

## Competitive Trail Riding

**What is competitive trail riding?** A competitive trail ride (CTR) is a timed, judged trail ride. It's not a race in the traditional sense, as the horse finishing in the shortest time doesn't always get the highest score. The sport emphasizes safety, proper horse management, and communication and teamwork between horse and rider. Several conferences and organizations, each with its own set of rules, regulate competitive trail riding (see listing below). Information in this article is based on general guidelines, although specific rules may vary.

**How long are the rides?** Depending on the sponsoring organization, rides vary in length and can be single-day or multiple-day events. A weekend ride often covers between thirty and sixty miles over a two-day period. For horses or riders new to the sport (but not necessarily new to riding), rides are shorter and can be covered mostly at a walk or trot (3.5 to 5 miles an hour). Riders at the top level traverse longer trails at a somewhat faster pace (4 to 6 miles an hour).

**How are the rides set up?** At a typical ride, there are three divisions: novice, competitive pleasure (CP), and open. A participant may enter at any level. The novice division is designed for first-timers and anyone else wanting a basic ride that offers minimal challenges beyond simply covering the distance. The open division is the most difficult, incorporating longer, faster rides and possibly more complicated terrain. Experienced riders who don't want to move into the open category may enter in the CT category. Novice and open divisions are subdivided by weight; riders whose body weight and tack equal more than 190 pounds compete in the heavyweight class.

**Who may participate?** In the North American Trail Ride Conference, riders must be at least ten years old, and participants who are under the age of 18 may ride in a junior division. There is no upper age limit, and many participants are middle-aged or older. Non-riding family members can help with a multitude of tasks to assist a rider, and may also volunteer to assist with the organization of the ride itself.

**What kinds of horses are used?** Any size, breed, and type of horse may be used. Horses must be at least four years old to enter the novice division, and at least five years old for the open division. Many riders prefer gaited horses for their comfortable movement, but there is no requirement regarding a horse's gaits.

**What equipment is necessary?** For the ride itself, any saddle is allowed, as is any type of bridle, with or without a bit. Tack should be clean and well-fitted to both horse and rider. Cruppers and breastplates may be used. A saddle pack is useful for carrying drinking water, a hoof pick, snacks, and other small items. In most cases, horses are not allowed to wear boots or other protective leg or hoof devices on the ride. If a horse frequently hits his own legs as he moves, this action should be eliminated by proper trimming and shoeing before entering a ride.

**What happens at a typical ride?** Horses and riders arrive on Friday evening at the site of a weekend ride. Horses may be tied to a trailer, tied to a picket line, or enclosed in a portable corral. A

hay net and water bucket are secured where the horse can reach them easily without getting tangled up. The rider pays any outstanding fees, shows a health certificate and negative Coggins form, and picks up a packet containing identifying numbers for the horse, rider, and vehicle. A veterinary check is the next stop, with each horse being examined for soundness. Vital signs are recorded, as are any cuts, sore areas, and swollen or rubbed spots. A horsemanship judge evaluates the horse's grooming and overall appearance as well as the rider's safety and effectiveness in handling the horse. A briefing is held to go over timetables, explain the course, and answer questions.

Early on Saturday morning, horses are fed and then tacked up. Riders report to the starter and are sent off at assigned times. Along the trail, observers note how effectively the horse and rider are communicating as they cross streams, climb hills, and negotiate other challenging parts of the trail. Riders may be asked to perform various tasks such as backing, dismounting on the "off" side, or moving the horse sideways. Use of the rider's aids and the horse's willingness to follow these signals are scored.

Several times during the ride, horses are stopped and checked for pulse and respiration. Riders are allowed to dismount and cool their horses by removing the saddle, if desired, and sponging or pouring water over the horse's neck and legs. Ten minutes after the horse arrives at the checkpoint, pulse and respiration are checked again, and horses whose vital signs are within the target range may continue. If pulse and respiration have not dropped to safe levels, the wait is extended another ten minutes and a recheck is done. Horses that still have not reached the target range are disqualified from further participation. A vet check at the end of the day's ride, plus a briefing Saturday night to review Sunday's schedule, close out the day.

If the ride continues on Sunday, the procedure is similar to the previous day. After the ride, participants await their scores for horsemanship and management as well as their horses' marks for soundness, condition, and trail manners.

**How does a rider condition a horse for competitive trail riding?** A horse's muscles, heart, and lungs need to be in top condition to avoid fatigue and injury while carrying a rider for several hours. Riders begin by walking and trotting at relatively slow speeds over level ground, and then increase speed, distance, and terrain difficulty as the weeks go by. Sample training schedules can be found on the Web sites of competitive trail riding organizations. It is important to plan a long enough conditioning period so that the horse is able to complete the ride without injury or strain.

**What type of feed is best for horses that participate in competitive trail riding?** Clean, good-quality forage is a staple for horses that perform long-term exercise. Forages help to hold water in the gut, aiding hydration in addition to stimulating the production of saliva which acts to buffer the entire gastrointestinal tract. Concentrates should be formulated to provide a continuous supply of energy without the "buzz" some horses get from simple carbohydrates such as starches and sugars. Feeds that supply a large part of their energy from fermentable fibers (beet pulp, soy hulls) or fat (rice bran, vegetable oil) meet this goal. Electrolytes are helpful for any horse performing strenuous exercise, and supplementation is vital when the weather is hot and humid. In general, preloading before the start and using a paste electrolyte several times throughout the race will keep a horse's electrolyte levels in a safe range.

**Where can I get more information about this sport?** You can access several competitive trail riding associations on the Internet. Among them are the North American Trail Ride Conference ([www.natrc.org](http://www.natrc.org)), the Eastern Competitive Trail Riding Association ([www.ectra.org](http://www.ectra.org)), and the Upper Midwest Endurance and Competitive Rides Association ([www.umecra.com](http://www.umecra.com)). Most Web sites have national and regional information, a calendar of rides, and details on how to contact a member in your immediate area.



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