

## Shahzada Borne on a Summer Wind. from Ian Curtis

Well it was hardly summer, more like the monsoon season and fortunately no wind. Our camp site looked a little wet when we first set up but if I could have known that it would be churned to ankle deep snot by Monday afternoon we would have opted for different digs. Saturday it was raining, it rained every day, and the first task is to glue eight boots on two horses. That doesn't sound ideal does it, trying to glue boots on in mud and rain? There was no alternative, we needed time for the glue to set so we could pre-ride and vet the next day. So gluing was attempted under the gazebo in the downpour. One horse done and running out of light. The fifth boot goes on and as the horse puts weight on it we can see fountains of water spurting up between the duct tape and the hoof. It's not looking good and we abort. Sunday morning in a brief respite from the rain we complete the task on firmer ground. Amazingly the 5 already done look good. If it doesn't work we will shoe never shod horses. It seems to be working and we vet and pre-ride. Phew.

The plan is to run three Blake's Heaven horses together and Monday looks to be going to plan. Like everybody our main aim is to complete, we did not have a 'no guts no glory' strategy but we know our horses can go pretty fast and someone has to win. Win? That is a controversial term at Shahzada and we understood from the outset that there is no recognition for first across the line. So be it, I can understand that thinking but I like speed. I'm here to have fun and so is my horse. We both like going fast. That is how we ride other rides and they say for the big rides, 'don't change a thing'. OK then!

So the three of us play Monday just right. We don't need to be in the lead, if our horses are comfortable we want to stay 'in touch'. If we are not, well we will reassess, but we are! Monday afternoon doesn't go so well. My daughter Kali's horse, Carousel, doesn't feel right and we are concerned about a poorly defined injury he sustained a month ago. Sure enough he has a represent. We work hard trying to find the problem and conclude it is the opposite hind to that called by the vet. We think it's a sore flexor tendon. Further advice pretty much confirms that and even though that tough little pony ultimately passes the represent next morning, his race is over. Kali cries buckets of tears and we are all very sad. On the up side Wind and I get a strapper. Not just any strapper, a super strapper.

Tuesday, Wind and Venus, ridden by Louise Stevens, have a steady morning. We are not pushing particularly hard but staying 'in touch'. Towards the end of the first leg, Venus looks uneven up the front. That is quite unusual for her and I miss it at first because I'm looking for a more common hind issue that we usually work through on this feisty little mare. She is lame (sound a day or so later) and vets out.

Now I have no constraints and I give Wind what he wants, my blessing to go. Now we are really having fun. Tuesday afternoon I find myself riding with the other two front runners, Narelle and Michael. The three of us have a handy lead on the next riders. Oops, I lose a front boot. I go back and pick it up and let the other two go. I'm carrying a strap on but the ground is soft and my horse can do 20km easy on terrible stuff so I leave it off. Now my horse feels even faster. Perhaps he can feel the ground better, I don't know, something, we are flying. I catch and ride with the other two but near the top of Shepherds gully we step it up a notch. I felt like the man from snowy river going down that

section. I whack a boot on at the bottom and find by the end of the day I have a 20 min lead. I re-glue the lost boot.

Wednesday morning I'm ready to start and the other front runners step out in front of me. Fine, suits me, I just stay with them, it's an easy pace and a happy trio. Come saddle up time for the afternoon session and we are in trouble. Wind has never had a girth issue but at 200km, 40km further than his single 160km completion, we do. On reflection, I think the morning's saddle blanket contributed. With so much rain we are using gear not normally used and this one was a bit long. Some of it was a bit further in front of the saddle. Don't change a thing! We haven't done many wet rides and that didn't help either. We tried the spare saddles but they didn't seem to help. Out with the trusty hole punch and some inventive work on the girth points seemed to get us some leeway. We were the last ones out by a ways. The big trot is gone. Canter seems OK but I just canter twice for a few meters on the out leg. There is a good bit of lead work in this leg and it helps me be conservative without losing too much time. At the end of Wednesday the three of us are within 7 minutes with the 4th rider an hour and a half further back. Can this be right, Wind's girth looks better than when I went out? He came home pretty well so just maybe we are OK. The vet doesn't even pick it up. The morning will tell.

Come Thursday morning, unlike me plastered in gaudy make up with glitter eyeliner, no beard and a tutu, Wind's girth still looks OK. We will see then. As was my strategy, I go out behind the field. Wind's trot is as good as most, there is no big trot but canter seems fine. It's raining, still, hard at times. I catch Narelle at the bottom of Blue Hill. She says she is taking it easy but up on the transmission line Narelle catches me. I turn it up, lose Narelle and soon overtake Michael. Michael comes with me but my leave late strategy has given me some time on him and the pace is good. It was about this time my 'good' eye started stinging. I couldn't help but rub it no doubt rubbing in all sorts of gunky make up. Before long I was in serious distress and could hardly keep either eye open. I'm following Michael virtually blind. I blamed make up, then the various girth treatments on my hands and no doubt reins but in the end it was a simple problem. In the rain, 3 years' worth of sweat and sunscreen were oozing out of the padding in my helmet. It was running along the brim and dripping in my eye. The edges of my eye were now bleeding and if I could have withdrawn I would have. I washed the helmet inner in a puddle and for the rest of the leg managed to keep the sore eye closed and the other one open. The second half of this leg was not fun. Keep your gear clean! All of it.

Wind's girth was a little worse but extrapolating that out, I thought we would make it. Thursday afternoon was comparatively uneventful. All leg I was looking for Michael's boot prints but there were none and I learned later he sadly vetted out. I thought it was a little slipperier on Wind's hind probably due to the softer boots wearing down. Once again the girth was a little worse for wear.

Friday, no matter what happens today I'm pretty satisfied with the outcome. It's going to be a fun day. Right up front we find a new issue. Lowering the saddle on, Wind has a massive flinch. Off comes the saddle and we find a lump 6-7cm diameter. It's right on the cusp of the back of the saddle. We think and hope it's not from the saddle but a bouncing boot. The boot I used on Tuesday and I haven't clipped it back on as tight as usual. We ditch that boot and gently give him a massage. It gets better but my leave late strategy is now catching up with me. We work as long as we can and I leave at 4:55, very alone, still dark and so foggy I can't see across Joe's Crossing. Wind is fantastic

and we keep at it. At the top of Jack's I work out the whole field is between me and the turn around. That is quite a relief as seeing other horses will lift our spirits. McKechnies provides our most dramatic moment. Wind second guesses my lead and steps on a huge oblige flat rock, loses all his footing and goes down. There is a mad frightening scramble while he gains his feet. There is bark off in various places on the right from his eye to hind fetlock but it all seems superficial. Handling the adrenaline for the next 10 minutes was 'interesting'. We vet through but the vet is now concerned about his girth and gives me an alternate strategy to try. We have a pretty good lead and can take it easy this afternoon.

Friday afternoon is an absolute joy. We ditch the second boot, Wind could do this leg barefoot and we won't need that. Wind is still firing. We get a bit stuck on one of the steps but spectator encouragement overcomes that easy enough. Somewhere after The Steps we lose that same boot but like last time it seems to spur Wind on. Down on the common he feels terrific and I know we have it in the bag. We cantered 90% of the common in a state of euphoria, I knew he was going to vet through. This Shahzada I was borne on a Summer Wind.

That is a long happy race story but it doesn't cover the most important parts. Just being out in that magnificent country with the friendly Shahzada family is what this ride is all about. I've missed out



telling you about my part time Strapper April completing the Mini Marathon and the fantastic support provided by my impromptu super strapper Kali. I haven't told you about how when we were 100s of metres from home Wind would call for Carousel and he would answer. How we had help from all directions to manage the issues we encountered. How the mud sucked us into ground. How my car battery self-destructed. How others in our camp area pitched in to help one another. The rain made the ultimate challenge all that more challenging but somehow that just made it better. Thank you to all those involved, officials, helpers, friends, other riders and horses. No matter how small your part, you are Shahzada.

Blake's Heaven Summer Wind being ridden by Ian Curtis.

Photo by Animal Focus