

Shahzada 06, Duncan McLaughlin Shahzada Story

Shahzada is a marathon event and that means this is a marathon story; so before reading go make a cuppa, or, if you are one to get into the spirit of things, grab a bottle of Gatorade J . I first visited Shahzada back in 2000 where I strapped for my friend Tova. The event blew me away – this is exactly what I had envisaged endurance riding to be when I first started in the sport. The problem for me was that my horse, Tom (Revelwood Shaja) didn't strike me as a suitable Shahzada mount – he is feisty in a nervy way, a poor eater and drinker, and spooky on track. On the other hand (hoof?) he is exceptionally tough, mentally and physically, and has stamina to boot. Anyway, the years dawned and dusked and I still didn't have my Shahzada horse – so this year I decided what the heck I'll take Tom anyway.

Why, oh why did I delay all these years. This is simply the most AWESOME event. The trail, the organisation, the horses, vets, the town itself and, most of all, the ATMOSPHERE! You have a year to ensure you have YOUR horse ready for next year's effort. But for now, why not sit back and I'll take you through my perspective of Shahzada 06.

A Disappointment

We arrived on Saturday; me with Tom and mum with Ginge (Cudgelbar Tarquin). Set up camp in a great posi – thanks Neil – I was very specific, in fact I almost wrote an essay, on what I was hoping for in our camp spot and Neil delivered. But,, dear reader, don't get any ideas – I have booked that particular spot for the rest of my lifetime and bribed the owner with beer too J .



Idyllic camp – flat and grassy – THANKYOU NEIL! Photo by Dunc

On Sunday, we rode the ponies out to and then up/down Jack's Track for a bit of a limber up. This was our first experience of the new, majorly improved trails (I have ridden Jack's previously on the St Albans ride in 04 where it was very eroded and rutted). The horses travelled along really well and the weather was marvellous. Stopped to take a couple of photos at the top of Jack's when, after a mere hour in use, the camera battery died (bloody thing hasn't been right since dad took it to Svaalbaard!). So much for documenting our Shahzada journey...



Sue and Ginge at the top of Jack's. Photo by Dunc

Back to camp and clean the nags up for pre-ride vetting. Quick practice trot, all looks good and into the vet ring. Trotted Tom fine but, SHOCK!, mum was asked to trot again!. Although cleared to start, Ginge didn't look quite right and, after a lot of discussion and a few more private trot outs, mum decided to withdraw. This was completely unexpected as Ginge is by far and away the soundest horse we have owned. Needless to say this was DISSAPOINTING...Mum was pretty brave about it all and in the end, we both agree, that maybe, had we both started, neither of us would have made it through.

(That's right dear reader, I am telling you that when you come to Shahzada next year you MUST bring a strapper. Better still, BRING TWO! I am pretty independent and don't really like having a strapper, even at 100 milers, but at this ride there just isn't enough time to get it all done yourself AND do your horse justice.)

The Vetting

Here is probably a good time to talk about the vetting. Much was made of the approachability of the vets. And rightly so (though I do wonder how much of that was simply because they said 'WE ARE APPROACHABLE').



Vets, resplendent in red – the most approachable ever made for enjoyable vetting.
Photo by Mary McIntyre.

There was, however, a different procedure for trot outs this year. As I understand it, in previous years, if a horse did a dodgy trot out it was spun and if ok but just a bit scratchy it had to represent. This year, the scratchy horses were simply given a B for gait and a comment in the book and allowed to go on. The horses with the dodgy trot out were allowed to represent prior to the next leg. This gave owners/riders/strappers the opportunity to work on the horse in the intervening time. In many cases, they were able to resolve any lameness type issues completely. Of course, the final trot was the final trot, nothing dodgy please – and so it should be.



Tom in the trot out after the Friday morning leg. Photo by Mary McIntyre.

I found that I was a little tense for Monday and Tuesday vetting. By Wednesday, one settles into the routine and those long, between leg breaks really make all the difference – having time to do EVERYTHING between legs is great! In between legs I did things like alter gear, have showers, massage my horse, gossip with other riders, nap, even pop over to The Fickle for a latte! (god dam city slickers J). Even for the final Friday vet I felt pretty relaxed about the whole deal. Lets face it, if you don't get through, sure it is disappointing but gosh, really, who cares – what a ride! Probably though, the fact that Tom felt so incredibly fit and forward throughout the entire event significantly reduces my VCS (vet check stress).



Tom – 'fit and forward' past Wellum's on Tues Arvo (photo copyright Main Event)

Monday

Monday morning and a 4am shotgun start, down along the Common Rd. I rode this leg with Virginia Dodson on Franshar Park K Shar (my ride at the Boonah Quilty) who was using Tom's bottom as auxiliary brakes (a role Tom is used to have performed the same role on several rides previously for Ginge). Virginia did a great job (and had the good sense to utilise Sharon May Davis - surely Australia's premiere equine body worker - when a few issues popped up with Shar later in the week) for a successful completion.



Virginia and Sharon

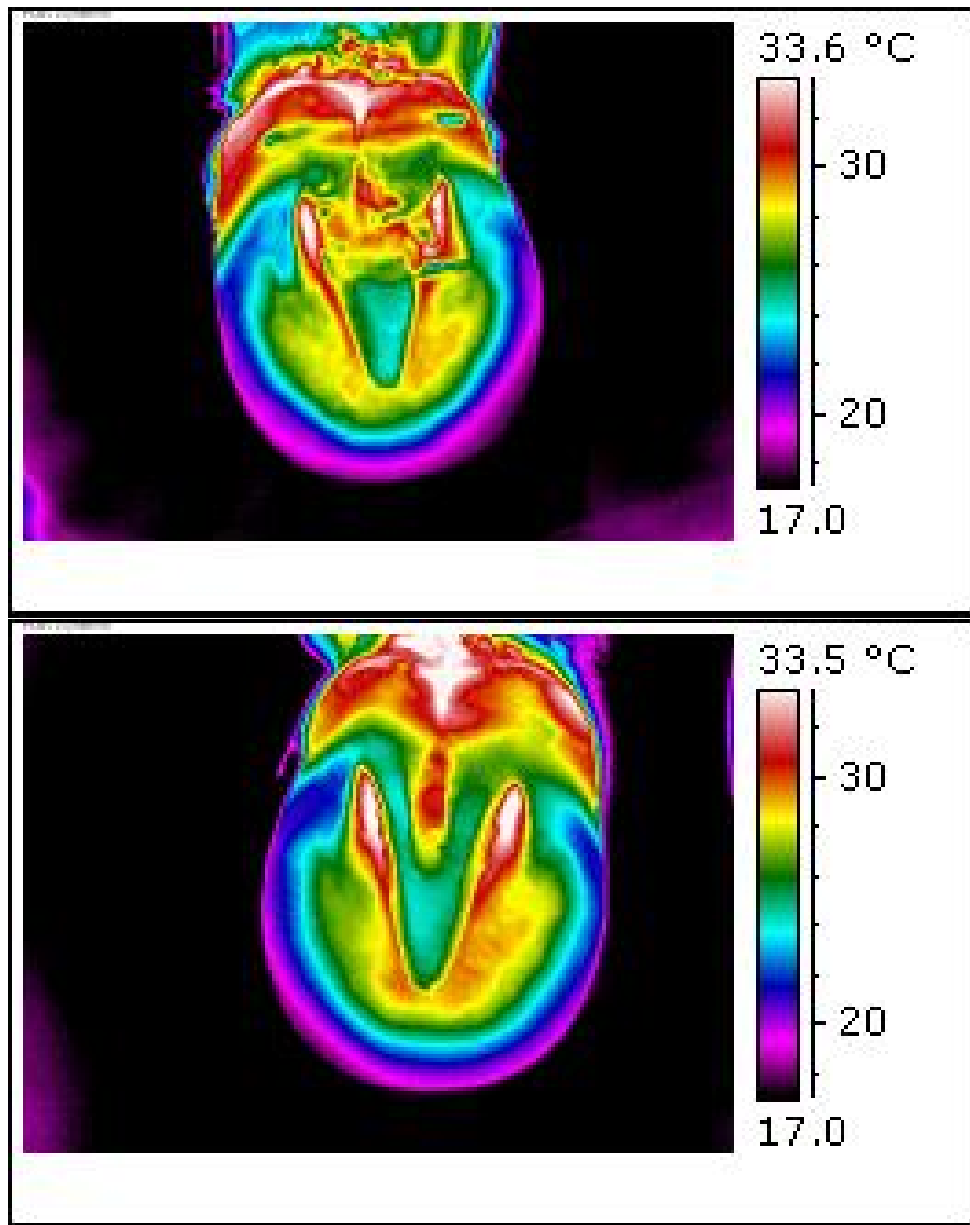
Up Johnny's (another super-smooth track refurbishment), along Transmission Rd (more of a forestry track really) then down Blue Hill, past the Bailey's and there was Lyn standing in her drive (looking fabulous) so we had a quick chat before moving on across Word of Life crossing (Word of Life is sold – will it get a new name I wonder?), now just a big sand bar, and our first photo opportunity with Main Event Photography, the on course photographers. What a great job they do – though, disappointingly, they had a bit of a sleep in and didn't make The Steps early enough to capture Tom's descent on Thursday morning - bummer. From Word of Life a 4km trot back into St Albans.

Now, I think it is quite obvious that if I were to give you a blow by blow, leg by leg account, as much as I would love to do so, we would be here until Shahzada 07 before I am done. So instead, I'll just continue with some observations and highlights.

Roadwork and Technical Trails

Ah yes, the road. There is A LOT of roadwork in this ride: Every leg begins and ends on road. At least 4km, (up to 19km on the final Friday morning!) – so you better have a sound horse. One of the things I did find very interesting is the number of riders who would religiously walk (mounted or unmounted) down every hill but would happily pound along the road in a flying trot or fore-handy, concussive canter!

Speaking of concussion: During Shahzada we had the good fortune to meet a number of people, including Jean Koek from Digital Infrared Body Images. Jean is a commercial thermographer and was there to follow up on Jen G's horse, Ferrymaster, who she had imaged at the Quilty. Now Jean also works with Jan (dahling) T in Queensland, another barefooter, so she tracked down some of us barefooter at Shahzada and took images of our horses. I found the comparisons in the different temperatures in the feet of shod and the unshod horses compelling. It was also interesting to see the shifting heat patterns in limbs and feet as the ride progressed. For example, Tom was pretty OK, thermally speaking, til Wed arvo, where his off hind hammy heated up. The next day his off fore was one degree warmer than his near (off side lateral problems). After the next leg the heat patterns in the feet had swapped, probably the near fore took more weight as a new heat pattern became apparent in the dorsal cannon off fore.



Thermal images of Tom's front feet, directly after vetting on Wed arvo.
Photos courtesy of Jean Koek, Digital Infrared Body Images

The technical trails are a BLAST. I couldn't get enough of them. Tom is great on tricky terrain, is pretty good travelling uphill and is exceptional travelling downhill. We just gobbled up Prestons, The Steps, McKechnies, Boyds and Bakers. I led up and down every hill except Shepherd Gully on Wed morning, where Tom was just too FULL OF GO and I felt I would have been risking my life trying to lead him! We made up a lot of time on the technical trails, which was just as well as we lost a lot of time on the road. I was much too conservative on the road, often getting off and running a fair bit of them. Similarly, there are a lot of areas on the hills (the top half of McKechnies and the first half of Jack's for instance) where you could easily stay on and trot along. Altogether I think I would have been walking/running for about 160km, next time I'll reduce that to about 80km – I reckon we could easily cut about 2 hours off our riding time.



About to ascend McKechnies for the first time (photo copyright Main Event).

Gear and Barefoot

I am really, REALLY pleased with my EasyBares. I used boots on all feet for the entire ride. I did lose a hind boot when cantering along the Great North Rd, with some very rough track over which I should probably have been walking/jig-jogging. But hey, it was Wednesday morning, Tom was firing, the sun was dawning, and the birds were singing. I ask you, who could possibly walk in such circumstances? And the boots were giving exceptional footing over the stony/rocky surface. Anyway I knew instantly it came off. The gaiter was half broken. No probs. I put it in my Stowaway pack, put on the spare boot I was carrying and off I cantered. Except that I didn't actually zip my Stowaway pack back up and the boot fell out. Thankyou Shelly and Steve for finding and bringing it back to camp for me! The boots Tom had on his front feet had already done about 1000kms prior to Shahzada – and they still have wear left in them! That IS value for money.

I did lose a boot on two other occasions, but simply because I didn't do up the gaiters. Unfortunately, one occasion was the final trot out. As the peanut gallery whooped their encouragement, Tom simply accelerated and the boot went flying off! Not a great advertisement for EasyCare and very remiss of me considering how well the boots had performed all week (I wonder did anyone get a photo of it flying off – I would love to have one).

I had no rubbing problems at all until Thursday, where I had noticed some hair abrasion on the heels and so had decided to 'wrap' differently ('wrapping' refers to the use of vet wrap or sports tape under the gaiters). Well, of course, one should never do what one hasn't tried at home. My new style of wrap was no good, and bunched up under that gaiter, causing pastern rubbing (the following pix are off fore and off hind – the worst rubbed feet).



Loss of hair on pastern from 'wraps'.

As you can see not so bad that any skin was broken but hair was removed and in the future I think I will adopt Carol's style of wrapping – she had no rubbing at all. Tom's feet did not wear at all due to the full time boot use. Next time I will ride some of the legs barefoot, just to get some wear happening. Here are some pre-ride and post-ride photos. The post ride photos were taken on Tues 29 Aug after a light trim as his feet had grown longer over the period (stimulation without wear of barefoot = longer hoof).



Tom's feet before and after Shahzada.
The post ride photos are after a light trim as Tom's feet had grown over the period.

I alternated saddles: Mon, Wed and Fri in my Cheyenne; Tues and Thurs in my Isabelle. Next time I will just stick to the Cheyenne for the entire ride – it was much the more comfortable saddle and with the Stowaway Pack I could carry spare boots, syringes of electrolytes, even a bridle (I rode in a halter only in the afternoons, Tom was much too energetic in the mornings – though I did change from a bit to an S hack from Wed as his mouth had started bleeding from early over-exuberant behaviour). I did find I had to put the fibreglass pommel insert back into the Cheyenne (I usually have it filled with pillow stuffing) to add more stability and keep the saddle off his wither.



Tom in his Cheyenne saddle with Stowaway pack and Zilco bridle and breastplate. He only wore the rump rug for presentation. It was very considerate of the Shahzada Committee to ensure the ride numbers toned in with my colour scheme! J Photo by Rob Howden

I mostly rode in my usual clothes: boots, gaiters, jeans (I did wear shorts for one afternoon leg – they were fine too) and a t-shirt. I used three different types of shoe: ariat terrain, Dublin jodhpur boot and Nike sneaker. The Ariat and Nikes were great, good support and comfortable off horse. The Dublins were hopeless for walking/running and my feet went to sleep while riding. They are ok at home but clearly not up to scratch for competitions with extended riding times.

Drugs! Have them available: for you, not the horse! I am not a fan of drugs but on Thursday I was having a lot of trouble just walking – a consequence of an old tendonitis flaring up after all the down-hill running. I know the quality of my riding on Thurs suffered for it. Murray supplied me with a potent (but unnamed!) analgesic on Friday and I could get back to enjoying the ride and the scenery instead of focussing on my dodgy ankle.

Outstanding Horses

For me there were four 'stand out' horses competing. The winner, Evonglen Holmgaard is such a top little horse. Brad had 'V8' crayoned on his hindquarter and you could see why. I saw this combo out on track almost every leg (as they went motoring past! J) and on all but one, where they still looked pretty good, they looked exceptional. This horse would have been my pick for the Best Managed horse. I don't know the breeding of this horse.

Two horses stood out as sheer magnificent riding horse types: Hillbrae Garnet (Baram Boy (Abiram x Zeta (Count Manilla)) x Debparobkee Sapphire Crystal (Wagga Salcrystal x Arkab Janita) ridden by Julie Fletcher. Julie told me this horse has over 5000km (alas, I think they went out lame on Friday). Karumba Nazrani (Ralvon Traveller (Ralvon Pilgrim x Naufali) x Nerita (Boyar x Queen of Hearts), ridden by Rowena Robinson is not only a great looker but oh so beautifully behaved on trail.

And of course, the old stager, Judstan Sharwayn (Sumerland Robreyn (Shafreyn x Jillian) x Jedda (Flash Design x unnamed). This horse must be the one of the most underrated in the country – his achievements are phenomenal! And another joy of Shahzada is there is actually time to talk to other riders - properly talk. For instance, I wonder how many people know that, in a previous incarnation, Mark was a jockey!

But really – all the horses are legends – you don't bring a dud horse to Shahzada. There was the now Toft owned, treadmill-trained, Blue Bronco, who, ridden by former owner Anne, showed how how whiz-bang conditioning technology applies equally well to these old style endurance tracks. The endearing Oakey Dokey and Jan Wade, symmetrically trotting their way around the trails. And even one experienced gelding (5th buckle from 5 attempts), who, under his even more experienced rider (now 12 Shahzada buckles!), was so self assured as to back right into the trophy table during presentation - breaking a trophy or too and nearly breaking Halifax as well!

I think one of my next projects will be an analysis of bloodlines for Shahzada horses, though, looking at the horses above, the results mightn't be that surprising. As just one example, Tom's sire, Seraja, also completed Shahzada at his only attempt.



Seraja, Tom's sire, competing at Shahzada. Photo courtesy of Dodi Sinfield.

That's All Folks

As a first time rider I found there was a lot to take in and a very steep learning curve. It was a fabulous experience and an amazing bonding experience with my horse - quite unlike any other ride I have attended. The exceptional effort by all involved, from little things like apricot pies available from Archie's in the vet area to major accomplishments like the massive containers full of water for the horses at the top of the hills, meant you could really focus and enjoy your ride.

I sought advice from anyone and everyone - and I listened. That doesn't mean I necessarily did what was suggested – I just considered how that could fit into my Shahzada attempt. I made some small mistakes along the way but I did do one thing REALLY right: I rode my own ride. This is my advice to any first time riders for next year, RIDE YOUR OWN RIDE.

Most of all – Tom is a superstar! OK, he is kind of a funny/awkward looking fellow, with a complicated way of relating to the world. But then, so am I. We match! And boy what a heart he has. I couldn't have asked for a better friend to share this trail.

If you only get one thing out of this story it should be this: if you are considering, or have previously considered and dismissed, the idea of riding Shahzada – Just Do It. Print off next year's entry form and send it in. NOW!



Tom and Dunc in the rainforest at the top of the Steps. Photo by Mary McIntyre.