

Getting Started with Distance: A Beginner's Guide.

So, you have taken the decision to give Distance Riding a go. Welcome. Where do we start?

With the horse, of course. All you need is your trustworthy equine friend of any breed that is sound and has some level of fitness. A few human supporters do not go amiss at every stage of your journey, however we guarantee you will soon make friends in this sport and help is available for the asking.

Set yourself a Goal

Decide what is the right starting point for you and your horse. Some points to consider are the distance you want to ride, location of the event, the date of this TADRA Event and who you might meet there or take with you as part of your camping/strapping/support team.

Work back from your first Goal

If your first goal is to ride up to 20k, 4-6 weeks prior to the Event you want to attend, start a regular ride training programme consisting of walking and trotting.

Build up gradually from about 8k, 2 - 3 times a week (taking approx. 1 to 1.5 hours) through slightly longer distances, more often, and with longer and more frequent stretches of trotting.

Try to include some hills. Take it easy going down hills, even dismounting and walking or running alongside your horse to give his back a rest and to stretch your legs.

Keep a steady pace uphill with no gulley rushing or bouncy, fast canters. By all means build in some long stretchy canters on the flat. However, very fast work can be detrimental.

Long, slow, steady, frequent work will build up condition and muscle in these early stages. Adjust your training practices to include more trotting over longer distances as your goals grow. Remember steady, consistent work with programmed rest is most effective in gaining fitness.

Fuel

There is a saying, "Hay for 20k". For distances up to 20k, most horses need only good pasture and roughage - and plenty of it.

By all means, add small amounts of low starch, low sugar hard feed on the days your horse is working.

While exercising, stop occasionally to allow a good grass pick or a takeaway snack of long grasses. This really perks up your horse and when competing it will be an essential practice to maintain horse health and achieve good gut sounds following a long ride.

Hydration

Horses need to drink lots of water. In a hot, humid climate good hydration is particularly important.

When exercising, encourage your horse to drink at any water on route. Offer drink on arrival at base (maybe sweetened with a small amount of molasses to be more tempting) and ensure constant access to fresh water while the horse is at rest.

Overnighting

Most TADRA events (but not all) will require you to camp overnight at the Ride Base with your horse. You will have to provide safe confinement inside portable metal yards or make an electrified enclosure with star pickets and 3 strands of electrified tape.

Guidance on acceptable standards can be found in the TADRA Rulebook.

It is a good idea to have some practice runs of this type of stabling with your horse before the Event. There is something very special about sleeping out beside your horse.

Packing

Packing up for a weekend away with Distance Riding gets easier every time you do it. See our checklist and tick off items as you install them in your transport. It is a good idea to have a practice run and leave sufficient time during the day before you are due to leave for the Event to do this. Don't forget your own camping gear, home comforts, high energy food, drink, and goodies.

New Skills for your horse

At a Distance event your horses will need to be OK about having strangers take their rectal temperature(thermometer in anus), listen to their heart, be closely handled by vets; and will need to be able to trot 40m out and back **on a loose lead** whenever you ask them to.

As learning these skills can sometimes take time and repetition to master, it is most important that they learn them well at home so that they can perform them well, and at your request, whenever required at an event.

Say hello

When you come to your first TADRA Event, please let us know it is a first time or that you are still feeling like a newbie. TADRA people will be happy to help answer your questions, show you what they do and often we find that people buddy up and will help you on your way.

Go the Distance!

Liz Terry, TADRA Vice President