

2019 SHAHZADA MEMORIAL TEST – 400 KM

With Blake's Heaven Adventuress

By Fia Hasko-Stewart



Distance is only part of the challenge that is the Shahzada Memorial Test 400km. The other element, which is at least as daunting, is the terrain to be covered. Not just hills, not just mountains, but solid rock formations that require the horses to act more like mountain goats, leaping up and down rock faces and sliding on loose rocks. A wrong move can mean a fall or worse.

In between mountains is extensive work along the roads, which in 2019 were as hard as the mountain rocks due to the dry season.

This year, I was going to take my lovely mare Blake's Heaven Venus who passed 6500km in successful endurance earlier this year. In 2013, she was one of four Blake's Heaven horses leading the ride when she went out lame at 370km. The others went on to get equal fastest time. I wanted to show that Venus could do it too; but alas, after 100km at Currowan two weeks before Shahzada, she appeared to have concussion issues and was not right.

Ten days before we were due to leave, I made the decision to switch to BH Adventuress. In retrospect this decision had a special symmetry: Talea and I bred Adventuress to capture the blood lines of Talea's junior horse, BH Ventura, who had given me my first Shahzada completion.

Adventuress had breezed through the Tom Quilty 160km in July. I was confident she could do the 400 and, given her breeding, I was hopeful she could do it in style.

There was just one weekend between my decision to take her, and our departure for Shahzada. Adventuress had not been ridden for more than four weeks. With team mates Ian Curtis and Celia Hodgson, I took her for a solid 30 km training ride. After two other small rides at home, it was time to go.

I headed off (after finally finding my car key) and met Ian and BH Summer Wind, who would be our riding companions. As well as Adventuress I had her sister, BH Hiraani, to be ridden in the 120km by Leanne Holz.

A condition of me entering Shahzada this year was that we have proper shelter in case of rain and extreme cold. Ian's son Aaron lent us a camper trailer which turned into a luxury camp, complete with fridges and heaters. I am not sure I could have done the ride without this as it made everything easier. Even with it, I had only a few hours' sleep for the first few nights but I was not cold.

After setting up, the next big job was glueing boots on the horses. Ian and I did this on Sunday morning, in perfect conditions. Later that day the other members of our camp arrived – Monica Ballard with her horse Larry and Talea and Jesse with BH Avalon and Contessa, all entered in the mini marathon As Avalon was very green, it was going to be a challenge for her and Talea too.

Nonetheless, Talea promised to help me and Ian as much as she could around her own ride. In fact she got up at 3am each morning, gave Adventuress extra feed and hay, and put compression socks on her. I could not have done it without her.

Given the location and time of the year, Shahzada is notorious for its weather extremes – from minus a lot in the morning to the high 20s in the afternoon. Adventuress was not clipped. She had completed the Quilty in Queensland without clipping, as all attempts to clip had failed. I decided to try again when she had finished the first tough day and was less fresh.

The second potential issue was that Adventuress had never seen rocks of the Shahzada kind. I hoped that, being a generally sensible horse, she would learn as she went. I was also very happy to have Wind (who achieved fastest time in 2014 at his first attempt) to show her how to tackle these tracks.

At the pre-ride talk on Sunday 25 August, head vet Kym Hagon encouraged riders not to go too slow, which pleased me and Ian. At 4 am on Monday we set out, travelling steadily. By about 30 km into the 50 km leg we noted that quite a few riders were travelling fast – perhaps Kym's words had had an impact. Ian's horse was limited to novice pace so we backed off our pace, letting others come in a few minutes before us. We vetted quickly and perfectly.

On Monday afternoon we climbed our first rocky mountain, on the trail known as McKecknie's. We rode parts but got off for the biggest rock steps, as these can be dangerous for the horses. Adventuress did not want to stay behind me and I was worried about her nudging me and running me over, so I let her go ahead of me. She followed Wind up, step by step. So far so good. At the end of day, Adventuress and I had the equal fastest time, together

with current NSW State Champions, Emily Streckfuss and Webb's Creek Starlight. Ian and Wind were just a minute behind.

Day 2 followed the same pattern. Wind set a fast pace and Adventuress was keen to match him. She followed him on the rocky trails and vetted exceptionally. On Careflight Hill I dared to grab her tail as she climbed the rocks. Tailing, except I had no way to direct her. I was astonished to learn that we completed that day's 79 km in the fastest time, in fact in 5h 57! Wow. Adventuress was in sizzling form but sadly, Wind was on a re-present for lameness.

We did what we could with Wind. We were not confident. At 3.45 am on Wednesday morning Talea ran him out and Ian accepted that he was out.

Wind had been a great mentor and partner for Adventuress. Now it was a whole new ballgame, and we were facing the hardest leg with not one but two crazy hard climbs and descents. Adventuress whinnied to everyone as we went past our camp, but we soon caught the front riders, Emily, Roz Edmunds and Sue Todd, and tagged along with them. When Emily dismounted to go up Boyd's mountain, Sue stayed on. I decided it was safer for me and Adventuress if I stayed on too.

It was not long before I realised that the girth was very loose and the saddle went way back, but it did not stop little Adventuress. We jumped and lurched our way up the rock faces and finally were at the top. I fixed the saddle, tightened the girth and we were off. When it came to the descent, I used the same tactic as before, letting her go at times. Then we were going up the mountain most feared by many, Prestons. Following Emily, I led Adventuress until two-thirds of the way up, then decided it was safer to get on. To my amusement, she promptly put herself into a trot. Take THAT Prestons!

While Adventuress was feeling great, I was very relieved to receive a cup of water from Charlie Gauci (our camp neighbour) who had trekked out to Preston's to cheer riders on. Later in the ride, Charlie proved to be an even bigger help.

Going down the other side of Prestons is even more challenging than going up. As we were at the front, Emily was stopped by a fallen tree. She started to back her horse up and at that moment Adventuress nudged me in the back (which I had been trying to avoid all ride). I flew towards Captain who reacted with a swift kick. Ow. Three weeks later my leg was still yellow and blue.

At the bottom of Preston's I got ahead of Emily and Adventuress was now on her own, To my delight, she took off across the grassy common. Once again, we had the fastest time and great vet comments. But the sun was out and I was concerned that she was not clipped.

We tried, but she had as much energy as she had before she started. No clipping. I hoped for some clouds in that blue sky. I now had sticking plaster around my shin, my right ankle which was extremely sore, and both knees – which had been bleeding raw before I even started the ride. Fortunately this was all covered by riding gear and it stayed on until the end!

Kym Hagon had described Leg 2 on Wednesday as "cruisy". Walking up Derwent's Track in the heat I strongly disagreed. I got back on at the top and we did cruise for a while but then we were heading down Short Wellums, which was also not cruisy. I had ridden for a while with Chris and Modena Schofield, but they got ahead. Adventuress had to face serious rocks on her own.

Although she did well, on one rock she slipped badly and knocked herself, almost sending me flying in the process. She was not happy. I coaxed her down the rest of the track and once we were in the open, she flew and caught up with the Schofields. Once again, despite lacking Wind, we had the fastest time of the day and we had extended our lead. Once again, my little mare made the vets laugh with her bouncy, cheeky attitude – and complete lack of tiredness.

It was now just a matter of getting around. We trotted around Thursday morning's leg until Corey Nix caught up and then went off with him. But when we got into the serious rocks, the prelude to the Steps, Adventuress balked at a particularly difficult section. While we waited, Corey, Stuart Lymbery and Allan Mackinder passed us, leaving me alone with my horse.

It took a while but I finally persuaded her to follow me. Then we were at the Steps themselves, with plenty of people but no horse to follow. I asked for assistance so I could go behind Adventuress to stop her looking behind. It did not work. At the biggest step, she just stopped. She checked out the view in front and then heard horses coming behind. This was not good! The next time she moved, she turned around, and now she was in a dangerous position.

Charlie Gauci, Paul Roosen and Dean Walkom came to help, but Adventuress was not going to be bullied into anything. I cannot thank Charlie enough for his quiet persistence. After many minutes, Adventuress let him pull her near fore over the step and onto the ground below. That started her and Charlie just kept her moving. I was close to tears, but my baby was safe, thank god. Still on her own, she cantered back to base and once again vetted perfectly with a whinny to Hiraani.

There was a forecast of rain on Thursday afternoon but it was still hot. Adventuress was not thrilled to be going on her own so we hooked up with Julie White for a while, then caught Emily. Adventuress found Jack's Track easy and we cruised along the top before the long descent down Baker's. At the bottom we found other horses and then Adventuress took off. We caught Stuart Lymbery and thank goodness, Stuart took us across the road onto a wider verge as a noisy truck zoomed past. Across the river at Word of Life and Adventuress powered home again. Fastest time again and our lead was now almost unbeatable - but first, you have to get around.

By now we were feeling pretty good, as all of the mini marathon horses had completed really well. Apart from Ian's disappointment, it was happiness all around, which was only partly dampened by the rain which had finally set in. I was worried that most of the tread had worn off Adv's front boots (Renegade glue ons) but Talea and Ian both thought there was more risk in trying to remove and replace them, given the rain,

3am on Friday and Talea was up, urging me to go steady. I headed off with the pack in driving rain on and was happy to trot along as the tracks had become very slippery in places. When Corey Nix caught us at about 35 km we upped the pace. Down Johnny's Hill and it was a flat 12 km home.

The grassy Common and the road were both affected by the rain. After some bad slips, I held Adventuress back. It was very cold and she got a B for gut sounds as she had not drunk well. Disappointing but not devastating. I bought her a new rug from the Mobile GG Spot to keep her warm, joking that she would get nothing for fastest time but she deserved a new rug anyway.

With the rain unrelenting, Stuart Lymbery and others advised the committee that riding up the Steps as usual would be too dangerous. While Adventuress seemed to be fine going UP, I was very relieved by this decision as slippery boots on slippery mud on a cliff was a bad idea.

I arranged to ride the last leg with Rhys Norman and Mitch Ravallion, and we set off in the driving rain. We walked up most of Johnny's Hill, turned around and walked down again. Back on the flat, I held Adventuress to a trot again. Back in the village with the end in sight Adventuress slipped again, crossing her front legs, but stayed on her feet.

Mitch and Rhys vetted before me, both successful, hooray. Talea ran Adventuress for me and it was a replay of her trots all week - full of bounce with a whinny to Hiraani before the turnaround. There was absolutely no doubt that she was fit to continue and we had done it. Just under two hours quicker than the next horse (who had to trot twice). There was no doubt in my mind that she should be called up for best managed, as she was.

Thank you to Ian and to all those I rode with, thank you to Talea, Ian and Monica for strapping support. Thank you most of all to the Shahzada committee and vets for allowing me and the other entrants to attempt this crazy event. It is not just a ride, it is a mountain climb, with so many ways to make horses (and riders) lame or unwell. When you complete, it is a blast. Achieving fastest time on my home-bred, home-broken, home-trained and home-booted horse, knowing she was as good at the end as at the start, is an experience I will treasure forever.



