



Photo by Animal Focus

Peter Bice

August 25th, and it was time to attempt the Shahzada 400km endurance test with my 16 year old daughter, Victoria, and a neighbour, 14 yr old Josephine Jansen.

The Shahzada is a marathon endurance horse ride totalling 400km over 5 days comprising of 80km each day split into 2 legs. The horses are checked by the vets before the ride and then twice a day during the event, and must be judged fit to continue.

I have attempted Shahzada 5 times previously, with my first success of 4 buckles in 1987. The last time saw me get through 370km before the heat and the dust took their toll on my horse, and I had to withdraw from the event. That was in 1994 so it is twenty years since my last Shahzada. Before I got married and had 3 children.

Victoria is making her second attempt, and for Jo it is her first time. Preparations have been going really well all season, with me riding my wife's (Tacye) horse – Georgie Girl. Victoria riding Amber (The Byzantine Diamonds) and Jo riding a horse borrowed from Jennifer Gilbertson, Windaroo Devina Glamour.

For Georgie Girl, a 14.3h grey part Arab mare, it is her first season at endurance and is proving to be very good and just lapped up all the attention and the work. Amber has completed the 160km state championship held at Del Rio in June placing 3rd junior with Victoria, and Devina is a proven Shahzada horse having completed twice previously.

Shahzada is a unique event and the preparations and training can be daunting. The excitement and the butterflies the week prior are a challenge as well. We set up camp on Saturday at St Albans which was the ride base, our home for the next 10 days. To loosen the horse up, Victoria and I rode from home in Wisemans Ferry before the priride vetting on Sunday.

At 4am on Monday 25th, 57 competitors with riders wearing head torches, lined up for the mass start to the 34th running of the event. Riders have come from Tasmania, South Australia and Queensland for this ultimate test.

With a good brisk pace up through St Albans Common, we were at the top of the first hill by daybreak. Travelling along the ridgeline, about ¾ of the way into the 50km leg, I fell off Georgie. This was my main worry for the ride as I had broken my collar bone back in June, resulting in a plate and 7 screws. Fortunately (I think) I landed on my back so I jumped back on and off we went until 5km from home where I found myself in the blackberries. I thought then that if I was going to fall off twice each leg, it was going to be a long week.

Tuesday was showery as we set off into the dark at 4am for another 50km leg. About half way into the leg, Victoria noticed that Amber was not quite right in her gait, feeling slightly lame in one leg. We slowed right down to see if she would ease out of it, however by the time we reached the valley floor it was obvious that Amber wasn't recovering, so Victoria decided to call for a float to take them back to camp, and withdraw from the ride. The showery weather was being a nuisance, but it was actually great riding conditions as it kept the horses cool and softened the tracks. Jo and I were powering on.

Wednesday it rained. It rained quite a lot. So as we went to start at 4am, there was a late change of course as the rivers were flooded. Yahn we got to do the first leg again rather than the dreaded "Prestons". We made it through day 3 with the horses starting to get into the swing of things, but the challenging conditions were taking its toll on the field, with many being eliminated from the event.

Thursday morning is dress up day, and the river levels have dropped enough for us to cross, however I am not a great fan of boots full of water, so it was feet up while trying not to fall off in the water. Although it was still wet, it was nothing like Wednesday. It's been 5 legs since I have fallen off so I think I'm starting to get the hang of this. Finishing day 4, both of us are travelling really well and we are starting to get excited. I put new shoes on Georgie as she had worn out the shoes that were new on Sunday.

Thursday morning sees another late course change due to a washout on The Steps. Crews with chainsaws and picks were sent up to do some repairs to the track so the iconic Shahzada track could be used on Friday afternoon.

On Friday morning, vetting after the 9th leg is a bit tenses as the end is now in sight. The final leg up The Steps is only 30km, but is just as stressful as you try to nurse your horse around. The final trot out for the vet in front of the peanut gallery is very tense. Even after finishing the 400km, there are still some who join the Friday Club by being judged not fit to continue, (fortunately only 1 this year). The crowd on the sidelines cheer on each horse as it trots out for the vets, and then the thumbs up is given and you know you have made it. Oh what a feeling!! It's been 21 years since I last got a Shahzada buckle with my now wife, Tacye.

Saturday morning is presentation and the work out for those selected for best managed. Jo was one of five called out for this award. 27 of the 57 starters finished the event. A success rate of 47.37%.

Although some of the iconic tracks were unpassable this year, the course was by no means any easier. There are also some tracks that have not changed much in the last 20 years, they are all tricky.

There is not a winner for Shahzada as "TO FINISH IS TO WIN" is the motto of Shahzada. The horse that gets the fastest time gets the same buckle as every other horse in the event that completes the ultimate test of horse management Fit and Well.

There were also 65 entries in the mini marathon, where competitors ride 40km a day for 3 days, a total of 120km. 52 riders were successful.

Shahzada could not have been run for the last 34 years without the wonderful volunteers and committee who cleared and marked the tracks, sorted out campsites, carted water up to the top of the mountains, TPR's, timekeepers and office workers as well as a multitude of other tasks, including WICEN who manned all the checkpoints and radios for the whole week. All these dedicated volunteers make this a remarkable event.

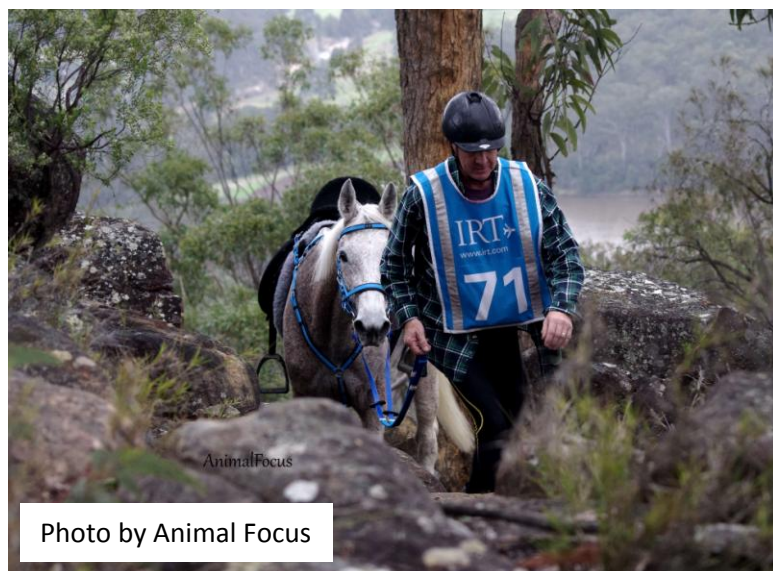


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From the strappers back at camp.

Shahzada for us is a bit like a holiday. We get to camp for the week and sit round the campfire, however there is some work involved. We need to keep the campfire burning so there is hot water for washing the horses when they return, then there is the cleaning and drying of the gear. Saddle cloths must be clean and dry to prevent rubs so that means 10 saddle cloths per horse.

Towels, horse and rider food and dry rugs need to be ready for when they arrive back and the gear for the next leg prepared, any issues with horse or rider need to be resolved. We fortunately had the

services of a horse masseur who also aided the rider's sore muscles. This year was extra challenging trying to get everything dry, and of course there was the socializing.

As soon as the horse arrives back a camp we have 30 minutes to present to the vet. In that time the horse is washed to remove mud and sweat, cooled down and towel dried. Given some feed but kept moving to keep them warm. In

that half hour the heart rate of the horse must be under 60 bpm. They are also tested for gut sounds, hydration, muscle tone and lameness. Luckily the rider is not judged for lameness as there were plenty of sore bodies.

Then back to camp to prepare for the next leg.

After living so closely with our horses there is a really special bond that forms between us.

Note: the donuts and sausage rolls from the canteen were AMAZING.

Peter