

Interview with Dr. Meg Sleeper*, DVM
2012 100 Mile National Champion riding Syrocco Cadence (Cadi)

1. You have completed the Biltmore 100 twelve times with three firsts and two BCs and the 75 three time with two firsts and one BC. What do you particularly like about the Biltmore ride?

The Biltmore ride is one of a handful of magical rides. The ride itself is a “bucket list” ride for many reasons! It is always incredibly well-marked and well-managed with a fabulous veterinary panel and an amazing group of volunteers. The trail is beautiful and challenging, but also very doable.

The Estate is a destination in its own right. I personally didn't start spending the time to see parts of the estate other than what was readily visible driving in and riding the trails until I had already attended Biltmore for many years. I now try to do a little something extra every year. The house tour is absolutely amazing (I was fortunate enough to return one winter and see it decorated for the holidays), but even short visits to the Antler Hill Village and Creamery, a self-guided tour of the garden and green house or the vineyard for a wine tasting are well worth it!

2. How do you prepare for the Biltmore ride given the terrain, topography and time of year?

I try to prepare for the elevation change at the Biltmore ride. It is actually quite deceiving as there is quite a lot of elevation change over the course. However, in recent years I come to the ride from my winter work in Florida where hills are not readily available. So I use other types of strength training (cavaletti, soft footing, etc.), which helps a lot.

I most often use steel shoes with pads (in front). There are other options that work also (there is never only one way to do anything), however I do believe hoof protection is critical on this trail.

3. You have also had some non-completions. What would you suggest to riders to avoid non-completions?

One of the great things about endurance (and life in general I suppose) is that there is always more to learn. If we are open to it and actually learn from these lessons, we hopefully continue to improve. I had one pull due to a stone bruise so I now pad for the ride. I have had two pulls due to rhabdomyolysis (tying up). One horse had a family history of tying up and I thought I had prepared him well enough the day before, but in hind sight I didn't. Fortunately, I learned a lot about him there. So, I was able to prevent future rhabdomyolysis events with him. Another time was a mare who had never tied up before that time, and never tied up afterwards, either. That was a year that the weather dumped cold rain the entire night before the event. Many horses actually tied up that year. I hesitated to put her in the trailer overnight when the bad rain started, but perhaps that would have helped. Of course, she might have had another issue from being in the trailer. So, I guess my best recommendations to others (and things I try to remember) are:

- Whatever the event, try to shoe appropriately and if you feel as though you didn't when you get there, then try to ride accordingly.

- Know your horse and ride your ride. Don't get caught up in a race that you didn't prepare for.
- Recognize we are only humans (or horses). There are no machines in that mix! Sometimes it just isn't our day. Dr Jim Baldwin, a brilliant vet and rider, once told me: "Sometimes we win when we don't deserve it and sometimes we get pulled when we don't deserve it. In the end it all balances out." He was so right!! I know I have done better at some rides than I ever expected to, and I have also been pulled when I knew in my heart it was the wrong call. It is important to accept whatever the outcome is with grace. It is easiest to do that if we enjoy the journey along the way. It is important to recognize how incredibly lucky we are to be able to spend time on the trail with our equine partner(s).

4. How do you adjust your ride plan for the weather and footing conditions, which can vary greatly from year to year at Bitlmore?

I try to never have a set plan when I arrive at any ride. Sometimes it is difficult to avoid getting caught up in the excitement of the day, but riding your own ride is the best shot at success. Some years the weather is perfect at Biltmore, but it can often be hot and humid, and even if only humid (which is sometimes not easily detectable by humans) it can still be very challenging for horses. Similarly, some years the trails are dry and fast, but rain can make the same trails slick and slippery. So, when the weather is hot and humid or if the trails are slick, my ride is a lot slower. Another great vet (Matthew Mackay-Smith) used to say the secret to success at endurance is "Never hurry and never tarry". That statement sums up a successful approach to the Biltmore trail.

5. How do you choose what pace to ride?

The obvious variables are the weather and footing mentioned above, but there are so many other variables that are also important, from the mental state of horse and rider to their physical states, which includes everything from basic healthcare and previous (years of) conditioning to how they traveled to the event, and the quality of the last available hay. I generally start out with a basic plan in mind (which can vary greatly if I am riding an experienced campaigner vs a young horse on his or her first 100), and then adjust that plan depending on how the horse feels and how the day progresses.

***Meg has completed over 100 100-Mile Rides; the 100th was July 2024 in the Vermont 100.**