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Hi Pam

Once again thanks for the course. I would like to thank all those involved in sponsoring, organising and facilitating the Ilabo (between Junee and Cootamundra for those not familiar) weekend on 13/14 June 2009 and the Trail Boss course that my partner Sally and I attended. The weekend was a good time away with great country surroundings, easy camping and all facilities. The added bonus was the opportunity to meet people, make new friends and swap stories and information about our horses and the great times we have had with them.

More importantly, the weekend was about taking the opportunity to make a personal contribution, along with about 20 others, to helping preserve the viability of our favourite leisure past time namely trail riding and horse trekking. It was also about learning how to just get about with our horses with others, safe in the knowledge that we are covered by insurance, are acting responsibly and ensuring the safety of others through our own behaviour and in sharing newly acquired skills and experience.

For those that don't know, the course is principally designed to ensure that Clubs affiliated with ATHRA can continue to enjoy low insurance premiums and low risk to their members through keeping their part of a partnership agreed with insurance providers, namely that the Club members will work actively to learn and implement a Code of Conduct for all riders engaging in Club rides and activities. The benefits of this strategy are huge and were only revealed to me fully after attending the course. The main advantage is the continued viability of trail riding and trekking in terms of insurance cover. Without the course and the commitment of volunteers in applying the Code of Conduct, premiums would undoubtedly undermine the viability of many clubs.

Not only are insurance premiums held down by the providers being assured of our responsibility and compliance with the Code, but our members are in a much better position to be considered seriously in the event that a claim is made. The incident reporting requirements and Code of Conduct highlight our genuine commitment to making trail riding safer and taking our horsepersonship responsibilities seriously, something we all try to do but can be hard, at an individual level, to demonstrate to the broader community.

It sounds complex but it is really about common sense, applying the sensibilities others have learnt in their years of riding, and demonstrating that we are responsible.

This is what the course teaches. You will be tested on your risk assessment, people and horse management skills, capacity to interact with the public as a rider, and handling difficult people (the potential that some people have to step up when needed is clearly amazing, and often just as amusing). You will also get to play a variety of responsible roles from Trail Boss, to Lead Rider, Drag, First Aid Officer and Steward. While the theory was important, the role plays were great fun with a serious message about safety and risk. Mateship and humour were the order of the day, as well as great food and the chance to take advantage of the couple of centuries or so of equine experience that joined us around the table.

It sounds challenging but really anyone can master these basic but important skills. It is more fun than testing and the supportive environment created by the presenters and ATHRA officials put everyone at ease. If you want to help your Club meet its commitments under the Code, I highly recommend the course and its content, as much for the content as the social occasion that it inevitably becomes when horse people get together.

Thanks again to our presenters, Pam Lamshed, Peter & De'hanne Keir for their professional handling and guidance - they are all from the Leisure Coast Club whose big rides would be a real test for any organiser. An extra thanks to the local sponsors and volunteers as well as Debby Avis, the NSW President who attended every session providing encouragement and swapping her stories and experiences.

My only disappointment is that no one could tell me how to make my horse go straight - still, that's what life with horses is all about, never ending challenge and new things to learn, and that's the way I like it.

Ian Shepherd and Sally Willoughby (Monaro Horse Trekkers - Canberra)