

25 Tips for Having Fun on Your First Ride

I remember my first endurance ride like it was yesterday—I could hardly move for several days after but I had fun! Here are some tips to get you through an experience that you will never forget.

1. Go to the pre-ride briefing, pick up a map if there wasn't one in your ride packet, and be prepared to take notes. Note the pulse and respiration (P/R) criteria and hold times for each stop and if there will be drag riders. If you have a crew get instructions/maps on how to get to the stop(s).
2. Before you go to bed, organize and stow what you will need for the ride and prepare a crew bag with a ground cloth, rump rug or blanket, water bucket, horse and human food, electrolytes (if you use them), and anything else you might need at a stop. If you don't have a crew, take the bag to the drop-off spot.
3. Put a couple of full water bottles and an energy bar plus your rider card and map in a plastic bag on the saddle or in a fanny pack. Don't forget a scoop or a sponge, if you have one.
4. If your horse kicks or threatens to, put a red ribbon on its tail. If your horse is a stallion put yellow ribbons on the bridle and the tail. You may want to use a green ribbon if to alert others you are a new ("green") rider.
5. Set your alarm. You may be too keyed up to fall asleep easily, and end up oversleeping.
6. When you wake up, eat and drink something.
7. Allow enough time to either lead your horse or ride for at least 15 minutes before the ride starts to warm up both of you.
8. Make sure you have your rider card and map.
9. Start well back or start with a friend—don't try to go out with the first riders.
10. If your horse becomes hard to control, you can try turning back for a while until you are by yourself or dismount and lead your horse back or away from the trail. Give yourself a good 10 minutes away from the crowd so you don't catch up to the rest too quickly. You might have to do this more than once.
11. When you get to a water source, try not to crowd in. Keep an eye on the other horses. Give your horse plenty of time to drink, even bringing him back to the water a time or two if he is reluctant to drink.
12. If you get lost, go back to where you saw the last trail marking and don't forget to look at your map, too.
13. If your horse shows signs of colic, lameness or fatigue, slow down and/or stop. Dismount and let him rest or lead him slowly. If this doesn't help, stop and wait for the drag riders if there are any; otherwise tell someone who can report you at the next stop.
14. As you come into a vet check, dismount, loosen the girth and—if you have some—pour water on him.
15. Get your rider card out and hand it to the in-timer, if required.
16. Water your horse; try not to crowd or pour water on the horse close to the trough. Some rides provide sponging buckets.
17. Most vet checks are a gate into a hold; this means your horse's P/R has to be at criteria before the hold time starts. When you think your horse is at the P/ R criteria, present him to the P/R staff; have your rider card out.
18. After your horse meets the P/R criteria—usually 60 to 64 beats per minute—take note of the out time on your rider card.
19. Present your horse to the vet(s) unless instructed otherwise. Have your rider card ready. Graciously accept what the vet tells you about your horse if there is a problem—don't argue or whine.
20. If this is a long hold, find your crew or bag and a place to rest. Feed and water your horse. Check the shoes and clean the hooves. You may have already removed the tack so clean or wash off what you can, particularly splint boots. Put a rump rug or blanket on if cool or windy. Walk your horse for a few minutes a couple of times to keep him from stiffening up. Locate the out-timer.
21. About 10 minutes before you are ready to leave (this can be later than the out-time marked on your rider card if you or your horse need more time to rest) tack up and walk to the out-timer. Have your rider card out.
22. If you think you may not finish within the allocated time, don't hurry—it is much better to come in late with a happy horse than a tired one. There is always the next ride. Keep in mind you and your horse have already learned a great deal.
23. At the finish, have your rider card out for the timer. Note: limited distance horses are given a completion only if they meet criteria within a half-hour of completing the course. Placings are determined by the order in which the horses meet criteria. Equines on endurance rides (50 miles and longer) have one hour to meet criteria.
24. Water your horse, strip the tack and clean him up a bit before presenting to the P/R and vet staff within the time allocated for your division. Afterwards, provide hay and water and walk your horse every 20 minutes or so to prevent him stiffening up. Wait a couple of hours before giving concentrates.
25. Enjoy the awards dinner and start planning for your next ride!

—Judy Etheridge