

My First Shahzada, 2019

Shahzada is deservedly the Holy Grail of endurance Riding. I had heard so much about it, the camaraderie, the bond with your horse, the beautiful scenery and the epitome of "to finish is to win".

While the event is run only 60 kilometers from our home I had never had (or made) the opportunity to enter, not even a mini marathon. So, 2019 was the year that it all happened for me.

I have a fantastic Arabesque horse, Abdul Arabesque (Zeus), a black Australian Stock Horse Arab cross. For me to even own this horse was a sad set of circumstances of which I am most definitely the beneficiary. Leslie Dowey-Maxwell, who bred him, was my wife's aunt and so the horse somehow has more or less stayed in the family and that makes him even more special.

He is a gelding, with a very inquiring nature and is very sure of himself. Even before we started him, he dominated his yard and it was always safer to feed him from outside the yard or have a bit of poly pipe handy to wave at him. Without doubt, a different horse person than me could have won Stock Horse Challenges with him or any other discipline they chose. He quickly learnt how to lift the loop off the round yard gate and let himself and his mate in, he learnt how to push the self-closing gate open and let himself out, but he never held it open for his mates to come out. Often Kristy and I would come home and blame each other for locking horses in the round yard until we saw Zeus do it.

Back to my Shahzada story. 2019 was the first year I was able to qualify Zeus as an Open Horse. He was old enough and I had made the time to work him up for this goal. We had done a few training rides previously and he had spent 3 summers in the mountains as a pack horse and riding horse, so he was pretty well legged up.

To enter Shahzada was the goal from about 18mths out. I had reduced my work commitments, Kristy was 100% in support and Zeus was sound, as you all know anything can happen.

The big week arrived! The experience started.

I had been using boots all season, so the first learning was glue on shells and how Sikaflex has an expiry date, who knew? Probably everyone except me. Then off to St Albans to set up camp and his yard for the week. I was near good friends in the tennis court reserve. It was like concrete as the council had used it as a machinery park and on top of that, the cane grass had been burnt and it was black. Again, the Shahzada family came to my aid giving me a roll of old shade cloth to put down to help keep clean.

Zeus seemed a little off colour, but this was Friday and there was plenty of time for him to bounce back. Maybe he knew the glue was old, maybe the other horses told him what he was up for and he was chucking a sickie, who knows? With help from everyone, particularly Jenny Carroll, he brightened up and was ready to go.

Day 1

Beautiful weather, great company, not a great fan of early starts and off we went. Up hills, along fire trails, back to the base, vet through, supposed to have a snooze but I was way too excited. Back out again, up a hill, along the top, back to base to vet. Whatever had been ailing Zeus came back a little and the vets were understandably concerned as it looked like he was sore in the back / somewhere. With Jenny Carroll working on him and a gear change we were ready for Day 2.

Day 2

Up a hill, along the top, looking down at the valley below, extraordinary trees and rock formations, soft fog rolling off the river ... it was beautiful. Had a quick snooze this time and back out. Vetted through and Zeus, with everyone's help, was improving ... WOW.

Day 3

I started to realise that this was harder than I expected. Riding around for 3 weeks with friends in the mountains, with no expectations of distance, the luxury of swapping horses and giving every horse a day off when needed, was no preparation for Shahzada.

The event was taking its toll and some great horses and riders were out. Some say it is better to finish early than get to Friday, but I cannot believe that for one second. Luckily for me everyone who was not as fortunate as me, stepped up to help strap. I had the best team on the field by far. Thanks to everyone. I was finding it easier to have a midday nap and harder to get up for the start.

Day 4

More borrowed gear to change the saddle fit on Zeus. We had a re-present and passed. Somehow Zeus rose to the occasion and even improved with the gear change. It got wet and cold. The St. Albans Common felt never ending. Jo Arblaster was sitting in the middle of it hoping for a smile from the remaining riders ... I doubt she got one.



Day 5

Still wet still cold, so bad the organisers felt it would be dangerous to take on the steps for a second time. (THANK YOU) I weighed in at 125 kg and blamed the scale for being wrong, only to be told everyone was carrying at least 10 kg of cold rainwater soaked into their clothes.

Final vetting. I knew I was worn and could "barely raise a trot" myself. Jenny arranged for someone else to trot Zeus out. A testament to him, he made it for me ... absolute ELATION. We had completed our first Shahzada. Zeus earned the Halifax Hayes Fit and Well Award and no horse deserved it more.

In summary, all the hills have dissolved into one, with the exceptions of *Prestons* where Charlie Gauci and company had climbed half way up to supply a cup of water and a jelly snake. *Care Flight* where Geraldine Stuart quipped she may have to call Care Flight to rescue me after a heart attack. *The Steps* where Charlie, Ian Dreghorn and others had climbed up again to offer moral support.

The montage of photos scrolling past on my screen saver inspires me to do it all again, if I ever have the opportunity.

Thank you to everyone involved in the organisation, the running, the catering, every rider who I rode with from time to time and every volunteer at the check points.

I have no recollection of what I ate for dinners, but I know I was well looked after by Faith Robinson.

Everyone helped me get through no matter how their Shahzada had gone.

That is what made my Shahzada. The two photos provided by Jenny Carrol and Jo Arblaster capture the relationship between horse and rider that Shahzada develops.

