

COMPETITORS GUIDE TO THE VET BOX

Cross Country at Eventing Rally is often the highlight of the competition for riders and horses. It is the ultimate test of your work, preparation and partnership with your horse. It can be exhilarating, fun, scary, disappointing, painful, exhausting, and sometimes all of these things at once! Crossing that finish line can bring about all types of emotions and you may be consumed with your performance on course and wanting to share those emotions with your teammates while you revel in the glory, or wallow in the disappointment. While these feelings are all important, remember that your most meaningful job as a rider is about to begin and you need to maintain your focus for just a little while longer!

The Vet Box serves several functions at a rally. It is the area where your post-ride equipment is waiting for you. It is the area where your horse will be checked for injury, where his vitals will be taken to determine his fitness and recovery and where his cool out procedure will be performed. In the event that your horse is distressed, it is where he will be treated and brought back to a cool and comfortable state before returning to the barns. It is also an area where your knowledge, skills and efficient team work will be judged as part of the Horse Management competition.

Preparation is the key to most successes in life and the vet box is no exception. If you do your homework and are organized ahead of time, your visit to the vet box should be a smooth and positive experience!

CONDITIONING

Your horse must be properly conditioned for the task at hand. It takes 6-8 weeks to condition a horse for a moderate cross country course, and may take longer at the higher levels or for a horse in poor condition at the beginning of the program. It is your responsibility as a rider to insure that your horse is physically and mentally prepared to perform for you on cross country. A lack of proper conditioning is unfair to the horse, unsafe and (least importantly) can result in penalty points assessed at rally.

This is not an article about conditioning and there are plenty of resources out there to help you plan a program that will allow your horse to reach the proper level of fitness for your rally. Seek out these resources and get to work! Remember that the numbers (vital signs) don't lie, so make sure you do your homework in this area. Your horse (and his numbers) will tell on you if you don't!

SETTING UP YOUR VET BOX SPACE

Your team needs to set up your vet box space in the morning, before the start of competition. A 10 x 10 tarp is the best and most efficient way to define your space and keep your equipment organized and off the ground. The box may get muddy as the day goes on so you will be happy to have a dry place to set your gear. Spread out your tarp in the designated area (usually in a row, up the middle of the vet box) and place your equipment on it.

Your team should bring 2-4 wash buckets to the vet box, depending on the weather (hotter = more buckets). You do not need one specifically for each horse, everyone can share. Make sure each bucket has at least one big sponge and a scraper. Bring 1-2 water buckets as well. It is a good idea to put some blue painters tape or other large, visible marking on the drinking buckets, even though they should already be labeled as such. Things can get hectic and being able to identify drinking buckets easily is important. Set your buckets up next to your tarp. If the day is not too hot, or it will not be too long until

your riders go, fill all the buckets now from the water source so they are ready when the first horse comes in.

A tote or laundry bag to place each horse's boots and tack into, as well as rider helmet and equipment, can be handy. Horses will be un-tacked in the vet box and the equipment will return later to the barn, so the more organized you can be now the easier it will be to sort it out and transport it later.

Your horse's halter and lead need to make it to the vet box, so plan on sending it with a teammate once you are tacked up and heading out.

Some additional ideas are a few towels, a chair, an extra lead rope and halter, perhaps a small cooler with some favorite drinks or snacks. If the day is brisk bring some coolers for the horses. Remember that everything you bring will need to go back, so don't bring half your tack room! Just make sure you have what you will need. Keep your space neat and organized. Vet box skills are part of HM competition!

Your team also needs to decide who will be in the vet box. It is very important that at least one person is there to meet each rider, and two is better. Perhaps your Stable Manager will spend the day in the box, with other team mates stepping in to help when they are not riding. Some teams prefer to have the SM stay at the barn as point person and vet box assistance is coordinated with just the riders. Sometimes teams will join up with another team and share the vet box assistance between them, with one SM in the box and one back at the barns. A lot depends on the weather, the schedule and the level and experience of the riders. There is no right or wrong answer but you need to make sure, as a team, that you have a plan!

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

You gallop through the finish flags and are feeling exhilarated beyond belief, sick to your stomach, or both! You may feel elated with your awesome horse, or you may already be planning the wording of the "For Sale" ad you will write the minute you get home. You can't wait to tell everyone how wonderful, or how horrible, it was. Regardless of how you are feeling right at that moment, your work is not done!

Pull up gradually and walk to the Vet Box staff waiting for you. This staff will probably include the Veterinarian, the CHMJ or an AHMJ, and the Vet Box Secretary. Your teammates should also be there waiting for your arrival.

At this point your communication with your team should be at a minimum. This is not the time to give an analysis of your ride. Your job right now is to dismount, quickly run up stirrups and loosen the girth, and then hold your horse quietly while the staff takes his initial vitals. They will certainly take the pulse and respiration, and may take the temperature as well. At this time you should be looking over his legs and assessing his demeanor to see if he seems well and normal to you. This is where your knowledge of your own horse comes into play. The staff in the vet box does not know this horse and you do, so anything out of the ordinary should be noted!

Once vitals have been taken, your cool out procedure will begin. If you are a diligent, high achieving Pony Clubber you will want to know what his vitals are so you can compare them to what you already know from your conditioning program to help assess your horse's current condition. You have a right to know the vitals, so if they are not offered to you, ask! The staff will tell you if they are concerned about the numbers and will give you instructions for how to proceed. If all is within normal range, head to your team's tarp area and get to work!

Riders should remove helmets and vests while your teammates remove your horses tack. This should be done efficiently, but unless your horse is in distress you don't need to be frantic with the procedure. Flinging tack around like a NASCAR pit crew is fun but un-necessary! Get the tack off, place it neatly on the tarp and put the halter on.

You should remove your horse's boots as well. Often the legs are the place that the blood vessels are closest to the surface and as such are an important location to reduce body temperature. Some of you may be reluctant to remove boots if horse is wearing studs and that is something you should bring up with the CHMJ PRIOR to your arrival in the vet box. You MIGHT be given permission to leave the boots on but understand that any signs of distress mean boots come off regardless. Cooling a distressed horse is the number one priority!

Now, get water on and then get it off again. It is not the putting on of cold water that cools the horse, but the removal of that water when it heats up, which happens in mere seconds! Having a horse holder and then a washer/scrapper on each side is an efficient system, as is having a washer going around with a scrapper following behind. Whatever your system, be generous with the cold water, paying particular attention to the areas where blood vessels are closest to the surface, as well as between the legs, followed by immediate scraping off of the hot water. Now walk the horse a lap or two and repeat.

Allow your horse to drink as much water as they wish. This will aid in the cooling process and combat any dehydration they may experience. By the time a horse shows symptoms of dehydration they are already in the danger zone, so let them drink and offer more water every minute or two.

You will continue this pattern until you are called for your second vitals check. This usually happens 5 – 10 minutes after the first. If there is nothing alarming you will probably be sent to continue your cool out procedure. If your horse is really, really fit and his numbers have come way down, you may be sent back to the barn after this second check, but more likely than not you will stay for at least one more cycle. Just continue calmly walking, drinking, sponging and scraping until you are released to go back to the barn!

THE NUMBERS, WHAT THEY MEAN AND WHAT CAN GO WRONG

So what do those vitals mean, and how are they used to determine condition and when you are allowed to return to the barn? More importantly, how are they used to determine a horse in distress? Your understanding of this topic will allow you to react calmly and efficiently in the event that your horse is not recovering as expected, and will certainly aid you in your future conditioning programs.

Resting Pulse 32 – 44

Resting Respiration 8 – 16

Resting Temperature 99 - 101

The horse's pulse and respiration will increase to 3, 4 and even 5 x's the resting rate during exertion. The first check done is often just to check the pulse and respiration rate and to develop a "high point" that we use to gage the horses **RECOVERY**, which is the important number. How high the vitals go is rarely a problem, and in fact very fit horses will often come in with higher vitals than an unfit horse because their bodies have good enough condition to work that hard. It is the rate of RECOVERY that we are generally concerned with.

Often the temperature is not checked as routine, only when the horse is showing signs of distress. Distressed horses will almost always have a very high temperature, so that will be monitored in the event of an issue as high temperatures that don't drop quickly can be very dangerous to the horse. Should your

horse show signs of distress, immediate and intense cooling will begin using copious amounts of ice water.

With each subsequent check (done at 5 – 10 minute intervals) we are hoping to see the vitals steadily decreasing towards a resting rate. The fitter the horse, the more rapid the recovery rate will be. During each check we are looking for a notable decrease in pulse and respiration rate. You will not necessarily stay in the box until full recovery happens. We look for rapid and steady progress towards resting rate, sending you back to the barn when we are confident that recovery is happening without issue.

An **inversion** in vitals is when the respiration rate exceeds the pulse rate and is a sign of a very high temperature. Horses lose up to 25% of their body heat through respiration and an inversion is the body's attempt to remove excess heat not lost through other tissue. This is common in unfit draft types and overweight horses, as their bodies do not cool as efficiently as lighter, fitter horses. Most inversions are present from the very first check and will prompt immediate “distressed horse” action. Ice water is urgent, and lots of it. Remember it is not putting it on that cools the horse, it is scraping it off immediately!

If the vitals elevate rather than decrease after the first check, this is also a sign of a potentially high temperature. Muscles continue to release heat for several minutes after exertion and if the horse is not well conditioned, or is carrying too much weight, they do not cool quickly enough to disperse the additional heat being created by the muscles. Again, immediate “distress” mode with rapid cooling using ice water will begin.

Sometimes horses will just be very slow to recover. If a horse is not showing a notable decrease in vitals by the second check the horse's temperature should be taken and rapid cooling should begin. Sometimes grazing a little will help the recovery rate, so sponge, scrape, drink and walk, graze a minute, repeat.

Always remember it is not how high the pulse and respiration are that indicates distress or proper conditioning. Many horses will come in with high vitals and will recover quickly, indicating good condition. Often those with lower vitals will be much slower to recover. It is all about recovery rate!

In the event that your horse is in distress you will immediately be given assistance and guidance in the cooling out process. Stay calm and follow instructions! The huge majority of distressed horses recover without damage so there is no need to panic, however quick action is required!

When your horse has shown good recovery, you will be released to head back to the barn. You should continue to monitor your horse over the next couple of hours to insure that there is not an elevation in vitals and also to watch for any lameness or injury that may not have presented itself immediately. Allow your horse a rest in the stall to pee and eat some hay, and then take them out to walk every hour or so to check for any lingering issues.

In most cases horses recover without issue and you can be proud of yourself and your accomplishment. You have successfully survived the vet box! Well done!

CONDITIONING TIP

Often horses will show distress not because they have not been properly conditioned, but because they live in, and were conditioned in, a climate very different from the one they are now competing in. Always take into consideration the temperature and humidity differences between where you live and where you plan to compete. If you live in a cooler, drier climate and plan to compete in a hot and humid

environment you need to condition your horse in the hottest part of the day and get your horse's fitness to a higher level than you would otherwise to compensate!

SIGNS OF MOUNT IN DISTRESS

(Items in Red or multiple symptoms indicate vet attention needed immediately)

Mount being pressed to continue on to finish – most horses will continue on without urging until asked to pull up.

Loss of coordination – tired horses may be lazy about foot placement – **severe loss of coordination – staggering, etc.**

Reluctance to move – rigid back / hind end muscles

Inversion of vitals (resp. higher than pulse) – **Not resolved in 10 – 20 minutes**

Vitals going up instead of down – **Not resolved in 10 – 20 minutes**

Slow Recovery – **Not resolved in 10 – 20 minutes**

Dehydration Symptoms (dry mouth, lack of sweat, tenting of skin when pinched, sunken appearance)
Once dehydration symptoms appear the dehydration is already at a severe and dangerous level.

Lack of sweat (which may or may not be a part of general dehydration but does indicate potential high temperature)

Temperature above 105* or maintaining at 103* or higher for more than 10 minutes.

Reluctance to drink

Slow CRT (capillary refill time – should be 1-2 seconds)

Blue/white/red mucous membranes

Anal sphincter relaxation (sphincter should pucker tightly when tapped externally) sign of severe distress!

Depression / Lethargy

Most symptoms will resolve with proper care and cooling

All symptoms are concerning and require attention and monitoring.

ACTUAL NUMBERS FROM A RALLY

Novice level eventing rally. The temperature was 89* with humidity. The course was 1950 meters @ 350 mpm over hilly terrain. All riders were C2's.

Numbers are shown as Pulse over Respiration. Temperatures were only taken on horses showing signs of distress.

16 Hand 8 Year Old TB	132 88	92 58	56 28		
15.3 Hand 10 Year Old ISH	101 70	60 26			
15.0 Hand 13 Year Old Appy/TB	84 68	98 78 (105.4)	82 64 (103)	60 38 (102.4)	Released with AHMJ's at barn alerted.
16.1 Hand 18 Year Old Perch/TB	118 84	58 40	42 16		
14.0 Hand 11 Year Old Haflinger	88 94 (105.2)	84 84 (105.2)	68 66 (104.1)	50 32 (101.2)	Released with AHMJ's at barn alerted.

Horse # 1 – 16 hand TB – This horse finished the course in a fast time and had moderately high initial numbers, but he showed good, steady recovery and was released after three checks with no issues.

Horse # 2 – 15.3 hand ISH – This horse had time faults as his rider was very concerned about his condition with the temperature and terrain and took it easy on him. His recovery was great and his rider on top of things so we released him after only two checks.

Horse # 3 – 15.0 hand Appy/TB – This horse had good numbers coming in, but was elevated for the second check, prompting us to take his temp., which was quite high. We went into Distressed Horse mode. He showed steady recovery and was released after 4 checks, though we did alert HM back at the barn to keep a close eye on him and his continued care. This rider was diligent in his care. His numbers, while concerning for a few minutes, did not indicate an alarming lack of fitness, but rather a moderately chunky horse on a hot day. No penalty points were assessed.

Horse # 4 – 16.1 hand Perch/TB - This horse had moderate numbers coming in and showed a very good recover rate. He was released after 3 checks.

Horse # 5 – 14.0 hand Haflinger – Very chunky. This horse had lots of time faults and needed to be pushed to finish, so we were alert to a possible distress before he even got to us for his first check. He was inverted with a high temperature. We were immediately in Distressed Horse mode and had the additional problem of a rider who lacked focus and concern for her horse. Volunteers aided with rapid cooling procedures. He was released after 4 checks. I would have liked to have kept him for another cycle, but we had no shade and thought it better to get him into his stall with a fan. We did alert HM at the barn to meet rider on her way back and to assist and supervise in his continued care. This rider received penalty points for both an under conditioned horse and a lack of attention to the care required of a distressed horse.