

Man-flu, in appetite and extreme physical exertion – how I conquered Shahzada by Kym Hagon

Thankfully my horse (Diamond R Boston – a.k.a. Boss) was far better prepared to take on the 400km than I was. I had been doing a fair bit of running and general fitness work to be able to do my fair share of running throughout the ride (as all good heavyweights should..), but contracted a dreaded man-flu from one (all?) of the kids on the Thursday before. No probs, that gives me three and a half days to recuperate, and we'll be right for the ride. Here is a diatribe of how my horse and I managed to beat Shahzada despite my suffering from a severe man-flu.

Friday – the mad packing. Have we got everything – and I mean everything. Food, clothes and bedding for two adults and 3 kids. For those that haven't done it, that means covering all potential weather conditions for 8-9 days without a washing machine (might bring one next year...) and that's heaps – first job well done by the super-strapper...great packing Kimmy. More rugs, tack and strapping gear than could possibly be needed (unless we didn't bring them). Bikes and scooters for kids. Microwave oven, George Foreman Grill and one large chest freezer (packed with pre-prepared food). Oh yeah, and horse, membership, logbook, dog and kangaroo... Mild cough and general malaise – quite manageable at the moment.



Kym Hagon riding Diamond R Boston
photo by Jo Arblaster

Saturday – arrived and set up yard and camp before helping vet a couple of horses for the 500. Settled in to a lovely evening feed and a few well chosen beverages. Cough developing nicely to include a mild headache. Still dry and hacking, so no joy with mucous.

Sunday – nervously await the weighing, entering, vetting, pre-ride and jittery sleep. Helped with pre-ride vetting before taking Boss for a short ride – extremely bouncy and keen. Moving well, so all bodes well at the moment. He's eating and drinking well in camp – had a few slightly loose poos today, hopefully that doesn't develop. Losing voice now and lung capacity decreasing. Very clingy mucous that requires extraordinary force to exhume it from the depths of the lungs... quite irritating really.

Monday – great to hear the rain falling just prior to saddling up... not too cold though, so here we go. He's a bit keen to belt up the common – it'd really gripe me if we go out first leg due to a tye up, so we do our best to calm him and conserve energy whilst not getting him too frustrated. Must thank April Bonham for Joda Shantilly's backside which was imposing enough to act as large brake for Boss. Ran/walked up Johnny Browns – where has all the oxygen gone? Lungs (mine) burning by the top, Boss grabs a quick drink and then on we go. Transmission Rd is a cracker and Boss rolls along at his usual speed and soon we're heading down Blue Hill, steady back into town. Vet through, a quick break before heading up McKechnie's, along and back down Jacks. I pulled a leg muscle running down the last bit of Jacks...could be a long week. Vetting all fine – time to apply copious amounts of strapping tape to said leg before downing more cold and flu tablets, sucking down a rum and off to bed.

Tuesday – Shepherds Gully into Great Northern Rd – Boss travelling over the rocks like a cat. He's chewing up the track today and feeling great. Vet through and all happy, then we prepare for the afternoon leg. Due to a series of management issues between the end of the first leg and vetting for the second leg, Boss ends up with a heart rate of 60 in the afternoon. This is closer to the limit than planned and we nearly shit ourselves! Superstrapper Kimmy is beside herself with worry – we have a short team meeting where I point out glass isn't just half full, but in actual fact extremely full. Boss is going great and we'll amend management and he'll be fine...I'm sure. Must make mention of my super strapper here. My beautiful wife Kim strapped nearly without fault all week. She was the hidden driving force that kept his skin (and everything else) in excellent condition – no rubs, no cracks, no chaffing, no problems. She was explaining her virtues as an aforementioned super strapper to strapping rival, Stuart Hitchcock, when she discovered I had returned from being on course. Whence

she berated me for being in camp so soon without her having heard my number being called. All to the jeering and sarcastic 'encouragement' of Stuey. Of course, being a diligent and observant husband who knows when to shut up (sometimes) I apologised and continued unsaddling my horse.

Wednesday – the hard leg – up Boyds, down McKechnies, up and over Prestons and back into town. Got the stuffing knocked out of me running up Boyds and then all the way over and down McKechnies. Hurting a fair bit but determined to 'put in' over the big hill. Boss starting to tire of waiting for me to get over Prestons – as was Sue Todd and Shelly Ison – thanks for waiting girls. Oxygen levels up here at this altitude seem to be particularly low. Lung capacity extremely poor and cough starting to sound like a turbo charged furball. Had to poke my left lung back down my throat once or twice as I'm pretty sure I coughed it out of my mouth – least that's what I thought it was... Stumble my way down the other side and back into town. Vetted through OK – horse getting better in spite of my demise. For those of you intending to ride next year, the afternoon leg is one to look forward to. Not too long and a really enjoyable track. Vetted through and now I can really sense that if we continue to concentrate and ride to plan, we can get through. Dangerous thoughts...stick to the plan... Shahzada Idol – disposed of any returning voice by warbling out a few tunes (and a bit of mucous and disease thrown in for those in the front row). Great fun though.

Thursday – heading basically along the first leg in reverse, but turning off a bit early from Transmission Rd to go down The Steps. This is one of the much feared and maligned legs that isn't all that physically challenging, but technically it is enormous at this stage in the ride. Boss normally moves over the rough stuff really well, but was a bit impatient today and rushed down The Steps resulting in a few minor scrapes – still feeling great though and we vet through without drama. Second leg – the first time he's been truly bored and a bit unwilling. I'm starting to physically improve and can now run virtually without limping. Robust man-cough still persisting. One major surprise throughout the week has been my general inappetence. I'd usually always back myself to eat vigorously in any situation – it may be due to this savage man-flu, or could be due to me eating so much cold and flu medication...? Either way, losing weight steadily.

Friday – There's a palpable apprehension all around camp. Riders are focused, and horses are looking good. Quite enjoyed the turn around on the first leg which gave us the opportunity to see/chat to ALL remaining riders in the field (some for the first time out on track). The legs seem longer and longer as the ride goes on. Vet through OK and now one leg to go – so we'll be in the book in some way shape or form. Head out on final leg... up The Steps. We head out early to just get the job done. Boss is back into concentration mode and ascends the climb without incident. I however managed to injure previously good leg jumping off horse – stop sooking and get on with it. The Steps is quite a long way up – gives us time to 'smell the roses' and imagine getting through... dangerous thoughts – stick to the gameplan. Along Transmission Rd, down Johnny Browns – no wonder I had no oxygen to spare going up this bloody 'hill' on Monday morning – it goes forever. Back into town to meet an inspirational crowd of eager supporters willing everyone on to success. I should say that from the onlookers on The Steps, to the crowd at the end, whenever *anyone* gives a word of encouragement on course it goes a *huge* way towards lifting your spirits and contributing to the impetus to get to the end – so thankyou to ALL who did! Final vet check...Anthony asks if I'm more nervous vetting on the final day or riding. I told him "There's nothing wrong with this horse, so I'm not at all nervous". I didn't say it to be a smart-arse or try to sway the decision, but that was the plain truth. With all the fantastic care that Kim gave to Boss throughout the week, and Boss's ability and faultless commitment to me and the task at hand, I never had cause to be nervous or worried about his progress or potential to complete – except for the 60 heart rate which, as mentioned, nearly made us shit ourselves. The sense of satisfaction and achievement at having completed this epic ride is probably only understood by those that have done so. If you haven't, I urge you to do so. If you have, you're probably sitting with the same smile on your face that I've got now. Cheers. Bloody good party as well, with good friends.

Saturday – Called out for Best Managed and Conditioned was just a fantastic extra bonus that I'll cherish forever. Boss now has 3 from 3 completions and has been called up each time. Obviously we're completely thrilled with this horse's talent and courage, but as he is home bred from a successful Shahzada mare, that's even more satisfying.

See you next year – probably from the other side. Kym Hagon