

THE RIDE OF OUR LIVES...

Karen Dobric, 2004

There are two main types of riding.

One is the race track. Think of going to the gallops. By the time they enter a race, riders are supposed to know the basics – how to saddle up, how to ride properly and how to get ahead.

Imagine a situation where some riders are allowed to race without having those skills. If they can't saddle up, they are left behind in the stables and nobody waits for them. Some riders who can't do up the equipment on their own might be given special help, but it doesn't really help much when they get to the starting gate.

If they don't know how to ride properly, they feel embarrassed and awkward. They know that by the time they get to the racetrack, people expect them to be able to ride properly. They know that some people get a bit of help saddling up, but once you get to the starting gate every rider is on their own. Some fall off, either in the starting gate or during the race. They might even be pushed off by another rider, because they're not able to hang on very well. Those that do hang on are so exhausted by the end of the race that most often, they take no interest in riding ever again.

Some just don't have the competitive spirit to want to race the others, and the idea of the dusty, monotonous race track whirling past them in a haze just doesn't appeal. Others think it might be fun, but they don't know enough about which way to overtake, and how to pace the ride so that they can get faster at the end. So they just trot along quietly and let everyone else race ahead.

Some riders were born on farms with horses, and riding is so easy for them that they can't understand riders who don't have the skills. The highly skilled riders just ignore the others, knowing they'll be last to the finish line, if they make it at all.

And some riders, who have little in the way of skills, find themselves to be naturals. They start the race, and really enjoy it. They get a real kick out of racing the riders who were born on farms with horses, because it's so much fun to win against them.

The officials are given a rather laborious, monotonous task. They read the rules to the riders, and make sure they have all the correct equipment. It's exciting at first – the buzz of the track, the noise and high spirits are just great. But after a few races, they get to know the types of riders who are not going to do well. They see them lining up, and try to give them good advice, but know there is only so much they can do. The problem is that another part of their job is picking up the fallen riders, dusting them off, and sending them back to the starting gate.

Some of the officials can keep going, but a lot of them either become dejected or leave the job. It gets tough to support the race when you can spot the winners so easily. Somehow cashing in on winning bets becomes a drag. They feel a bit like they're cheating, but they're not breaking any of the track rules. Some of them just can't work out why they feel the way they do. Some of them get so worn out that they go off to find other race-tracks where the riders are all superb, and they don't have to worry about those who fall off or don't finish. The buzz and thrill of the track returns, and then they start to wonder again why all race tracks can't be this much fun. Then they remember, not everyone can win anyway.

The other type of riding is the trek. Think of a coastal region with hills and valleys, seashore and forested areas, and a riding arena at the start.

When the riders get to the arena, they are sorted out according to their riding ability. Some are already superb because they have been riding since they were very small, and they go together in a group for their first trek. Others are still trying to learn how to saddle up, so they are put in a group at the riding arena for a while. Even though the guide book says they shouldn't be there if they can't ride, it's obvious they're not ready for their trek, so they have extra help to prepare them.

Some of the riders are really talented at jumping, others at riding fast, some at dressage and yet others have great skills at endurance riding. Because there are several treks in their time there, on most treks they get to enjoy going with others who have the same skills. They have a wonderful time pitting their expertise against the best – jumping higher, riding more accurately, and riding further or faster. It really hones their skills, and they share tips and gain even better skills. It's fantastic for all of them.

Most riders have some idea of the treks they will enjoy. Some of the talented riders even choose to start on an easy trek, because at that time they might want to enjoy the company of others riding slowly along a forest path. Some riders, no matter what their skill level, want to start with a bit of a challenge. Even against good advice, they might still get the chance to take on a tougher trek. It suits them really well to have the opportunity.

The most important thing about the trek is that the officials have to get to know the riders. There seems to be little point in demanding that the riders go on any particular trek. That is not what the treks are for. So the officials find out what each rider is capable of, and give advice about the best treks to suit their level. Of course, they will be allowed to choose the direction and pace to a certain extent as well. Some go galloping along the beach, some take their time picking their way carefully along narrow forest tracks in the hills, and others might decide to concentrate on basic riding skills on a long farm track. So when they are all ready to go, the riders move out with a group of others who have similar skills, and they are all content with the path they are taking and the pace they will ride.

When they have finished, they are checked out by the officials. Because they have had officials along with them, the riders are much better placed to know how they are getting on. If there are things they need to brush up on, they may go back to the arena group for a while. That often happens with a group that has started with an easy trek – one that doesn't take very long and gives them the chance to find out what they can do.

All the riders on the treks are using their skills. Some are taking long treks with huge challenges, going overnight in all weathers, and travelling on risky, quite dangerous paths. But they are well prepared, and it suits them to have the challenge. They know that they will continue to want to pit their skills against all odds.

No matter what trek they go on, there are always episodes where the riders decide to have a bit of fun. They see who can jump the highest, who can ride the furthest in a short space of time. It helps them see how they are getting on, and how good their skills are. Then they are back on the trek, carrying on with their purpose. When they return, they take stock of what they have done, and decide on the next trek. They gather lots of skills and experiences, and get on well with other riders as well as the officials.

The officials find this type of riding really incredible. It has all the thrill of the track at times, but they find that because the riders are riding at a skill level and pace appropriate for their own riding ability, they very seldom fall off. Because the riders know what to expect, and can have some choice about where they ride, they hardly ever get exhausted. That means that all the riders get better at riding. And it means that the officials enjoy their job, because they don't have to pick up tired, worn-out riders any more. And because they are advised on the most appropriate trek, the riders don't get exhausted and put off by riding.

The riders find out after a while that they keep enjoying their riding, no matter what type of trek they are on. And best of all, none of the treks are off limits, as long as they can show that they have the skills to cope with a particular trek. Most often that takes a lot of planning and preparation, but it makes it possible and the riders think that's really great. Going trekking, all the riders will finish their time knowing how to saddle up, how to ride properly, and when they need to draw on such skills, knowing how to get ahead.

The trek is more expensive than the track, and it often takes more time. It might even need more officials. That's why it's not so popular. But if you want people to enjoy riding because it's something they need to be able to do, it's not costly at all. Trekking is the most excellent, efficient, empowering and enhancing way to become a great rider, no matter who you are. It depends how important riding really is.