

TRAIL RIDING WITH A Special Pal



Provided by Susan Morgan

She bought the Quarter Horse from a friend who had previously obtained him at an auction. The gelding's coat was rough and dull-looking. He had a huge pot-belly, and his hooves were in need of attention. Nevertheless, Susan Morgan saw some potential in Pretty Parific (Pal), the golden horse with the wonderful disposition.

Knowing that Pal had been turned out to pasture and given a standard feed-mill grain mix, Morgan looked at improving the horse's diet as the first step in bringing him into better body condition. "I experimented with different feeds and also read nutritional fliers, magazine articles, books, and a lot of feed tags," she said. "Nothing really made a big improvement in Pal's condition."

Turning Point. Morgan began taking Pal to trail rides where she met some members of the North American Trail Riding Conference. "This organization emphasizes trail safety and care of your horse," she explained. "My first competitive NATRC ride, Spanish Trail, was in Florida in 2006. Donnie Hix, regional manager for Kentucky Equine Research's Team Member Flint River Mills, did a very informative clinic on nutrition." What Morgan learned there provided a crucial turning point in her feed-management strategy.

Filling the Tank. For hard-working trail horses, Hix's recommendation was Endurance Gold, a feed formulated specifically for horses that perform strenuous exercise. Unlike many equine feeds that are based primarily on starch from cereal grains, Endurance Gold provides part of its energy in the form of beet pulp, a fermentable fiber, and fat (soybean oil). For horses involved in long-distance exercise such as competitive trail riding, this formulation ensures a continuous supply of energy throughout the day.

Competitive trail riding, or CTR, requires plenty of energy, even in the novice division that Morgan enters. "Our typical ride is 20 to 22 miles the first day and 18 to 20 miles the second day," she explained. "Most of the trails are in mountainous regions, so for the horse, it's comparable to being on a human stair-stepper machine for hours." Although the distance is covered at a moderately slow pace of around four miles an hour, it adds up to a lot of exertion. Endurance Gold is fortified with a full measure of minerals and vitamins including natural vitamin E, an antioxidant known to help prevent muscle soreness following intense exercise. This feature is important when a horse is asked to perform as well on the second day as on the first.

Keeping Score. In CTR, horses and riders are judged independently before, during, and after rides. Horsemanship scores for the rider depend on management of the horse, both on and off the trail, while the horse is scored on indications of health, performance, and conditioning. Pulse and respiration are measured before each ride and rechecked several times at mandatory stops along the trail. If a horse's vital signs stay above designated limits after a period of rest, the horse is judged not to be in fit condition to continue and is eliminated from the ride. Other causes for elimination might be signs of colic or serious dehydration. Pal has always passed his vet checks, a fact of which Morgan is justifiably proud.

The yeast culture that is incorporated into the Endurance Gold formula promotes normal hindgut function and maximizes fiber digestion, important factors in a horse's gastrointestinal health. "We might travel as much as ten hours to an event, and then within an hour or two of unloading, I take my horse straight to a vet check," she said. "He's never had any signs of colic or other problems."

Special Steed. While horses of any breed or type may participate in CTR, the Quarter Horse is not the breed of choice for many competitors. Typically somewhat heavily muscled and

stocky, Quarter Horses often play second fiddle to their Arabian cousins, who are genetically endowed with characteristics that equip them for long-distance exercise. However, Pal has proven that the right program of conditioning and feed management can help stack the points in a particular horse's favor.

Morgan's comments after a recent ride chronicle her enthusiasm and success: "We had a wonderful ride at Heart of Dixie last week. It was Pal's fifth sweepstake this year in the novice division, meaning that he placed first on points among all novice horses (lightweight and heavyweight) in conditioning. To update his accomplishments this year, he has five sweepstakes, six first-place finishes in ten rides, and is currently in first place not only in Region 5 but in all NATRC regions in the United States in conditioning for a lightweight novice horse-and-rider team, and for horsemanship in the lightweight novice classes."

Winning is more than numbers, though, and Morgan is the first to credit her feeding program for her horse's superb condition. "I believe proper nutrition is the basic first step for all horses," she said. "Pal has definitely proved this to me. There is a different look to a nutritionally well-balanced, fit horse. I have one now. What a Pal!" 

Trail Trials: A Competition, Not a Race

In competitive trail riding, the fastest horse doesn't always win. Instead, the horse in the best condition throughout the ride is the victor. Fitness is determined at a series of veterinary checkpoints throughout the competition. During the trail ride itself, each horse's vital signs are measured every few hours at mandatory stopping places. Regardless of a particular horse's numbers at a certain point, an interval of relaxation should bring pulse and respiration down toward resting rates. In unfit horses that have not been sufficiently conditioned for the exercise they are asked to perform, pulse and respiration rates drop much more slowly. Riders can assist their horses by systematic training and proper nutrition before the competition. Especially in hot, humid conditions, the administration of electrolytes can maintain a horse's ability to perform well and remain comfortable.

There are a number of competitive trail riding associations, each with its own slightly different rules and regulations. Among these are the North American Trail Ride Conference (www.natrc.org), the Eastern Competitive Trail Riding Association (www.ectra.org), and the Upper Midwest Endurance and Competitive Rides Association (www.umecra.com). Each organization's Web site has regional information, a calendar of rides, and details on how to contact someone who can answer further questions.

In general, guidelines for the sport are lenient as to type or breed of horse, kind of saddle and bridle, and level of competition. In the North American Trail Ride Conference, riders can compete in novice or open divisions. A junior division accommodates for younger riders; the competitive pleasure category is designed for more experienced riders who don't want to enter the open division. A new "distance only" option has been designed for anyone who wants to earn mileage points and get comments from the judges, but doesn't want a chance to place in the competition.

For those interested in competitive trail riding but unsure how to get started in the sport, volunteering at a ride is a good way to gain experience and get the feel of the event. By helping with record-keeping at a vet check, handing out packets at registration, or assisting at the scorekeeping table, a volunteer can quickly be in the thick of the action.



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