

My 500km Shahzada, by Mel Anderson

Shahzada is not *just* a ride, it is **THE RIDE**. Tiki and I started preparing for Shahzada 08 the day we returned home from Camp E.I. in 07. I knew I had a mighty tough little pony that would do the distance. He had the heart, strength, and attitude, and a very determined, short, red-headed rider that would work hard to achieve the best possible result for her little Tiki.

Many phone calls were made between myself and Sharon May-Davis, discussing the prospect of Tiki and I attempting the 500km. There was no question – if ever there was a horse ready, Tiki sure was. He was doing everything right, completing rides soundly and settling into a much more mature head space. This was very pleasing. Things were finally falling into place.

Saturday 23rd August, Ausden Kon Tiki, a 9 year old, 14:2hh, Flea Bitten Grey, Arab Gelding, arrived at St Albans, along with myself and his team of strappers. Kirsty, my wonderful dedicated sister, gives up so much of her time to come to rides and support me. My mother, strapping at her first Shahzada. Sharon May-Davis, no words can describe the knowledge, passion and brilliance this woman possesses when it comes to horses. Akiko Otsuka, attending her 5th Shahzada and Mime Fugimoto for her 1st time both visitors from Japan.

It was time for Tiki to present to the vetting area for his pre ride vet check. Kym Hagon was ready for us with his little apprentice Dusty. To show off some super vocabulary skills Dusty announces to me; “*here is daddy’s stethoscope.*” Do we have another future vet in the Hagon family? We were given the thumbs up to start, so back to camp for an early night in anticipation of a fantastic week to follow.

Sunday morning, 3am the alarm rings under my pillow. The excitement and nerves all mix in together as I awake for the start of what is to become the most amazing week of Tiki and my endurance career to date. Camp was quiet, people and ponies were still sleeping as I saddled up Tiki ready for the 4am start of our 500km Shahzada experience. It was such a lovely gesture to see Gay Bonham waiting around the fire to wish us well, along with Ross Mudie who was taking the official time as we left. A wake up call was needed for Neil, and he then bounded out of his caravan and into the waiting car to set off down along the Common as our check point crew assisted by my sister Kirsty, Mime and Akiko. They drove to the base of Johnny Brown’s Hill to ensure we headed up into the mountains safely. Visibility was pretty poor, with fog and mist the entire 12km along the Common restricting our view, however it was one of the most magical rides I have experienced, to be completely alone it was quite exhilarating and surreal all at the same time. With droplets of mist forming on my eyelashes and steam puffing from Tiki’s nostrils we rounded the bend to see in the distance the car lights and our first checkpoint. We headed up Browns, and met Neil walking up the track to ensure we passed through the gates safely. We had a quick chat as we climbed the hill, a wave goodbye and Tiki and I were off. Winding up and along the Transmission Rd we were finally above the mist and as the sun began to rise the views were to die for. Tiki traveled beautifully along the tracks and we slowly began the decent on Blue Hill. Off and walking we made it to the bottom to find Neil and Casper (his dog) waiting to escort us through the gates and ensure we made our next checkpoint safely. Another little chat, a quick drink of water and we were off again along Wrights Creek Rd, then right onto Settler’s Rd and back into St Albans for our first of many vet checks. As we walked back to camp, Kieron Power

handed me a beautiful framed photograph of Tiki and I, taken only minutes before out along the road. This good luck token was on display for the week, along with many of his other fantastic images.

9.53am we set off on our 2nd leg, out to Joe's, then up McKechnie's, where we ran into Michael Knihinicki and Peter Cooper who were on foot finishing off the track marking. Some words of encouragement from the guys and then we were off again. We reached the top and headed along the Woomerah Path towards Jack's Track where we were to find Allan Casslick filling the water troughs. What a wonderful job of track clearing and marking Allan, Neil, Brad and all their crew did on the trails, it was a superb effort. Thank you!! We then headed down Jack's to make our way back through Joes and then to base. With the all clear to continue we headed out onto our 3rd leg at 2.38pm. We had 13km to complete which was out along the Common to the base of the Steps and then return. I was amazed at how well Tiki was traveling on his own. As we headed out many 400km, 120km and 80km riders were out warming their horses. As we rode along we met up with Malcolm and Megan Matters riding Colin and Morning Star. We continued along together to the checkpoint where Allix Jones and Haydn Fisher were waiting for us. We had planned to ride part of this together, however Morning Star had other ideas for Megan and our plans went out the window. Tiki and I headed back into base for the final vet check for our first day. One day down for us, but 'Day One' starts again tomorrow!!

Monday just seemed to fly by as we repeated the first two tracks from the previous day. Tiki knew all the good drinking spots and the great picks of grass along the side of the road. Another day and Tiki passed with flying colours.

This year the tracks had changed slightly, Tuesday morning now entailed traveling along Settlers Rd out to Shepherd's Gully, a tricky track, but if ridden to the conditions a lovely morning's ride. Another successful vet check and we were off again to climb Careflight Hill, a new addition for the 2008 Shahzada tracks. As the evening came to an end I felt exhausted, however a foot and leg massage by Akiko was what I needed. I recall crawling into bed at about 7.30pm and was fast asleep by 7.32pm.

Wednesday morning Tiki and I were full of energy and had the pleasure of riding with Sue and Kissie, Jan & Leonie, Fiona and Em, Ann and Ivan Tyto. These ladies and their horses are all amazing, such experience amongst them. With Preston's in sight I was in a dilemma – should I walk up or ride. Usually I would walk, however Tiki just seemed to keep out stepping me when I was on the ground, so I jumped back on and he carried me all the way up. I still can't believe I rode up. Back in base we presented to the vets with great parameters and fit to continue.

Thursday morning Allix and I rode out together. All was going great until we reached the water troughs at the top of Blue Hill where my headlight decided to stop working. Bugger, it was almost light, but we had about 30 minutes till visibility would be OK without a torch. A huge thanks must go to Allix and Flyte who led the way for Tiki and I in the dark until the morning light was enough that we could travel safely. We made it down the steps together with no incident. It still amazes me, the things we ask of our beautiful horses and they oblige so willingly and without question. For a brief moment I, myself, stood at the top of the steps and thought,...but why? On arrival back to base it was decided after vetting we would get Tiki re shod on his back feet. His fronts were perfect, my farrier at home had made special front shoes which seemed to be holding up to the conditions wonderfully. His backs were wearing a little thin though. New shoes were put on and he was ready to go again. Not bad for completing 400km on one set of

shoes. Thursday afternoon was like my Friday. The butterflies started to hit in. Had I done the right thing? Was I being greedy wanting the 500km, should we have only attempted the 400km. Doubt was running through my mind, but at the same time I was extremely happy with Tiki's performance so far. He had not put a foot wrong, we just had to keep doing exactly what we had been doing all week and things would be fine. There was no stopping us.

Friday became a bit of a blur. The day seemed to be all over before it had started. As we finally climbed up the iconic Shahzada steps on Friday afternoon, I had the pleasure of riding for the first time during the week, with my camp neighbour, April on her borrowed steed, Boss. What a lovely horse, he looked so keen and strong at the end. It was also such an uplifting feeling to see the photographers, strappers, vets, and the volunteers climbing the steps to wish us all well for our final 30km. I still don't really remember much of Friday afternoon back in camp. I remember hearing cheers and clapping as we crossed the time keepers desk, then I saw 2 friends who had driven down to see us finish the ride. They had been watching our progress on the internet. They were wearing home made shirts with "Team Tiki", "Number 1", and other fun stuff hand painted on them. Even Hamlet their dog had ribbons around his neck. Strapping, then to the TPR, it was like running on autopilot, we had our routine but it was like we were in slow motion. I just wanted to be through the final check. The most important thing I remember was seeing the faces of the vets as we were given the thumbs up. Thinking about it now still makes me want to cry. I am so proud of Tiki. As I have said before it was surreal. I remember hugging the vets, but most of all hugging Tiki. I don't think he knew what all the fuss was about. If only he knew that he is one of only 3 horses in Australia to have successfully completed this distance of 500km in an official ride.



Mel and Tiki

Photo by Col Hodgson

Presentation, now this was going to be something to remember. I had packed Tiki's traditional Arabian costume, a halter and breast plate, hand made in Syria, with red tassels, beads, shells and silver nose band. It was packed in the hope that we would be successful and he could wear it on Saturday morning. I was not expecting to be placed 7th in the 400km on top of completing the 500km. I have ridden Shahzada for 3 successes from 3 attempts and each of those completions my horse and I have been called in the line up for Best Managed horse. Each of those occasions were amazing in their own right. Jasmine Minstrel in 2004 also with the fastest riding time, Tiki in 2006 for his 1st Shahzada and now 2008, Tiki's 2nd. When it was announced that Tiki was awarded the Best Managed Horse award I was filled with an overwhelming sense of pride. My little pony, with the squashed in face, presented with such a prestigious award.

I believe that the Best Managed award encompasses all the hard work we have put in not only during the ride but the year leading up to this. It is an honour to be awarded this, but most of all the accolades of this achievement must go to my best mate, Ausden Kon Tiki. Throughout the week we had no represents, we vetted through with only 1 trot up at each vet check, and metabolics were great all week. I still can't believe we had no issues to deal with during the ride. I guess the important factor with Tiki's success this year was, we had no soundness problems leading into the event, and basically the team managed Tiki by using preventative measures to reduce any potential issues that may arise.

Thank you again to all the sponsors of Shahzada 2008, but on a personal note, Tiki and I would like to thank Haydn and Gail Fisher for the donation of the rug for Best Managed Horse award, and to Rex and Sharyn Cox for the spectacular Perpetual Trophy. I still feel speechless when I think about what this really means. Tiki you are my little star!!

There were so many people, some even, who I am ashamed to admit, I do not know their names, which offered the most amazingly wonderful support for Tiki and I (and our team back in camp while we were out enjoying ourselves on the tracks) during the Shahzada week. Whether it was a kind word here and there, a warm smile, a hug or the friendly camp side banter; it is these things that still, as I sit at home now, confirms why I love being apart of this awesome sport. Thank you for making our achievement so much more memorable than I could ever have imagined.