

The long game...

Going the Extra Mile

When mainstream eventing dispensed with the roads and tracks, and steeplechase phases of competition it may have seemed that the 'long format' was gone forever. But BRC held with tradition and you can still take part in long format at the National Horse Trials Championships in August. So, when it comes to fitness, will our riders need to step up a gear in preparation? We asked Paul Tapner for advice

The long format

First of all, it's really important to understand what 'long format' means by referring to the rule book or competition schedule. This will detail exactly what you're going to do at the event and it's really important that you do your homework and prepare well in advance.

Your required speed will appear in metres per minute (mpm) – for example, the schedule will say, 'you will be doing 'X' kilometres of road and tracks at 'X' mpm. For the cross-country, most courses are measured at 450mpm and BE100 and BE100+ are 475mpm. For the steeplechase, they'll probably ask you to go at 520mpm or maybe even 550mpm. A horse's canter is around 300-350mpm.

Pacing yourself

To familiarise yourself with the required speeds, you can either place markers at set distances around a field and time yourself, or use a GPS tracking device (that cyclists and runners use). The SpeedCheck app for iPhone is designed specifically for event riders to learn their speeds and you can set ranges of plus or minus 10mpm. It will do a low beep if you are too slow and a high beep if you go too fast. This is something you can do trotting along the road so you can learn what a 220mpm trot is, for example.

In competition, use a measuring wheel

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About Paul Tapner



Gatehouse

Also known as 'Taperz', Paul is one of the most committed and hard-working riders on the international eventing circuit. A consistent performer, Paul moved to the UK from his native Australia in 1999 and combines his competitive career with training riders at all levels. Highlights include winning Badminton Horse Trials in 2010 with the courageous little bay, Inonothing. He is currently on the Australian equestrian training squad. Paul is sponsored by Gatehouse Hats, who have kindly worked with him to supply this article.

Paul at Burghley



SWD&Photography



to measure the specified distances and memorise your target points.

For instance, if you have to go at 450mpm, you will measure every 450 metre segment and make a mental note of where each segment ends – the beep on your event watch should coincide with those points and act as a guide to tell you whether you are ahead or behind time.

Fitness training

You horse will become fitter while learning your speeds but I also recommend interval training to build stamina.

For BRC Championship level, start with:

- 1) Trot for 10 minutes (warm up)
- 2) Walk for three minutes
- 3) Canter at your required speed for two minutes
- 4) Walk for three minutes
- 5) Canter at your required speed for two minutes
- 6) Walk for three minutes
- 7) Canter at your required speed for two minutes

The trick is to make it progressive in order to increase fitness and I would use this pattern every fourth day. For the first two sessions, we do three lots of canter for two minutes (as above). We do it once and then four days later, do it again.

Then we do three lots of canter for 2.5 minutes for the next two sessions (at four day intervals), then move up to three lots of three minute canters and eventually three lots of five minutes. That's at least two months of work. In the days in between we are schooling or hacking as usual.

fastfacts HAY'S OK

Research suggests horses can eat hay right up to exercise because, if there's fibre in the gut, it will absorb water so they'll be more hydrated.

The four day recovery between is important. Leading up to Badminton I aim to enter four one-day-events, which would be counted as gallop days in the horse's fitness programme. So when the horse runs cross-country at a one-day-event, we wouldn't gallop it within four days before or after.

I had never jumped a steeplechase fence until I did my first one in competition, so it's not necessary to have access to steeplechase fences and gallops in order to prepare. Equally, if you haven't got hills to build stamina then go a little bit faster in training; so instead of doing a 450mpm canter you would do 500mpm – you just add on 50mpm.

Rider fitness

If you are preparing and training the horse yourself, you should be physically fit enough and strong enough for the event.

Rider fitness is important: studies have shown that when you ride cross-country, both your own and your horse's heart rate is at maximum most of the way round. When you think of the split-second decisions you have to make it compares to sprinting up a steep hill while trying to do a Sudoku puzzle.

What you're doing when you ride cross-country is problem solving or reacting. You need to be a thinking rider and react to whatever's going on at any point in time.



Top left: A fit horse is less likely to pick up any injuries

Above: Paul Tapner cross-country preparation

Top: Paul in action at Burghley

Having your brain still working at a high level when your heart is at maximum is actually really difficult. If your body is familiar with having your heart rate at maximum, then it's not so much of an issue - you can still think clearly and you can still react clearly. Therefore, lack of fitness in horse or rider can be a problem in terms of safety and performance.

Feeding and hydration

If the horse wants to drink after exertion, let it drink. If the horse is hot it will drink more. If you let them cool down and then offer them water, they tend not to drink as much, so rehydration can become an issue.

There's good scientific evidence to support the fact that horses should be allowed to eat hay all the way up to exercise because, if there's fibre in the gut, it will absorb water so they will actually be more hydrated. Do not give any hard

Above: Learn to gauge speed at home

Right: Heart rate check - the horse's heart rate has to get below 80 within 10 minutes of arrival at the 10 minute box

Far right: Getting ready to leave the 10 minute box

feed within an hour or so of exercise, but don't be taking their hay away, unless they're likely to gorge themselves on it.

As you increase the horse's workload in training, you should be increasing its concentrate feed accordingly, and we also give electrolytes in the evening feed after exertion. After cross-country, we provide forage and then go back to the normal feeding routine within two or three hours.

Recovery rates

If you're going to understand your horse's fitness you have to know what its normal heart rate is. You can get expensive digital heart rate monitors or just go online and buy a cheap stethoscope and learn how to do it yourself.

I've got diaries for most of the time I've been a professional event rider – so 20 years' worth. I note every single

fastfacts TEAM EFFORT

Have a minimum of two helpers - one to hold the horse, the other to wash the horse off or a maximum of three people - one to hold the horse and the other two on either side the horse washing it off. At 4* level we have four or five people - one person to hold the horse, one each side to wash the horse off and another to replenish water buckets or rotate between washing off.

horse, every time it's galloped or run cross-country and I know what its heart rate is between 10 and 15 minutes afterwards.

That has been a very valuable tool because it tells me whether the workload I've just given the horse is enough, too much or not enough. You need to be familiar with that if you're serious about getting your horse fit.

The horse's heart rate has to get below 80 within 10 minutes of arrival at the 10

minute box. If the heart rate is above that you will be held and, ultimately may not be allowed to continue if the horse is not considered fit enough.

10 minute box

Your support crew must know exactly what is expected of them. Have a minimum of two helpers – one to hold the horse, the other to wash the horse off, or a maximum of three people – one to hold the horse and the other two on either side the horse washing it off.

At 4* level we have four or five people – one person to hold the horse, one each side to wash the horse off and another to replenish water buckets or rotate between washing off. Any more than that and everyone gets stressed – including the horse – and you trip over each other.

The long game...

Clockwise from Right: Applying leg grease; Sync your watch to the official event time; Bandaging after the event, and Paul taking part at Badminton

Your crew will need to have their equipment ready and including:

- buckets
- sponges
- sweat scrapers
- headcollar and lead rope
- spare horseshoes (with the same studs as you're riding in)
- bandages
- towels

Everything needs to be there well before you, the competitor, are due to arrive in the 10 minute box and your crew should have the water buckets already filled, ready to use as soon as you come in.

It's too late for them to arrive at the same time as you. Don't forget to use towels to dry reins and to clean your boots before you go cross-country – the



10 minute box invariably becomes very muddy because there's so much water flying around cooling horses.

Aftercare

These days we use aggressive cooling. If the horse is hot, it needs to cool down quickly as its physiology is very bad at dealing with heat. Horses have a large body mass and, unlike an elephant that has big ears to dissipate heat, the horse is ill-equipped to cool itself. The vet will take the horse's temperature, will say whether it's too hot or not, and you will need to get it cool.

Aggressive cooling also has a good effect on recovery. You need to reduce the core temperature of the horse as quickly as you can, so after every gallop, after every exertion, all our horses get cold water hosed.

You wet the horse all over, scrape it off. If the water you're scraping off is cold, good. If the water you're scraping off is hot, wet it again straight away and keep doing that.

Thereafter, keep checking the horse, put your hand on to feel whether it has heated up again – a hot horse will remain hot for 20 minutes after, so don't cool them off and then think 'oh right, I've got to stick a rug on it', because 10 minutes later they'll be sweating which means they're still cooking on the inside, they've got lactic acid damaging their muscles and they're certainly not going to show

jump very well for you the next day.

After our horses have galloped or as soon as they've completed cross-country, the boots come off and the ice boots go on and stay on until they are hot and then we put on another set of ice boots. For a one-day-event or a gallop, we only put one set of ice boots on.

We then wash the horse's legs off, making sure they're clean, dry and free of cuts then we generally use an Epsom Salts bandage (soak a bandage pad in a bucket of cold water with a handful of Epsom Salts) and apply to the legs with a stable bandage.

The Epsom Salts act as a cheap poultice although some horses can be sensitive to Epsom Salts, in which case just use normal stable bandages, or magnetic boots or bandages.

Finally, people often think that you need to keep the horse walking after all that exertion but just let it graze. Then it can wonder around at its own leisure and you can reflect on what was, hopefully, an amazing experience. ●

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WORTH THEIR SALT

Wash the horse's legs off, making sure they're clean, dry and free of cuts. Perhaps use an Epsom Salts bandage (if your horse is not sensitive to it). The salts act as a cheap poultice.