that allows them to remove the bit during rest stops. If you don't use a halter/bridle combination, you will be required to carry a halter with you in case of emergency.

**Hoof Protection:** All types of hoof boots that provide sole protection are allowed. However, any attached strap, keeper, or gaiter must not extend above the pastern. The judges may request to observe the area covered by the attached strap, keeper, or gaiter.

**Other Equipment:** Riders should carry a halter, lead rope, hoof pick, knife, sponge, and water bottles. The water bottles are used to wet down your horse on hot days as well as for you to drink. The sponge is for wetting your horse at streams. Rain gear, lip balm, and snacks are nice to have along. Just make sure your equipment does not bounce or chafe the horse, and that weight is distributed evenly. For instance, don't put all your water bottles on one side! Saddle bags are not recommended as they bounce around. Fanny packs work well.

## JUDGING

**First and foremost, this is a fun sport. The goal is to explore new trails, enjoy your horse and friends, and learn something! Whether you take home a ribbon or not, enjoying the ride makes you a winner!**

**The North American Trail Ride Conference (NATRC)** monitors and sanctions all judges. Judges are required to apprentice under other judges before being awarded their judge's card. There are two types of judges at each ride: the veterinarian judge and the horsemanship judge.

**The "vet" judge** judges the horse only, not the rider. The vet performs an initial exam of all horses entering competition. This is called check-in. The vet will check each horse for any obvious problem which would preclude the horse from going down the trail safely. The vet will check hydration, muscle tone, gut sounds, capillary refill, mucous membranes, withers, loin, back, girth area, and legs and feet. He will check for soundness by having you lead your horse in-hand at the trot, circle your horse in both directions at the trot, and trot back to the judge. Manners are important: make sure your horse stands quietly, lifts his feet when asked, and does not try to bite or kick. On the trail, the vet judge will have many opportunities to observe your horse's trail ability and manners. After the ride, the horse is checked out in the same manner as check-in.

**The horsemanship judge** judges the rider, not the horse. She observes check-in to see if the rider is in control at all times and if the horse is clean and well cared for. On the trail, she will check for the rider's balance and lightness in the saddle, body and leg positions, control of the horse and use of aids. She will observe whether the rider assists the horse over terrain and obstacles and the rider's ability to mount and dismount easily and lightly. The horsemanship judge also looks for trail safety and courtesy, safety of stabling, and trail care. She will see if gear is clean and fitted properly, whether the horse has adequate food and water at the trailer, and if stabling at the trailer is clean and safe.

Even the most experienced riders talk about how much they learn from judges and other competitors by participating in competitive trail riding. **Nobody knows it all!** The judges do not expect you to be an expert. You will find that the judges want you to succeed. They and your fellow competitors will help you get started. **But the important question at the end of the ride is: Did you have fun?**

## GETTING STARTED—CONDITIONING YOUR HORSE

**Long, slow distance** is the foundation of a sound conditioning program. Concentrate on conditioning your horse's muscles, tendons, ligaments, heart, lungs, and circulatory system by walking, walking, walking!

**Wait until your horse is at least 4 years old** to start conditioning for competitive trail riding. By then, he is mature enough to benefit from the conditioning program without suffering injury to joints, tendons, and ligaments.

**Start gradually.** Ride at a walk for 5 miles, with short trots on the flats and low, gradual hills. Every week, add another 2 miles, up to about 10 miles, but don't increase the speed. Then, one day a week, do a longer ride, but not a faster one! Most horses walk at about 4 mph. Keep that up for two weeks, and then try a speed of 5 mph for 10 miles. If your horse shows distress, go back to 4 mph. **Never** increase distance and speed at the same time!

**Walk, Walk, Walk!** That is the foundation of a sound, long-term conditioning program. Work with your horse to produce a brisk, energetic walk. Don't be tempted to add speed. Remember, your goal is to build stamina and endurance. The purpose of a conditioning program is to build the long-term athletic ability of your horse for years to come.

**Don't have time to condition?** Start small, just ½ hour to 45 minutes. Soon you'll find the time to do more because you and your horse are having fun and working toward a goal together. You'll find your partnership with your horse improving!

**Want to learn more? Contact the person nearest you:**

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Or, visit the following web sites: NATRC Region Six web site at [www.natrcregion6.org](http://www.natrcregion6.org)  
NATRC National Web Page at [www.natrc.org](http://www.natrc.org) where you can find links to your own Regional Web Page!

See you on the trails!

Debbie Payne, New Member Chair

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