

A Newbie's Road Trial Journey

My first exposure to a road trial was in a magazine talking about the first road trial which had been held in years and I had just gotten my first Dalmatian so that I would have a riding buddy as I trained ponies for people while in college. The first time I would actually see a road trial? Well that would be at the 2006 DCA National Road Trial where I was the lone RD A competitor.



When I made my decision to compete at the road trial I put together what would be my training plan, biking at night and bringing Jammy to the barn on weekends to ride with the horse. My original plan took into consideration the 12.5 miles, the fact my block was 3/10^{ths} of a mile and how many weeks I had until DCA. With the time limit given for the trial being 3 hours vs the distance I knew I had to go an average of 4 mph, but no idea how fast or slow that actually was. At this point the geek in me came out and with a GPS to determine that I averaged 7.5 mph on the bike and a search of the web provided the average speed of a horse walking and trotting.

In February, Jammy and I started biking first 4 laps of the block and then adding a lap every night. After agility one night in March, I noticed he wasn't peeing freely and took him in to my vet as an emergency, it would seem Jammy was blocking and our first Road Trial wasn't to be. Talks with my vet and a change in medication and we went back to training with an eye on whether he was comfortable or whether to stop. All seemed to go well and we returned to training though I made the decision to top out our distance work at 4.5 miles. Would he be fit enough was the question.

Horse work would be its own challenge as despite having earned a CD as well as being 2 legs away from an RAE Jammy was not the most reliable dog off leash. We started with going out to the barn on Sundays when it was quietest and working beside my horse on leash and when he remained in position rewarding him by tossing down food. As the trial got closer I made the decision to start waking up even earlier to bring him with me to the barn in the morning and be able to drop him off home before work. These early morning also meant I could lock the 3 of us in a ring and do some off leash work, recalls and stays while keeping him confined enough that I wasn't worried he'd get into trouble. Unlike most competitors, we had to worry about alligators in the pond at the facility and more of them on the only trails we had access to so trail riding was out.

In some ways having my own horse was a positive thing and a negative as I knew he would not make the trip to Kentucky from South Florida. At 17.1 treating off the horse meant tossing food instead of being able to just reach down to reward the position directly. Lofty's also a saint and if Jammy got nervous about something he could literally go underneath him and I didn't have to worry about him getting kicked or stepped on. This confidence around the horse was good for Jammy who's a bit soft but when the first horse we tried at the trial tried to kick him it led to me trying several other horses and even so the horse I eventually did the trial on I didn't sit on until the morning of the trial which hurt us in the speed as I didn't get a chance to do more than walk him.

Jammy's obedience section wasn't far off then his normal ring performance. He lagged on the hock and he barely passed the recall. I was happy with his stay even though he wasn't as good as at home and was quite proud of his distraction. Not having really ridden the horse up to that point I had trouble getting him to canter and at that point we were partially into where we should have been galloping but we managed to pass and we were cleared for the trail.

Most people would have considered the rest to be the easiest part, but for me it was the most worry. What would Jammy do for 3 hours off leash in a strange place? The answer to that question is he had a blast! He never got more than 25 feet ahead or behind except when he made a right instead of a left, he came when called and our last minute horse let him run past him without much more than a flicker of an ear. When it came time to cross a stream near the midway point he decided it was better to get wet than to be left behind and when he caught the scent of his friends he passed us and headed into the midpoint without us.

At the midpoint and finish his pulse and respiration were only 1 off from where he started and I was quite proud of him considering we almost never made it to the trial and after hearing people normally went out on long trail rides with their dogs and horses. It was definitely a learning experience for us and I regret that with our trails being in the Everglades there's no way for us to just do it for fun. But as I get my younger dog ready for his Road Trial debut I have that look on his face to look forward to as he runs beside the horse.