



# Impressions from an Endurance Newbie

By Jamie Bratt

**I**t was a weekend of firsts. My horse's first competition. My first endurance ride. The first year of the Canter Over the Mountain ride in West Virginia.

I had been training all summer with my Shagya-Arabian, Shagya Skamp AF. I purchased him as an endurance prospect; his sire Janos was a successful 100-mile competitor who had been exported to Japan to train for FEI-level competitions. Skamp also inherited excellent conformation and temperament from both sides of his pedigree. He exemplifies the famous Shagya-Arabian combination of brains, bone and buddy-up personality.

But, at just 5 years old and after just a few months of training together, would he live up to the promise in his first competition? And what about me, was I ready to ride for 25 miles?

Thankfully, I had read the AERC primer for new endurance riders the year before and heeded much of the good preparation advice. The best thing I did was volunteer at a few endurance rides before Skamp arrived at my farm in Maryland. Not only did I come to understand the organized chaos of the ride camp and crewing areas, I also witnessed some great tricks of the trade to emulate and some classic mistakes to avoid.

Most importantly, I connected with several experienced endurance riders in my area who quickly became mentors and friends. Though I had been riding for over 20 years, I had so much to learn about the unique challenges of endurance (and I still do).

The mantra I heard most often from the veterans was, "Know your horse." I came to appreciate this simple phrase much more once Skamp and I ventured beyond the arena. As we hit the trails together, we established our own subtle language and a strong foundation of trust. Through steep climbs and descents, fallen logs, river crossings, mountain bikes, freight trains, wildlife—even an oncoming kayak or two—Skamp continued to impress me with his tireless happy work ethic and calm persona.

My riding buddies noticed, too, wanting to know more about this special Shagya-

Arabian breed!

By the time we loaded up for Canter Over the Mountain in September, I was new to Skamp and I were fit enough to finish the limited distance ride safe and sound. Still, I was outside my comfort zone. Instead of the familiar hunt jacket, tall boots and polished leather tack, my turnout consisted of half-chaps, hiking boots and a headstall I fashioned out of baling twine and duct tape!

Ridecamp was a whirlwind of activity as the starting time approached. Many horses became intractable, but Skamp remained level-headed.

Our time on the 25-mile course was an absolute joy. Fall was just beginning to nip at the leaves in the mountains of West Virginia. The air was crisp and the ground dry. Locals gathered to watch the ride—some lawns served as rest points stocked with apples, grain and water.

At first, I struggled to decide when and how to pass other riders, but soon the field spread out. Skamp exhibited a fantastic extension to his trot that I had never felt before. He was on a mission. With help from

my crew (*aka* husband), we made it through the vet check with excellent scores. Our second loop was a lovely 10-mile jaunt along a logging road through leafy, rolling forest. I announced to the squirrels, "This is *fun!*" as we cantered past. The whole ride seemed like a grand adventure.

After crossing the finish line, Skamp ate and drank heartily and trotted out with vigor. Though I knew we had ridden well, it came as quite a surprise when I learned that we had finished in fifth place. A top ten finish? Really? My riding buddies were beaming, but not so surprised.

Presenting Skamp for the best condition evaluation was one part of an endurance ride I never prepared for. I showed up at the wrong time, temporarily misplaced my rider card and led Skamp through some very sorry-looking trot circles. Still, I was grinning from ear to ear. I was so proud of Skamp's performance throughout the ride.

The following week, I listed my tall black field boots on eBay. Thanks to my super-horse and my mentors, I am hooked on endurance!

## Top 3 lessons learned in my first year of endurance

**1. Watch and learn.** I can't stress this enough: volunteer at a ride (or several) before ever entering one! Assisting a hundred horses as they pass through pulse-ins and vet checks not only teaches you to use the business end of a stethoscope, it also gets you comfortable with the whole process so you are calmer on your first ride day. You'll get a chance to see the good, the bad and the ugly of vetting in and crewing. Start to practice the good and avoid the ugly in your own training at home. As a ride volunteer, you'll meet the leaders of your local endurance world—and you may just find a mentor! Paying it forward by volunteering is fun and extremely educational.

**2. No purchase necessary.** It's true—you really don't need any special gear to get started in endurance. You don't even need your own horse! Conditioning the "second string" horses of veteran riders is a wonderful way to learn the ropes and do a favor for your mentor. "Trailerpooling" with a training buddy is another way to keep cash in their wallets, and you get to the good rides/training ground without needing your own rig. Some of my pals accept crewing, cooking or tack cleaning as a form of payment, too!

**3. To thine own self be true.** Endurance riders truly are a magnanimous and laid-back bunch, and they LOVE to share stories and advice with new recruits. Long rides to trailheads, hours in the saddle and relaxing at ride camp lend plenty of time for opining. From tack to training to nutrition to hoof care, opinions vary widely from one rider to the next, sometimes even conflicting. If you are an experienced rider but new to endurance, don't lose sight of what has worked for you in the past. And here's something everyone will agree on: your horse's opinion matters most!

—JB