

## RAMBLINGS...

“To finish is to win.” That’s the motto of the sport of endurance riding. I discovered this year that endurance riding is my sport. I’ve never been into athletics, showing, or competition in general, but I wanted something to focus my riding. I tried dressage, and although I love taking dressage lessons to improve my riding and training skills, I’m not disciplined enough to really get into the sport. I’ve always loved trail riding and riding fast, so endurance, being trail riding fast, is a perfect fit!

Endurance rides are typically 25 miles (limited distance), 50 miles, or 100 miles, and respectively, a person has 6 hours, 12 hours, and 24 hours to complete the rides. A horse can start completing limited distance rides as a 4 year old, but must be at least 5 to participate in the longer events. A complete account of the rules and regulations can be found at the American Endurance Ride Conference web site ([www.aerc.org](http://www.aerc.org)).

I started riding Raven at 3.5, but not seriously until he turned 4. He developed a propensity for running off, and my dressage instructor identified it as a trust issue. She nailed it, but it took me over a year to figure out how to remedy the problem, which I’ll explain in more detail as this story unfolds.

Raven turned 5 this year, and he and I attended our first endurance event in May. We participated in the Black Hills Ride and completed the 30 mile limited distance ride at a walk and trot in 5 hours. However, throughout the ride, Raven would periodically have a mental melt down and take off for no apparent reason.

Two weeks later we attended the Ft. Howes Ride. My strategy was to let Raven set his own pace and channel his energy down the trail. My hope was that he would wear himself out, and thus decide to be decent. The 25 mile ride was split into a 15 mile loop and then a 10 mile loop. The terrain was short, steep hills, and the footing was muddy. We rode at a trot and a lope, and Raven handled the mud and terrain expertly. We were running with the lead group, and I was hooked on the sport! Raven seemed relaxed and confident for about the first 10 miles. Then some riders caught us, and Raven became nervous. Raven didn’t like having riders “chasing” him, and when the rider in front of us stopped to dismount and lead her horse down a hill, Raven left the trail and went crashing through the timber in flight-mode. We parted company. I mounted up again, and the remainder of the 15 mile loop was completed with Raven and I battling for control. We completed that 15 miles in 1.5 hours, and Raven checked out fine with the vet, but I pulled him from the ride due to bad behavior.

Although I had wanted to attend rides in July, August, and September, I decided to put more time and miles on Raven before entering in another event. I decided to shoot for the September ride. How was I going to get Raven under control? I started asking everyone for advice, and received a myriad of answers. The strategies I tried didn’t work, and the other suggestions didn’t make sense. There was no pattern to Raven’s episodes. My thoughts kept returning to my dressage instructor telling me Raven didn’t trust me. Raven is very trusting and respectful when I work him from the ground;

somehow that connection was not being transferred when I mounted. My thoughts also returned to Raven's panic when riders were "chasing" him. Unfortunately, I don't have anyone to ride with on training rides, but I determined that I needed to find someone so Raven could get used to being around other mounted horses.

It took some pleading, but I finally found someone to ride with me on four training rides. That helped Raven get used to being around mounted horses, but I still wasn't sure how to gain his trust while riding. We were in a vicious cycle: I'd be nervous that he'd blow up any minute, which made him nervous and prone to blowing up, which made me more nervous, etc. I knew I wasn't being the strong leader I should be, but every time I mounted up, I went into self-preservation mode. Then a fortuitous thing happened: I came across a couple articles that taught if you're having problems with your horse and nothing else seems to be working, try praising him. Like some people, some horses need a lot of praise to behave well and enjoy their work. In accomplishing ground work, I have always praised Raven often, and when he becomes scared, he will take ahold of my shirt sleeve, i.e. he looks to me for security. However, I wasn't offering him any security while mounted because I was always tense and prepared for him to run off. I wasn't praising him because speaking triggered him to run off. One day I decided to try the praise tactic. While riding in my home pasture, which is a safe and familiar environment, I forced myself to relax, to pet Raven often, and to verbally praise him often. It was a great ride without incident. For the next month, I used this tactic. Whenever Raven would become nervous, I would stroke his neck and talk him through it. He started to trust me and my judgment and was less inclined to try running off.

In late September, Raven and I headed to the Ft. Laramie Ride. By happenstance we set up camp next to a couple ladies who also had mustangs. It was fun to visit about our horses and to see our mustangs compete well with Arabians in the sport. The next day, Raven and I completed the 25 mile ride in 2.5 hours without incident. Raven actually preferred to be with the other mounted horses, regardless of them being ahead of or behind him. I was able to visit with the people I rode with, and Raven remained relaxed and obedient. I was so pleased at the progress we'd made!

I'm looking forward to the next endurance season. It will be fun to see Raven progress even further in his training, and it will be fun to meet other adopters along the way. Mustangs really do excel in the sport of endurance, so if you like trail riding fast, I encourage you to give the sport a try.

Questions or comments? Email me at [tstrauss@blm.gov](mailto:tstrauss@blm.gov).

Happy trails!

*Toni L. Strauss*