

Are you wondering what everyone is actually doing?

Here are the answers to some of your burning questions:

In the Vet Ring

All horses must present to the vets prior to starting their ride, to be cleared to start. They must also present to the vets within 30mins after each leg of their ride, to be cleared to continue, and within 30mins of crossing the finish line, to be awarded a successful completion. A horse is not regarded as 'completing' a ride if it fails any vet test, even the last one.

First stop is the TPR area uphill of the trotting lanes. Often there is a queue and you will see some horses being led in circles to stay warm. Each horse is met by the Chief Steward who checks the identification of the horse. Then each horse has its Temperature (rectal), Pulse (heart rate) and Respiration (breaths per minute) recorded onto a logbook, by the TPR stewards.

After the TPR check, each horse is assessed by a qualified vet who scores various dehydration and physical stress indicators, such as mucous membrane refill, capillary and jugular refill, skin recoil, heart sounds, gut sounds, muscle tone, body condition, and a check for injuries. After this, the horse is trotted in a straight line for 40m and back, during which the vet (and many bystanders) are checking that it has a free, sound action. Lameness or soreness can be indicated by an uneven trot, and often by bobbing of the head on a regular footfall. Ideally, a horse should look supple and rhythmic through its whole back and hindquarter – not stiff with just its legs moving. If a horse is judged lame by the assessing vet, a rider may request a panel decision, in which the horse is trotted out again in front of 3 vets, with a majority decision being made. Tiredness or clumsiness may cause some unevenness of the trot, but are not necessarily indications of lameness. Lameness is determined by a consistent unevenness or head bob.

All scores from every horse are recorded into a National database. Each time a horse (or rider) fails a vet check, penalty points are accumulated, much like on a driver's license. If too many points are accumulated, riders and/or horses can be given rest orders or suspended from the sport for a time.

You can watch the vetting from the undercover seating area next to the trot lanes. If you are intrigued to know more, there are volunteering opportunities to pencil for the vets, standing with them and writing the scores into the horses logbook as they assess them.

Out on the Course

There are five rides being held over the weekend. Introductory rides of 20km, 10km and 5km are held on Saturday, with staggered starts from 12 noon. On Sunday the main 80km endurance ride starts at 7am, an introductory 20km ride at 7:30am and an intermediate 41/61km elevator ride at 8:00am.

In the elevator ride, riders complete the first 41km leg, and after passing the vet check, can then choose either to continue with a further 20km, or to withdraw with a successful 41km completion and no penalty points. If they choose to continue and fail the vet test at the end of 61km, then they have not completed the ride and do not have either a 61km completion or a 41km completion, and penalty points are accumulated.

Riders must have successfully completed 2 x 40km rides before they are permitted to enter an 80km ride. Both riders and horses are 'novice' until they have successfully completed 3 x 80km rides. Novice horses are speed restricted.

The course follows forestry trails and dirt roads up and down hills, across creeks, through pine forest, natural bushland and through open agricultural land. There are a series of checkpoints along each route, with radio contact back to base. Rider bib numbers and the times they go through each checkpoint are recorded and radioed back to base, so each horse can be tracked on its journey around the course. This enables support teams to be ready for when riders return to base, and also provides a safety network for competitors.

There are water points along the course, and riders are keen to see their horses drink well throughout the competition. As with human marathon runners, dehydration can be a serious issue. You may notice that every time a horse pees at the ride base, people stop to take note of and discuss it's colour as an indication of the horses hydration. Many endurance horses are trained to pee on command.

The course is closed to public vehicles for the duration of the event. If you would like to see more of the action, there are volunteering opportunities at the checkpoints. You can register your interest for next year's event on the website link or at the Cherished Volunteer tent at the ride base.

Strapping ??

Strapping refers to the process of preparing the horse for the vet assessment. Once a horse crosses the finish line, the rider has 30mins to present to the vets for assessment. If they are late they will be disqualified. The horses heart rate must be below 55 beats per minute for a novice, and 60 beats per minute for a qualified endurance horse.

Every horse is individual, and the strapping techniques used vary considerably. If a horse has a high heart rate, you will see a lot of water being poured or hosed over the horse to cool them down, and strappers will try to keep the horse calm with head low. If a horse's heart rate is OK and the day is cool with a breeze, you will see rugs being placed over the horse, or just over its loins, to avoid a chill (which will raise the heart rate). Too much feed can raise the heart rate, too little feed may not trigger sufficient gut sounds. Too much heat can raise heart rate, too cold can raise heart rate. Too much movement can prevent the heart rate from lowering, too little movement can result in stiffness or cramps, which can result in higher heart rate, or lameness. You get the idea – strapping is an art and requires experience and knowledge of your horse.

Most riders show signs of stress in the interval between crossing the finishing line and presenting at the vets, especially if they are up the front of the field, where a strapping mistake can be the difference between winning the ride or being vetted out. At this time riders may not be tolerant of additional stresses or threats caused by exuberant children, pets, umbrellas etc. Particularly near the TPR area where a heart rate of 60 bpm may mean a win, and a heart rate of 61 bpm means a fail with penalty points. For professional endurance studs, the scores in a horse's log book throughout it's career directly influence the sale price of the horse.

You can wander around the ride base and watch the strapping techniques of different teams. The red-vested Wingello Forest Fairies are experienced endurance riders who are willing to answer questions and offer advice about strapping.

