

Training for Your First 50 by Janine Esler



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Janine Esler is owner/operator of Esler Arabians in Granite Bay, CA, where she starts and trains arabians and other breeds for trail and endurance. She has completed the Tevis 6 times. Her advice here is oriented toward endurance riders who are considering their first 50 mile ride.

Endurance riding is not a sport for the faint of heart. Over the years, though, I have seen far too many cases where the brave decision to "do my first 50" was undertaken with little or no training for the horse. As a professional trainer I can spot the unprepared horses at a ride all too easily. If I could just walk over to any of their riders and give my best advice, this would be it.

Before attempting your first 50 mile ride, be certain that your horse will respond to basic cues in the arena and on the trail. Your horse needs to stop with minimum pressure, side pass, back and respond lightly to your hands and legs. He/she must also be able to exhibit various degrees of

collection on a light rein, preferably using a snaffle bit and a running martingale.

Next you need to build a degree of confidence on the trail. Your horse must show the same responsiveness "under duress" on the trail as in the less stressful setting of the arena. Therefore, if your horse is not very responsive in the arena, he will be very unresponsive on the trail and will certainly become a "wacko" when ridden on his first 50 mile ride in a group of other horses.

The "holes" in your horse's training will become more apparent as you move on to more difficult situations. Conversely, a well-trained horse will work his "kinks" out, learn to concentrate and "get to work" on his first 50. You can expect to achieve this focus, your main training goal, on the second 25 mile loop. By then, much of his anxiety should have dissipated due to the working distance. Having a strong training basis, he will finally go down the trail -- anxiety free -- drawing on, and responding to his solid "nearly automatic" arena training.

Your second goal for the day is for your horse to finish his first 50 mile ride relaxed and confident. It is absolutely crucial that this goal be met: It is what he will remember and it will imprint on his behavior for the rest of his endurance career.

The exact opposite outcome results when a horse with a weak training basis is advanced to trail work too quickly and taken on a 50 mile ride to "calm him down." Believing that an untrained horse will calm down during the duress of a ride is pure foolhardiness. The horse will become increasingly anxious and out of control as the ride progresses, working himself into a panic frenzy. He will end his first 50 mile ride (if he makes it that far without being pulled by the vets) scared and wild-eyed. Fear is the feeling he will remember. In turn, the next ride will be worse.

As an equestrian group endurance horses are certainly the most poorly trained of the performance classes. Many horses starting in endurance have no professional training whatsoever. There are in fact no short cuts in training and none should

be taken. The endurance horse needs training from the ground up, perhaps more so than other disciplines. Why? Because what we ask of them is incredibly difficult, stressful and even painful if not done as a training progression.

Your trained horse's first 50 mile race requires correct strategy and homework. The old saying is accurate: "Horses run on instinct, not on intellect." It is your job, through proper initial training, to replace the "herd" with yourself. You must become the herd; only then will your horse not succumb to the primal "herd instinct." He will bow instead to you, his new master -- and mentor -- for safety and direction.

It is imperative to gradually approach the inevitable dangerous situation of moving with a large group of horses. On the first ride I always start 5 minutes behind the last horse to leave. I mount my horse and hit a medium trot. The medium trot is ingrained in my horse's mind because that is the speed they have been taught to hold during all of their trail

training. It is automatic. Since it is automatic, in a chaotic time, this "race/herd time," it will become a safe place to be. Horses need to feel safe moving; it is there that they will find peace.

Within a few miles my horse will start passing (at the trot) other horses in the back. Do not try to make your young horse walk too early. He will build up too much anxiety and burn up more energy without covering any ground than at the medium trot. I allow the horse to trot for a distance that I feel is safe for his condition. Then I ask him to walk. If I cannot achieve this on his back I get off and ask him to stay behind me at a walk. All my horses are taught this behavior prior to ride time.

When my horse's P&R's are down I will continue his trot. The trick to covering distance on a young, newly conditioned horse is never to allow them to go "red on the dial." Know when to ask your horse to walk. If you wait too long, he will not recover in the vet check. Conversely, if you ask too soon, he and you will expend extra energy fighting each other and the walking will be a net loss.

I continue to alternate walking (on a loose rein) and trotting, working with my horse to both cover ground and conserve energy. In addition I always keep my horse "in frame." By "in frame," I mean slightly collected with a rounded back and very little pressure on the snaffle bit. Horses that move over the terrain "out of frame" have a much greater chance of tripping, pulling muscles, and getting sore backs than ones moving properly. A horse ridden out of frame, with his head up and his back down, will suffer leg trauma from his front legs "pistoning" the ground. This effect is especially evident on young or under-conditioned horses and is exacerbated by a heavier rider on rough terrain.

At the lunch break I encourage my horse to drink and eat as much as possible. I put them in a situation that will make them relaxed and comfortable.

The second 25 mile loop is always magic. The first 25 removes most of their anxiety. The lunch stop lowers their adrenalin level. In the last 25 miles we move at whatever walk-trot combination the horse's condition allows him to comfortably handle. I work at keeping a perfect medium collected trot and encourage him to walk fast on a loose rein.

This last half is a very controlled 25 miles, encouraging the horse to listen closely to me. In this way at the finish I have the focused, relaxed, happy athlete that was my goal from the start. He remembers this experience as positive, not freaky or scary. Every subsequent 50 mile ride for the first year I do exactly the same, methodically grooving the horse like a tennis player grooves his swing.

With three years of progressive successes behind you, you will have a veteran endurance horse on whom you can ride your ride comfortably and correctly, unthreatened by the inevitable herd of out-of-control racers. This method requires patience but places the horse's attention with the rider and vice-versa, the way it should be: A true team effort by horse and rider. There have been volumes written about the special bond that

can exist between horse and rider. I have had the extreme privilege to experience such a bond with my gelding Kholt-Fortee.

Kholt is a 12 year-old Khemosabi grandson. He is sired by Khemistree (Khemosabi x Rabbanni by sx Saladins) and out of Sarali (sx Saladin x Safaari). He is 15' 2 hands, bay and the strongest, most powerful horse I have ever ridden.

I began Kholt's endurance training when he was 9 years old. He was an especially difficult pupil because he is very spirited, very strong, and exhibits an inordinate amount of the instinct for self-preservation. In short, all things on the trail or on the way to it should be avoided!! In addition, his avoidance list includes, rider, tack, horse blankets, and anything else that may be put on the horse, or even close to him! By the end of 2 years, however, Kholt had come a long way. We had completed many 50 mile rides, several 100's, and a 3-day 150. We had on the negative side, 2 Tevis starts, 0 finishes. Kholt's 1997 start ended when he lost his cool with a passing horse and went running and bucking down a very steep slope. He then tripped and rolled with me still aboard resulting in my general appearance being altered and a 2 inch cut on his face which earned us a disqualification.

The following year, 1998, our farrier made the error of shoeing him with only 3 inch toes. That is fully 1/2 inch less than he should ever be. At Michigan Bluff, 2/3 way thru the race, Kholt's feet were sore and he was excused from the race.

I was devastated since Kholt had never been pulled from any other ride and I wanted him to have the honor of completing the Tevis Cup 100 mile ride, considered the toughest equine competition in the world. Kholt and I learned some difficult lessons and I then believed 1999 would be his Tevis Buckle year. Three weeks after the '98 Tevis Cup, Kholt was diagnosed with "moonblindness," aka equine Uvietis. Equine uvietis is a disease of the auto-immune system which manifests itself in the eye. It has no known cause, but many environmental factors are suspected. Amongst them, an abnormal worm shedding brought on by worming with Ivermectim, is suspected. I believe this was the cause in Kholt's case.

For 3 months we took Kholt to every eye specialist in Northern California. We treated him both orally and with eye drops including 7 different eye medicines up to 6 times per day around the clock. Kholt knew we were trying to help him. He became extremely responsive and would come in from his pasture every time when called, standing quietly for painful medication day after day. Unfortunately, nothing work and Kholt was diagnosed with painful glaucoma in his left eye. I was given only one option; remove his eye! That was not perceived an option for me; Kholt deserved better. Through perserverence, I eventually located and ophthomologist laser surgeon in Palo Alto, Dr. Mugahnem. He performed the surgery on Kholt. The operation was a success in as much as it saved his eye, but Kholt's optic nerve had already been destroyed. So he had

become completely blind in the left eye. I know that if I would have had the co-operation of the other specialists I had used in referring me directly to Dr. Mugahnm I could also have saved his sight. We have to this day kept his blind eye healthy and comfortable by the use of Muro (and eye ointment, applied 2x daily). Kholt still always comes when called, stands quietly, and puts his "head-down" on command for me to put his fly mask back on after treatment.

Initially, just after Kholt became totally blind in his left eye, he became very frightened and spooky. It became very difficult even to lead him anywhere other than his own pasture. I knew I had my job cut out: It was only 4 1/2 months until the Tevis Cup and I had not been able to ride Kholt in 7 months. He needed to adjust to his new world, so that he could negotiate the world's most challenging and dangerous trail quickly. With much of it being in the dark, I wasn't sure we could do it.

For the next 4 months, Kholt learned to trust me more and more through the use of a new method of communication. I taught him to respond consistently to my left leg (his blind side and the cliff-side of the Tevis Cup Trail) and by verbal commands. I talked to him constantly, reassuring him and instructing him to "step" over and around objects in his path. I also talk to him telling him to slow down, speed up, bend left or right, duck his head down under trees, and to be careful on slick ground. Kholt listened and responded to everything.

After several 50 mile ride completions he began to shy and stumble less. Next we did 150 miles at the Shellborne Station Pony Express multi-day ride. Kholt trotted over the finish after 150 miles like he hadn't anything difficult at all! He was regaining his confidence. During those four months I became aware that Kholt's sense of hearing and touch became more acute, as a compensation for the loss of sight is his left eye. Finally all that instinct for self-preservation which had made Kholt do difficult to train initially payed off. He depended on me to be his left eye and his protection. He knew that instead of 2 eyes he could only use one, and I had become the other.

On all of Kholt's previous endurance rides he had always been in front of Amori, his riding companion. On the morning of the Tevis Cup start, July 24th 1999 it was so. On the way to Foresthill, Kholt and Amori braved Granite Chief Wilderness, Cougar Rocky, Swinging Bridge and the 3 great canyons that make up most of the 22,000 feet of verticle on the 100 mile Tevis Trail.

At Foresthill darkness fell. It was Kholt's biggest test. He would have to negotiate the last 28 miles in the dark beginning with the treacherous "California Loop," a narrow hillside mountain trail built with switchbacks and an ever present deadly drop into the American River gorge. The drop-off side of the trail was on the left side, Kholt's blind-side.

Kholt headed out of Foresthill at dark and immediately panicked. He could not see the trail at all and neither could I! I could not cue him on where to step. Without my input and reassurance he was terrified. We decided to put Amori in front of him hoping that since Amori was white he could

follow him. Normally Kholt is very competitive with Amori and I have never been able to ride him behind another horse. That night however, Kholt decided to trust Amori and I. We trotted in total darkness much of the time for the next 7 hours, passing the vet-checks and trecherous challenge in excellent shape. I can't tell you who showed more faith; ie: Mine for Kholt, or his for me, but when we finally saw the lights at Auburn, crossed the finish line and did our "victory lap" I knew I was truly blessed to have been allowed to share in Kholt's victory. A mere 4 1/2 months after losing sight in his left eye to glacoma Kholt had completed the most difficult endurance ride in the world! That distinction sets him aside as an extremely rare equine.

Three weeks later, Kholt happily finished the 5-day, 250 mile Brice Canyon X P ride. One week later he led the Khermistreetu son Lucca and his owner Sandra Goodwin to their first 50 mile completion at the Lassen Challenge ride. One month later, he once again led Sandra and Lucca to a Lake Sonoma 50 mile completion.

In the process he continues to teach me more about strength, determination, and faith than any human ever could.