The long game...

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.

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

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.

About Paul Tapner

Paul at Burghley

SWD&Photography
**Fitness training**

You horse will become fitter while speed training if you are ahead or behind time.

For BC 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 canter 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 will 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 a 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 450rpm canter you would do 500rpm – you just add on 50rpm.

**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 sprints up a steep hill while trying to do a Sudoku puzzle.

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

**fastFacts**

**TEAM EFFORT**

I love 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. Your support crew must know exactly what is expected of them. I 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.

**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 dehydration 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 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 offer 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 you can 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 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.
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.