Angie McGhee on the lighter side

Heart monitors-headache & heartache

I just got a new "How To Train The Ultimate Endurance Horse: book as a gift. The tag read, "To Angie from Kaboot," but I knew that my horse didn't really buy it for me, because it has one of thoses "Using a Heart Monitor to Track Target Ranges" chapters. Kaboot may not be an intellectual like Trigger, but he's certainly not dumb enough to get me back on the heart monitor kick.

Like any good endurance rider, I spend a large portion of my time evaluating heart rates and recoveries. When I first got started in this sport, I purchased a $6 stethoscope, which I wore on all my training rides. To my neighbors, I must have looked like a village idiot who marches around with a flowerpot on his head, but wore it with pride.

After reading several articles on achieving target heart rates, I decided that my $6 stethoscope was totally inadequate. Surely, if I had a heart monitor, I could follow these programs to the letter. Then my middle-of-the-pack mount would, in a matter of months, do his version of Rocky running up all those steps and jogging in place with his hands in the air…..yea.

Purchasing a monitor

So…. I bought a heart monitor. This was before they came in those handy little easy-to-lose wristwatches version. Mine looked more like a large calculator, and had electrodes directly behind the withers: you know, right where most saddle tree pressure points, and they wanted me to put a stack of quarters under it. Go figure.

The second set of electrodes was to be put under the girth. This is the set that you carry in your hand as soon as someone informs you that they are swinging between your horse's front legs.

The heart monitor salesman stated that this heart monitor would show the slightest rise in heart rate. It could alert me to discomfort caused by something as small as a pebble in the shoe. So, I suppose I should subtract about 10 beats from the reading to allow for what his heart rate would have been without those huge electrodes digging into his back.

On day one, it took so long to get wired up. I hardly had time left to ride. Yet I mounted my future champion to train for my inevitable year-end award. Hmmmm, interesting, Walk: 64. Slow trot: 110. Slow trot uphill: 155. Spook, slam on brakes, go rigid and stare at squeaky windmill: 180. Walking with electrode dangling under belly: 265.

The first few days were very enlightening. I learned my horse's heart rate recovered much faster than the skin on his back, which took hours to lose its electrode imprints; but, other than the fact that I lost 15 minutes of ride time hooking up all my wires, the heart monitor didn't change my workout much.

I'm sure that had I followed the directions in the book, everything would have worked our fine, and I would have written a very humble story about my success in the yearbook, but I ran into trouble right from the start.

A trip to the pharmacy

For one thing, for the first 30 minutes the readings were sporadic, so someone recommended that I use K-Y jelly instead of water on the skin under the electrodes. I hate buying things like K-Y at the pharmacies. All pharmacists are sadists who love to hide thing like K-Y and lice shampoo, so that we'll have to ask them where they are. Naturally, there's a line of sweet little old ladies waiting for their prescriptions when I say, "Excuse me, do you carry K-Y jelly?" When they all turn to stare, I mumble something like, "It's for my horse," which probably gives them nightmares for weeks.

Once I finally got the heart monitor to work, at least most of the time, I got out my book and tried to duplicate the author's training routine. First, I was supposed to do a workout of five miles or so at a target rate of 130-140 bpm. I warm up 15 minutes at 64 bpm walk. Then trot up a hill at 135. That takes about 30 seconds. Next, I walk down the other side of the hill. (Save those suspensories!) That takes four minutes at 65 bpm. Then we trot 200 yards at 121 while he tries to shy out on the pavement to avoid balloons tied to a mailbox. That takes about a minute and a half. Next we have to walk past a rottweiller's house; that takes three minutes at 80. By the time I have opened and closed gates, walked across pavement, and stopped to give someone directions, I have probably spent a total of five minutes of my entire ride between 130 and 140bpm.

Interval training begins

Since it appeared that I wouldn't be able to maintain a constant working heart rate, I decided to skip to the next chapter in the book. "Fartlek" is a kind of interval training. I have some serious ideological problems with using this form of training, because I really hate that name. There are hundreds of dialects on earth, and why we have to choose fartlek to replace a cool name like " interval training" I'll never know. However, I did try to follow the book's directions in the interval training chapter…..once. I dutifully strapped on my monitor, took one last look at my book which read: "Work your horse at a target heart rate of 180-200bpm for a couple minutes, then slow down to allow his heart to return to 100-120 before starting another interval."

I led Kaboot through the gate into my neighbor's hay field, mounted up, and started to trot….121, then canter…125, then harder gallop…145. Hmm,this is taking a little more speed than I had expected. I asked him to run…155, I can feel a little hesitation in my horse. He's never known me to let him do anything like this in an open field. I lean forward and asked for a little more speed, and he really starts to get in to the spirit of the workout…160…he digs a little deeper…165.

By now he's having trouble making turns, but I lean forward and ask for more speed. I can hear the grass tearing as he sends it flying in great clods behind us. The fence posts run together like the white lines on the freeway as Kaboot gradually edges over his "sanity threshold" and goes into dead runaway mode. He tears around the field with his nose stuck out and his ears pinned flat to his

head. My ears feel pretty flat too. My helmet blows to the back of my head and the angle of the visor in the wind is threatening to make me airborne.

I try to see if he has hit 180 yet, but tears are whipping from my eyes, blocking my vision. I try to listen for the alarm, but the wind is roaring in my ears. As we take yet another lap around the field, I sense that the neighbor's cows have congregated at the fence line, obviously intrigued at the sight of a horse traveling at mach speeds with a rider flapping in the wind, still hanging on to a wad of flying mane. My fear of running at such speeds is compounded by the knowledge that Kaboot is capable, in approximately a nanosecond, of slamming on the breaks, doing a 180 degree rollback and beginning to graze—all before my body has stopped its forward trajectory.

I finally manage to get a glimpse of the readout, and his pulse reads…94? It appears the electrode isn't getting a good connection. I soon learn that this is the case any time you might be training in a range, where you actually need to know the reading. After 10 maniacal laps at this speed, I estimate I have done around 10 seconds at 180 bpm, and 10 months of damage to his mind. And they expect me to do "a couple of minutes between 180-200"?

Plan B: I take my horse to the base of the biggest mountain around, and aim him towards the top. What I find is that yes, I can get my horse up to 180. However, running at a pulse of 180, I run out of mountain very quickly, and run out of horse even sooner. As he strained with the effort to maintain a 180 pace, I began to see where this method got its name. By the third day of fartlek training, I began to sense my horse's strength was increasing, mainly in his neck. He was now able to resist any attempt to tilt his nose remotely towards my mountain trail.

At this point, I might have given up had I not had an enlightening experience. We were out on a ride, and had just done several hours of training, in ranges that any exercise physiologist would consider less than worthless, when up ahead, a lone deer stepped out of the woods. Since I could feel Kaboot's heart beating in my knees, and he had apparently turned to stone for the time being, I ventured a look at the heart monitor….190! I couldn't believe my luck. I had finally found a way to reach his training threshold….fear!

I lay in my bed that night and thought of ways to use this knowledge to work my horse anaerobically. The possibilities were endless. I let the neighbor's kids ride their Big Wheels on our gravel driveway. For the first time in years, I let the kids have fireworks on the fourth of July. I took my dogs on training rides, so they would constantly dart out of the woods unexpectedly. I even considered rigging up my barn like a Fun House at a carnival, with blasts of air horns that would go off unexpectedly. I know this plan was effective, because as in any good conditioning program, it took more and more stimuli to get the desired heart rates.

Then I read an article, which opened up even more possibilities. It suggested that all horses should be hauled in slant load trailers, because horses preferred them. How did they know? Because the horses had been wired with heart monitors, and they found that the ones hauled in slant loads had lower heart rates during the haul. Aha! Lucky for me, I've been too busy to trade my rusty straight load trailer for an aluminum slant like all my friends have, which means that I can now list all hauling time in my training log.

The article further stated that the driver could have a great deal of control over the stress the horses were put under. What it came down to was that if I would accelerate rapidly, swerve into turns, and slam on the brakes at every stop, I could probably condition on rainy days just by taking Kaboot for a drive! I especially liked the mental image of accelerating from 0 to 60 in five seconds, then slamming on the brakes and doing a 180. OH, payback would be sweet!

Stick shift analogy

I admit that the time I spent using a heart monitor was a valuable experience,. It's just like having a tachometer for your horse. I remember when my dad was teaching me how to drive a stick shift, and how he emphasized the usefulness of the tachometer to help decide when to change gears. I distinctly remember him saying, "When the needle gets between the 3 and the 4, the engine is working too hard, and you should change gears." I also remember the advice my more practical sister gave me, "Just keep your eyes on the road, and when it sounds like the engine is going to blow up, shift."

I use a hear monitor just long enough to learn how to tell when my mount is running in that range "between the 3 and 4," but nowadays I find it easier to keep my eyes on the trail, listen to my horse and simply shift gears before he blow up.

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