



Ride & Tie is a fast-growing, unique and adventurous equestrian sport that horses naturally enjoy. Photo by Melanie Walker

Ride & Tie – The “Share-A-Ride” Sport

Interview with Carol Ruprecht

We at Natural Horse had the distinct pleasure of interviewing Carol Ruprecht, a lifetime member of the Ride and Tie Association, about this unique sport that is steadily gaining national attention and popularity. Over 150 years old, the sport originated as a mode of transportation in the old West, where frontiersmen discovered two men could travel great distances at a fast pace without wearing down the horse if they traded off. The sport was revitalized and gained national attention in 1971 when Levi Strauss sponsored the first Ride & Tie Championships.

Why do horses seem to really enjoy this sport, and how is it natural for them?

For one, the horse is a flight animal, designed to run at full speed away from danger, for a short distance. Then the horse rests. Evolution didn't really design him for long sustained travel (outside of meandering from grassy spot to spot) but for short bursts of speed. Ride & Tie is all about short bursts of speed and then rest, repeated over and over. The horse rests between each burst of speed, tied to a tree, waiting for the next runner to arrive.

Also, because the horse is a herd animal, the horse has a natural affinity for team (read: herd) sports. Because the horse is domesticated, the humans are included in the herd. Ride & Tie is a sort of "sport of herds" all running around, passing each other and being passed over and over again. The pace of the sport means the horse sees the same runners and horses over and over. Each time the horse gets to pass the same horse again, the passing horse is "winning" all over. Each time the horse is tied to a tree and gets passed, the tied horse is eager for the runner to arrive, so the horse can again pass the passer and "win" all over again. It's a kick. Horses are very keen readers of body language. Each time a tired runner views her team member waiting for her tied to a tree or bush, she's grateful. I am certain the horse knows it and enjoys being appreciated for his superior position on the team.

How can one gear up and get started? What equipment is needed?

For the individual who is already a horse person, there is very little that really needs to be done to compete in Ride & Tie. Of course the fitter the person, the faster he will travel on the ground, placing the team higher in the rankings. Walking is perfectly acceptable and even the fittest competitors walk at times because the courses are usually chosen for their difficulty (mountains, altitude, rocky trail). The only specialized equipment necessary for the sport is a safe effective tie rope. We use a six foot long piece of climbing rope, terminated in a strong carabineer (available at any local climbing shop). The rope is tied to the halter and the carabineer is on the tying end. The rope can then be quickly wrapped around a tree or bush, carabineer snapped, and off you go. The only other specialized equipment is something called a double stirrup. This is a stirrup with two footfalls, to suit teams with very different length legs. Another piece of equipment which is popular is a full wool saddle cover. This is handy for teams who want to ride in running shorts. Advised is a saddle which is easy to get in and out of repeatedly.

How is the horse prepared?

A lot of people prefer an older horse about 10 to 14 years in age, because they feel horses this age are a bit more sensible. In my opinion a calm personality is more important than age, because the horse has to be able to handle being tied and having other horses pass while tied. We've introduced a lot of endurance horses to the sport of Ride & Tie, even horses whose owners thought they didn't tie at all. If introduced gradually (tie and watch, tie in sight of another tied horse) the horses are pretty quick to catch on to the game and recognize the tie won't last long, and the runner is on the way. The horse should be fit; this is a team sport where the horse is the central team member. The fitness and speed of the horse can make up for the weaker human runners. But then again, if the runners are in poor shape, the horse will get lots of rest at the tie!



And they're off! Photo by Bill Gore

Is this considered a safer sport for the riders and horses than some?

I would imagine most equine sports are more dangerous than Ride & Tie, but I can only compare this sport to others I know, and my other sport is endurance riding. Ride & Tie is not as safe for the human as endurance. Most unseatings occur at the start of the event. The start can be worrisome, with so many excited horses, but smart runners stand clear of the excited horses. The runner can twist an ankle on the uneven running surface. The runner can get stepped on (usually by her own horse as she fumbles to untie him). That being said, this sport is the perfect training for ground manners. Because of the frequency the riders are on the ground, horses tend to learn excellent ground manners from Ride & Tie. My recurring injury is scratches from the thorn bushes my partner tied in. For the horse, the only significant danger is a poor tie. Based on the statistics of the past 30 years, the sport of Ride & Tie is much safer by both measures of metabolics and soundness than endurance. This is a sport that tolerates no drugging and no endangerment of the horses. It's strictly supervised by veterinarians.

I notice from the photos that helmets are not always worn – any reason why there isn't a helmet requirement?

Ride & Tie is a smaller sport and tends to look to endurance for basic guidelines. Endurance has no helmet rule, except for junior riders. Most Ride & Tie competitors balk at the idea of running in a helmet. We may get over this, as we see adventure racers do run in their helmets without any distaste for the discomfort. Some people (not many) share a helmet and switch it to the rider at each horse exchange. I've done this for years, and it's inconvenient. It's very easy to run off with one's partner's helmet firmly affixed to one's own head.

How are saddles and partners chosen? I see that double stirrups allow for differing rider leg lengths, but what about saddle comfort?

Certainly the horse's saddle fit comes first. Any horse which is not "fit to continue" at the end of the event means the team is disqualified and does not place in the event. A sore back is included in the "fitness to continue" judgment. Since the horse is the only one wearing the saddle for the entire course, his opinion will most likely rule. There is no weigh in. Partners are chosen individually, so it's up to the owner of the horse to decide who will partner on the owner's horse. No awards or recognition are given based on rider weight. The saddles tend to be the same as those used in endurance - light weight and nonrestrictive to the horses' motion. A lot of English style saddles are in evidence.

Can horses compete barefoot?

Barefoot is certainly allowed. We are currently riding a horse who could compete barefoot; he's got great feet. We ride in either Sneakers or Easy Boots. The Easy Boots are really popular because the horses are barefoot when not competing, but have some sole protection during the event.

What do the riders generally pack on the horse?

The courses are generally designed in a series of loops which keep coming back to a central point for each vet check. Because the loops are not usually over 15 miles in length, very little equipment is packed on the horse. Perhaps a spare Easy Boot. Some runners prefer to tie water bottles on the saddle, though I think this is a mistake. We ride with CamelBaks on our own backs. This is a water bladder in a very small backpack designed originally for bike riders. It means the runner has access to water when on the horse and when on the ground. Some people have tried packing a radio on the horse (turn it on loud when the horse is tied) in order to avoid running past a tied partner. But it didn't work very well.

How does one know where the trail goes? Are there markers for following it?

The trail is very well marked with surveyor's tape/ ribbons and lime. Mile markers are common. Ribbons tied to trees are the most common marking. It's possible to get off trail through lack of attention, but it's more likely to run past the horse and not notice for a while that two of the team members are running in parallel.... getting farther and farther in front of the third who is still tied to a tree! This has led to people decorating their horses with bright colors and streamers.



Riding, running, sharing a horse, passing each other again and again – that's the way this competitive game is played.

Photo by Melanie Walker

How does one place in the competition?

This is a timed event. All teams start together at the shot of the gun. The first team from which all members cross the finish line before all members of any other team is the winner. Maybe. The only maybe is the decision of the vet. If any horse is not fit to continue, that team is disqualified. No one worries too much about the runner's condition after the event is over; the humans are expected to be tired and sore, possibly even bruised and lame. Not the horses. All team members must pass the finish line for the clock to stop on that team. They are not required to finish together.

What are rider age ranges?

The youngest competitor at this time is a nine year old girl in Washington who partners with her grandfather. In the article at www.equisearch.com/equiwire/results/eqenduranc3108/ I mention a girl who did her first Ride & Tie at age 8 with her mother. The oldest competitor ever is my father, who will be my partner at the World Championships this year at age 74. This is certainly a family sport, with several cases of three generations who are competing or have competed over the years.



Racing for the finish line. Note horse's saddle has double stirrups - necessary to accommodate two riders with differing leg length. Photo by Melanie Walker

What ages and types of horses are competed?

The minimum equine age is five years old. There is no upper limit. At the 2002 World Championship the horse ridden by Elaine Ruprecht and Tom Gey for an overall finish of 8th place, second woman/man team, was 20 years old. This same horse won the race and was awarded the coveted Best Condition three years earlier at age 17. There may be older horses competing; it would not surprise me. I'm just not personally aware of them. Just like endurance, the sport is dominated by Arabians, but all comers are welcome. Even mules have been seen competing at this sport.

Is this a year-round sport?

It is a year round sport. The first event of the year is the one following the World Championship event. The World Championship this year is on September 6th, 2003 and will be the final event of the Ride & Tie year. There are approximately twenty events during the year, across the United States. While predominantly on the west coast, events are also held in Ohio, Montana, Tennessee, Arizona, Maryland and Virginia. A full race schedule is available on the website.

Whom can one contact to get involved?

The Ride and Tie Association welcomes everyone to the sport, whether rider, runner or not yet either. If you have access to the internet, I suggest you visit EquiSearch at www.equisearch.com/sports/endurance/rideandtie where you will find a number of articles written about past events. A visit to the Ride & Tie website is also invaluable at www.rideandtie.org. On the Ride & Tie website we have contact details for mentors who want to help other people get started in the sport. There is a schedule of events, rules of the sport, membership application, and a partner-matching page where newcomers can find other people who want to start a Ride & Tie team.

If you do not have access to the internet, then call the Ride and Tie Association at 650-949-2321 or write to us at:

The Ride and Tie Association
469 Casita Way
Los Altos, CA 94022

The sport of Ride & Tie may not be for the weekend dabbler or the faint of heart, but it could be! Ride & Tie obviously requires practice, stamina, and perseverance from all three team members. Training for Ride & Tie is unique and challenging in that it requires time commitments from two humans plus some additional horse training. However, it's a great way to get and stay physically fit, and to spend some fun quality time in the great outdoors with family, friends, and horses!

Natural Horse Magazine thanks Carol Ruprecht for her generous help in preparing this article. May she have many happy trails, and a great Ride & Tie year!