

Endurance riding, with Graham Hartley

- Jon Okay, so here we are, we're speaking to Graham Hartley, who's an endurance rider. And Graham, I must admit I know nothing at all about horses, or endurance or anything else. So what is it, exactly, that you have to do? What is endurance?
- Graham Right. The easiest way to explain endurance is basically it's marathon running for horses. So you run ... you race, run from distances of 20 kilometres up to 160 kilometres in a day, and it's very strictly vetted, for the welfare of the horse, obviously. Every 20 kilometres, 30 kilometres they have basically a pit-stop for horses, where the horse's heart-rate, respiration, dehydration is checked and their gait is checked for soundness.
- Jon Is it checked for drugs as well, maybe? Amphetamines?
- Graham It is checked for drugs but not a.. not as often. It is checked for drugs but not as often. Because it's expensive to ... it's expensive to take samples, process them. It is done, but not so often.
- Jon I must ask you, as a cyclist, what's it like actually getting off the horse after 160 kilometres?
- Graham It depends where you finish! If you've won ... you know, you don't notice. You really don't notice. If you're at the back of the field, then you're fairly tired.
- Jon How do you actually prepare your horse?
- Graham Erm, the horses are trained from ... well, as we breed our own for the sport, they're trained from the moment we 'back them', break them in. It's just general riding really to start with, and then the distance is picked up. Ya. We train slightly less intensively than a lot of people, where we'll do a lot of walking, strengthening, and then wait. The speed tends to come in naturally as the horse gets balanced and more competent.
- Jon And what about the rider? Do you need special skills? Do you need your own training?
- Graham You should, but I'm very lazy on that, mainly through time-constraints.

Jon Okay. Now I must admit that I heard a little bit on the radio last week – something to the effect that £4 billion pounds was spent in the UK on horses, which seemed to me a staggering amount. Is it an expensive sport over here?

Graham Um ... it's probably on a par with the UK. The difference in France is, obviously, there's a lot more space, a lot more land, and land prices are cheaper, so you can afford to have a horse.

Jon What is the attraction of the sport for you?

Graham To be honest, to me it's 'coz we keep winning.

Jon Sounds good enough. So, can I just ask you about the circuit? Where do you start, what kind of terrain do come across, where do you finish ...?

Graham We select different rides for different horses. Different shapes and sizes of horses obviously go better on different types of terrain, so we'll... the calendar for the year comes out, and we'll look at it and go 'that's a good flat course which would suit this horse, that one's a hilly horse ... (hilly horse?) ... hilly course, which would suit another horse'. But it also depends ... all that training is set with a goal. So we'll look at the calendar and go, 'that's our goal for this year' with a horse, and we'll tailor the training, the rides, everything for that one ride, be it a national ride or an international ride, it makes no difference.

Jon So when is the big ride coming up?

Graham The biggest ride this year is the World Championships in England – which we won't be going to, because we haven't got a horse that's at that stage at the moment, unfortunately.

Jon Okay. And as a complete novice, do you think it's possible to train me for that big event? Would it take long?

Graham In the time-scale we've got until that ride, no.

Jon Okay. On that note, I think we'll conclude this part. Thank you.