

Caledon vet explains the art of endurance riding

By Constance Scrafield

There is all kinds of art, including more than we acknowledge, in the world of sport.

To ride a horse in a 50-mile race and bring him in, also winning the award for Best Condition, takes skill, work and finesse.

Horse veterinarian Bri Henderson of the Cheltenham Veterinary Centre took time to discuss the art of endurance riding with us.

The horse in this case is her fabulous grey Arab stallion Stryder, stable name Rivendell Elessar, 'one of the most competitive horses I've ever ridden,' Henderson said.

She described their recently won race, the Coates Creek Endurance Competition.

'We went out five minutes after the group of riders went so I could keep him calm,' she said. 'He was quiet until he saw the others horses as we caught up to them. He realized what we were doing and then he hunted (the other horses), passing each one. He hates a horse to be in front of him. I had to hold him back a lot of the time.'

An endurance race, essentially a competitive 50-mile trail ride at speed, is run in stages both as to the trails themselves and the breaks for recovery along the way. These latter are actually serviced stops with vets in attendance, watching the speed at which the horse's heartbeat recovers and its general condition as to soundness of limbs and lungs 'whether it is eating and drinking and is in good spirits' before horse and rider continue on their way. The ride is mapped out in loops that come and go into the area of the pit stop and vet checks.

'When Stryder is dialled into the job, he knows at the pit stops to lower his head and be quiet so his heart rate comes down at the vet check. Then, he eats 'he loves to eat,' Henderson said of her remarkable Arab. 'When we're back on the road, he is focussed and he knows what he's doing.'

'Off the job, he's very cuddly,' she commented affectionately, 'looking for treats and playing around.'

Having been raised on her parents' farm, Rivendell, near Niagara Falls, where the focus is on horse breeding and training, Henderson has had all the advantages of an equine-based upbringing. Her mother is a judge, a competitor and a dressage trainer; her father is a trainer and a long-distance, endurance rider.

'I was really very lucky,' she said. 'I spent a year in Ireland and rode at a centre nearby. I went on to school in Edinburgh (Scotland) and rode just outside the city, where I also learned a lot from the trainer there.'

Stryder lives off the family farm, on a property in Shelburne with three geldings, to be close to Henderson for constant training.

'He works four to five days a week,' she remarked. 'They live outside 365 days of the year. There is a good run in with the doors to one side so there is full cover at one end 'we keep it piled with straw in the winter and they have super heavy blankets. He gets a good feed 'Brooks' Perform 'n' Win' and free choice hay and grass.'

It's always a worry for those used to keeping their horses in at night.

'It took me two or three years to get used to it, but every time I go there, they all seem happy.'

'We joke that we are his staff,' she added.

'As Stryder is so challenging, I've learned a great deal from him,' she remarked.

The craft of preparing for such a challenge is not only riding the trails in the area with rivers to cross and hills to ascend as part of his training, but endurance horses are also very often trained in dressage 'the other end of the riding style' for balance in their muscle development and in fact. It is called cross training.

He also gets adjustments from an equine chiropractor and acupuncture.

Back to the winning day at Coates Creek Endurance Competition: Stryder came in, looking nothing like a horse that had just won a 50-mile race.

Her surprise at their success came during the last loop of the ride, when a photographer at a water stop told her they were in the lead. 'I had no clue, although I thought it was odd I didn't see anybody was around 'he hates being behind other horses 'he just has to be in front.'

Once over the finish line, 'His heart rate was down by the time we had his saddle off,' said Henderson's husband and pit crew Sean Elliott. 'He was remarkable and looked as though he could do it all again.'

'They were very complimentary because he was very well behaved,' Henderson was happy to report.

She and Stryder had spent the weekend there 'Friday and Saturday night before the Sunday race, as she was the ride veterinarian for the Saturday event.

Her praise for his acumen in the races: 'He eats at the pit stops and, on the last loop, we stopped for him to eat some delicious grass. He drank at the troughs that were every five miles and the puddles.'

?He's very good at taking care of himself,? she said.

The notion of combining the indisputable art form of dressage and endurance racing is that dance by horse and rider, reflecting the unending historical relationship between us and our equine partners, without which history would have been a very different story.