

It's good to be a little bit crazy

## Shahzada 2010 as experienced by Rachel Kuns and Kelkette Park Finesse (Nessie)

It's always good to have a goal to strive towards, even if that goal has half your friends and workmates calling you crazy. Don't listen to them; listen to the ones who think it sounds like a fabulous adventure. My goal for 2010 was to start the Shahzada 400km marathon on my trusty (when she feels like it) steed Nessie.

I've been doing endurance since 1988 but have never been to Shahzada. And since a disastrous trip to Tassie to attempt the 2005 Quilty, I haven't even ventured outside of the tick zone in SE Qld. I generally strap and drive for myself so distant rides are a challenge and the idea of the 1000km drive to St Albans was a little daunting. However, I sent a bunch of emails to Shahzada diehard and fellow Queenslander, Anne Barlow, who sent some lengthy and wonderfully detailed replies back, which culminated in an offer to drive down in convoy with her. Her broken collar bone had healed and she now planned to go.

Yay! I had a travel buddy! The drive suddenly seemed a lot less daunting. I had a bit of a panic 4 weeks before we left for Shahzada as a minor patch of greasy heel on Nessie flared up badly and had to be hit on the head very severely with some expensive veterinary help. Although not 100% healed up when we left home, it was much better than it had been. I'd heard stories of the dreaded St Albans greasy heel/cracked heels and suspected this might be a problem for us.

But I figured we'd deal with it when we had to; I wasn't going to let it stop us. You can't finish if you don't even start.....

So we were good to go. With the car and float packed to the gills I met Anne at the tick gate at Tweed Heads and we continued on with Anne leading.



Rachel Kuns & Kelkette Park Finesse.

Photo by Kieron Power

The drive down was quite uneventful and surprisingly pleasant (except for the mad truck drivers) and we arrived at St Albans mid-afternoon on Friday. Anne went off to set up camp with her sister Karen Rhodes and I set up my camp in area P and met my fellow marathoning neighbours – Peter Norman, Shelly Ison, Linda Eden (who was strapping for Peter and Shelly) and Ruth van der Wegen. We also got new neighbours on Sunday and Monday, Michele and Georgia Ladmore and Sally Fenner, who had come to do the mini-marathon and to TPR. They prove to be great and, in Peter's case, highly entertaining camping companions. I got a lot of ribbing being the only Queenslander in with a bunch of New South Welsh(wo)man but over the week Michele, Linda and Sally helped me out with basic strapping, filling water buckets, picking up poo and cleaning hoof boots. And on Saturday morning after it was all over and the camp fire had gone out overnight, Peter split some wood and went to considerable trouble (he'd run out of

firefighters) to get the fire going again for me as I wasn't leaving until the Sunday. These little bits and pieces made a huge difference from my point of view and I really appreciated their help.

At 2.45am Monday morning we were up and at it with a comparatively easy first leg. Nessie pulled most of the way and was doing her big trot (which she never does at home) and I was feeling grateful for the extra brakes I had bought six weeks before. Then at about 45 km my left knee started to hurt. Uh oh. It had caused major problems at an 80km ride four weeks before but I'd hoped two massages in the meantime would have fixed it. We vetted through and I paid a quick visit to Sharon Thomson to see if she could do anything for the knee. I also had plenty of ibuprofen and Panadol so hopefully I could keep it under control.

We lost Peter at the end of the first leg. Very disappointing for him. We went on, setting off on the second Monday leg which headed up McKechnies. This was so very very cool!! I hadn't done any tracks like this for many many years and none ever with Nessie. I loved it! And Nessie was so good over the rocks, picking her way carefully and safely but cruising (and in some instances leaping) up it at the same time. She finished the leg well, my knee not so well. Massage didn't seem to be helping and painkillers were only doing so much. Plus Nessie's greasy heel was starting to look worse. I wasn't sure how we'd go on Tuesday.

On Tuesday morning my knee was not happy so I loaded up with drugs. Three km into the first leg I stopped and shortened my stirrup leathers hoping that would help ease the pain. I was starting to think I wasn't going to be able to keep going for too much longer.

At the end of the leg we vetted through but Nessie's front heels looked vile. The skin was grey in one area, smelled bad and was very tender when I tried to wash and treat it. I'd seen lots of greasy heel in the past but nothing that looked like what she had. I took her to the vets for some advice which distressed me even more as it was subtly suggested that I should withdraw. I limped back to camp feeling very depressed and near tears. At this point Sharon grabbed me and said 'we're going to strap your knee'. She had found some sports tape and got Maurie to strap the knee but I seriously didn't think either of us would get around the next leg.

Up to this point Nessie had been traveling with Renegade hoof boots on all four feet. I decided to change the boots on her front feet from Renegades to Easyboots (the original style without gaiters) as dirt and sand seemed to be accumulating around the heel caps on the Renegades and possibly contributing to the greasy heel. I hoped that having nothing on the heel area would decrease the problem. I'd brought the Easyboots along specifically as a backup plan for greasy heel so at least my preparation was paying off. Unfortunately I didn't have a backup plan for the hind feet as the only boots that stay on her and don't rub are the Renegades. I just had to hope that the greasy heel didn't get too much worse on the near hind. The off hind had never had any greasy heel during preparation and was still fine at this point.

We set off on the second leg and fantastically the strapping of my knee helped hugely. The pain was much more manageable and I could ride better. Nessie didn't seem to be bothered by her heels while we are riding (only when I tried to clean them) so we got to experience the lovely little hidden rainforest valley at the bottom of Careflight Hill, followed by the not so lovely climb up Careflight Hill. We made it to the end of the leg and vetted with Rochelle Joyce. She looked at Nessie's heels and told me they were pretty bad but to see how the trot out went. She suggested a couple of extra things for treatment and then watched her trot out. The greasy heel didn't seem to be bothering Nessie's movement or soundness so we were through to go another day if we felt up to it. Both vets had suggested soaking Nessie's heels in Epsom salts. Guess what I'd forgotten, left in the kitchen cupboard at home. I paid a visit to Anne and her sister Karen who were both adamant that I should not withdraw but should manage the problem – manage, manage, manage. Karen was very firm, saying Wednesday is the worst day. If you can get through Wednesday, then pull out all stops and do your hardest to get to the end. I left with Anne's Epsom salts, instructions from Karen on how to make up the salts and bandage Nessie and thankfully, a little more optimism. I took a side trip to the public phone to alert my sister that we had a problem and might not make it through the next day, then back to camp to bandage and cream the heels.

Early Wednesday morning I removed the Epsom salt bandages and wiped off the bit of cream I'd put on under them. Such relief – the heels actually looked a little less angry and Nessie wasn't nearly as sore when I slathered them in White ointment before popping on the boots. Quietly hopeful we set off down to the Word of Life crossing and up Boyd's, following a pack of horses, and then we hooned along the Woomerah track having a great yak with April Bonham. We got to McKechnies, the first tricky downhill we'd had so far and April went on ahead while we took our time. Multiple people had told me that when negotiating down these hills (particularly Prestons and The Steps), give the horse a long rein, get well ahead of them and don't look back. I did the first two but really couldn't do the last. I had to keep looking back and guiding Nessie which did help when she decided she saw a better track than the one we were on. Mini-panic, stop Nessie!! And then redirect her down off the steep metre high rock ledge she'd gotten herself onto. No harm done though. Onwards to Preston. My knee snarled at me when I got off and attempted to walk up it so it looked like I was going to be riding up everything - but at least I could lead down. I hopped back on and poor Nessie had to carry me all the way up the very steep Prestons, with me trying to stay as far forward and off her back as possible. She did a fabulous job getting to the top and then we headed straight back down the other side of Prestons. We had a repeat of McKechnies when Nessie decided on a different track, but again we got safely back on track, finished the hill and returned to down with a bit of a fang through the common paddocks. Back to the vets and we got the go ahead to keep going. Nessie's heels were still yucky but she seemed to be coping well. We might just get to the end of Wednesday!

Off on the second leg. We only saw one other rider at the start and then no one until we got to the bottom of Short Wellums. I suspect Nessie was wondering if she was the only horse in the world having to go out and do the track – but a bunch caught us up and went on past through the paddock. As we headed back to base Nessie hooked in behind Martin's stallion and checked him out all the way back in. We got through the vet check and I was feeling slightly euphoric that we'd actually made it this far. Three of Nessie's four heels were nasty but they were no longer grey and gunky looking, instead resembling a dried up dam bottom with cracks all over them covering an area nearly the size of my palm on the near fore and hind. Again, I'd never seen anything like it. I was getting a whole new education in skin problems. But at least the heels weren't infected anymore. I made a phone call to my sister to let her know we were still going and she seemed even more relieved than me! The anticipation had been killing her. I was feeling much better than I had expected to so I headed off to the Fickle Wombat with Anne and Co. to enjoy Shahzada Idol. We really need to get some of Kym Hagon's songs down on paper – he is a very funny and talented guy.

Thursday dawned. Nessie's heels didn't look much worse than the day before, although the cracks on the near hind were spreading. I was starting to think we might make it to the end even with the heel and knee problems. Heading off down the road I ran into Anne and Karen. Karen's horse had just pulled a shoe so she went back to town while Anne and I continued on together. This turned into the only leg where I rode the whole way with someone. Anne told me stories of her early Shahzada rides, what the track ahead was like and what to expect when we got to the Steps (plus a bit of Queensland gossip not suitable for NSW ears). At the Steps Anne went down ahead. At the first turn her mare got a leg up on the side of a boulder, the rock under her front feet looked like was rocking and she started to scrabble and panic. But she got the foot back down without even a scratch and seemed okay. I started down with my heart in my throat, thinking please don't do that Nessie because it would scare the crap out of me. But Nessie had learned her lesson the day before and followed carefully, waiting when I said wait to let me get ahead, and then coming down very neatly. I was very happy with her as we safely make it to the bottom and head for home. No worries at the vet and we were good to go again.

At this point I was turning into a robot. Wash and dry the heels. Put cream on. Put boots on. Ride out and back. Wash and dry heels. Put cream on. Go to vet. Take boots off. Wash under boots. Put more cream on. Put boots back on etc. This was ongoing from Tuesday afternoon but it was keeping us in the ride so I wasn't going to stop it. We were also seeing Sharon and Maurie for massage for both of us. Other than my knee I had no real aches or pains and muscle wise Nessie was coping really well.

Off on the second leg and Nessie felt tired and sluggish so we took our time on anything rough and trotted steadily wherever it was good. A slow walk down Boyds and we returned to town, where the vet commented that she was quite tired. Hopefully a good night's sleep would put things right and she'll feel perky for the last day.

Friday morning and I was running low on Ibuprofen. Where had it all gone? At least I still had lots of Panadol. Should buy shares in one or the other company or convince them to sponsor rides as I'm sure I wasn't the only one popping pills. The knee wasn't so happy this morning but the night's rest had done Nessie a world of good and she was traveling really well. Sadly, on the Woomerah track I met camp buddy Shelley leading her horse back as she'd gone lame on track. So close to the end and she had been traveling so well up to that point. I was worrying about going up the Steps in the afternoon as my knee would not let me walk up hill but unbelievably, after we walked very carefully and slowly down McKechnies, something happened in my knee and it stopped hurting. Just completely stopped hurting. I got back on and trotted back to town feeling elated because for the first time since Monday there wasn't any pain. I knew it was temporary but heck, enjoy it while it lasts. No problems at the vet, Nessie's heels were no worse and I was now feeling sick with nerves with only 30km to go.

Last leg. I figured we'd just take our time, no rush, we were so close now. We got to the Steps and Nessie just stopped dead and stared at the spectators. I had to tug to get her attention and get her going but once she got started she followed me up the Steps beautifully. And my knee let me walk up with no pain. I overheard someone say "gee you can really hear the effort the horses are putting in to get to the top" and to think these horses had already done 375km.

They're so good to us – such special friends. We travelled steadily along the top and down Brown's road. Then we had a bit of a fang through the common paddock but I kept missing ribbons and arrows (apparently the cows ate some of them – I hope they got indigestion) so I slowed down and started keeping a better eye out. We trotted into town to keep all the muscles warm and I did a mad wash/dry/cream on all heels and even took the hind boots off, washed them out and put them back on. We went over to the TPR for a final heart rate of 37, and then to the vets and the peanut gallery. It was a little intimidating as they start cheering and clapping as we started to trot. Nessie slowed down and her ears were going in all directions. I was saying come on, keep trotting, you've got to look good or they'll make us trot again and I don't want to do that. Heading back towards the vets and Nessie started slowing down again but then three thumbs went up in the air and we were through!!! We'd made it – our first Shahzada! Oh my gosh it felt so good. Lots of hugs for horse and rider and we could finally relax.

One bung knee and three severely cracked heels couldn't stop us even though they'd tried pretty hard. Back at camp I felt a little lost as the ride was over and I could stop and sit – I hadn't stopped to rest for five days and I wasn't sure if I could do it now. I finally tracked down some of the other Queenslanders to find out what happened to them. They all had their own stories to tell. I hadn't had time to do any socializing since Sunday night, instead being almost obsessively focused on Nessie and our ride, so it was nice to catch up.

Saturday we slept in until 6.30, such luxury, so Nessie thought it was all over. She wasn't so sure when I put the boots back on again and saddled her up for presentations. While we're standing in line I saw Anne talking to the head vet and he pointed in my direction. What's that about I wondered? I find out later when we got presented with the encouragement award (sponsored by Anne and her hubby Steve). A lovely surprise but it made no difference. I'd already been planning next year. And yes we'll be back next year, all going well.

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