

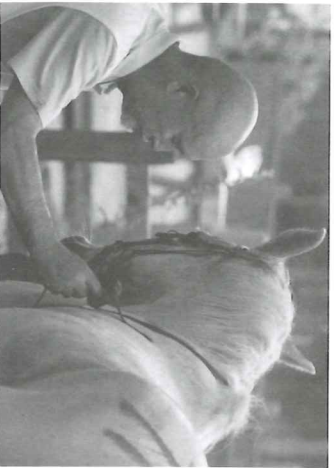
Endurance in Japan: same and different



WATCHING THE START of an endurance ride at Shining Moon Lake near Kita-Ka-ruizawa in Japan's Gunma Prefecture seems closer than the half-a-world away it truly is from the rides here in the U.S. and Canada.

Much like here, the start is filled with excitement with horses gamely looking to hit the trail, riders equally as excited (though perhaps with some concern about whether or not they are going to stay seated), volunteers standing around waiting for the timer to "open the trails," and crews offering words of encouragement for their family and friends.

I've been fortunate enough to travel to Japan twice to serve as an FEI official for the Shining Moon Lake Endurance Rides. Shining Moon is a multi-sanctioned ride, much like our own, with national (like AERC) rides and FEI rides. The Japanese Endurance Rider Support Association organizes these rides.



Seiichi Hasumi at the Shining Moon. © Mike Tomlinson, DVM.

Our host was Mr. Seiichi Hasumi, a rider who is familiar to many AERC members. Mr. Hasumi currently has 1,455 AERC miles with seven Tevis buckles in his collection (finish-

ing all that he started). Our group of officials and veterinarians from the U.S. were diligently watched over by Kiyotaka Yaguchi (fondly known as Yaguchi). Believe me, he had his work cut out for him!

It was like herding cats—none of us speak Japanese (well, maybe enough to get us into trouble); a few of us think we know where we're going in downtown Tokyo (questionable), and you gotta like sticky rice without soy sauce (or you'll hear about it from Yaguchi).

When one sees photos of Japan we're often shown the hustle and bustle of Tokyo or a serene Japanese garden. Not so when you travel nearly to Nagano (home of the 1998 Winter Olympics) in the mountains northwest of Tokyo. Pine trees abound with dense foliage below, roads wind back and forth and become narrower as you go on, and city life has gone on vacation.

The endurance trails there are not so different from what we ride here in North America. They differ in width, amount of sunlight, and footing just the same as we see here. But I honestly don't think I've seen anything like the "brain" (as it is commonly called) on any trails I've ridden here. The brain is a complex set of trails that once you enter is easy to read due to the roping off of the trail that forces you to go forward. It is like a maze that resembles the twists and folds of the brain.

This portion of the trail requires smart riding: you just can't go too fast, you need to think of each upcoming turn and make sure that you and your horse are centered or risk injury. The footing is generally good, but one must keep in mind the volcanic region that



Shining Moon trail map, including "brain" sections.

you're in and the rocks that might be present. Temperatures vary like they do here; it can be cool and rainy or hot and dry. Altitude differences on the trails are not huge, but there are constant changes that work both horse and rider. Trees abound, so thankfully there is a break from the sun on a lot of the trail.

The vet check area is very similar to what we see here. An arrival timer, crews in the crewing area, pulse timers, trot-out lanes complete with experienced veteri-

narians, an out-timer, and a steady stream of volunteers await the riders. Riders enter and the crews descend on the team, however, this is one place where we differ. It is completely quiet outside of hushed voices of the crews. If anything, there is maybe a little laughter, but there are no raised voices. We could all take a lesson from this—ease up, take a breath.

In Japan you don't see the "backyard horse" grazing around the house like you do here. Horses, and horse trailers, are more of a luxury. Most of the horses arrive in horse vans or large trucks with canvas-covered tops. The majority of the horses competing in the longer distance are of Arab descent with much of the shorter distance equines being native Hokkaido ponies, known locally as Do-san-ko. These hardy ponies average around 12 to 13 hands; some are gaited, and all seem to have a great disposition.

I've been lucky to travel to foreign countries while enjoying the sport I love. Although most of my overseas experience has been of fictitious or crewing for members of the U.S. team, I've been able to see the same love for the horses, trails, and endurance as a whole each time I've travelled. I have to admit that the positive experiences working the rides in Japan by far outweigh all the others. I think this is probably due to the fact that they more closely resemble the AERC rides that we all love. ■



Shining Moon ride staff (left to right): Schu Kawashima, DVM; Kiyotaka Yaguchi; Makoto Sekigawa; Ray Randall, DVM; Mike Tomlinson, DVM; Mrs. Harumi Hasumi; Mr. Seiichi Hasumi; Jan Stevens; Sue Phillips; Tom Timmons, DVM; Jane Huff; Dennis Seymore, DVM. Photo courtesy Mike Tomlinson, DVM.