



Carol Layton 1/2, with Omani Mr Sqiggle 1/1 descending The Steps

Photo by [Peter Jackson](#)

It is difficult for me to find the words to convey my sheer joy and amazement at successfully completing the 400km Shahzada endurance ride on my 6 year old Arabian gelding, Omani Mr Sqiggle (Sqig). Not only that, Duncan McLaughlin and I completed the ride barefoot and booted for the Easycare contest. Then, on top of those two achievements, both Duncan and I had our names read out for the 6 horses called up for 'Best conditioned/ managed horse award'.

Shahzada is based at St. Albans near Sydney, a pretty little historical town beside the McDonald River, unfortunately a dry sand bed this year in the ongoing drought. The course winds its way in 50 or 30km loops (called legs) through scenic sandstone hilly country combined with very hard road work. Many riders fear the road work most of all due to the hard concussive surface, topped by compacted road base to feel like hard bitumen. At least last year when I did the 130km trainer

on our little barefoot stallion, Leshal Ikon, there was a bit of sand on the edges to track along but not this year.

Three years ago in my first attempt at Shahzada, my horse had a 'bingle' with rocks up a narrow track called McKechnies on the Monday. I was in front, leading Ikon and he had been good at picking his way amongst the loose rubble and rock as we climbed steadily. However, the track went through a narrow chute created from a long boulder split in half. Half way through the chute, Ikon sped up in the narrow confines and instead of trampling me, his legs spread sideways and scored cuts and knocks from the rock. The very long climb on the Tuesday morning up a single track called Prestons followed by the steep descent was too much for Ikon and we vetted out for lameness.

Fortunately for us this year, the new Shahzada committee had worked very hard to make the tracks a lot safer. McKechnies was unrecognisable with the boulder chute completely destroyed. A sign on a tree points to where it used to be, now called Allan's rock, named after the huge effort by Allan Caslick to remove it. Yet McKechnies is still not to be underestimated, still very tiring with its steep gradient but far less scary for me.

Tuesday's climb up Prestons and then the short descent gave me the only fear of vetting out for the week. Sqig is generally a delight to lead along single track as he lowers his head quite low and checks out the track and thinks about where he puts his feet as he follows my feet. At about the steepest point of the descent, the track had two small sloping slabs of sandstone divided by a very narrow gullet of sand, sloping steeply down to a drop onto sand and then the next drop down around a tree with exposed tree roots. Sqig decided to head to the right side of the track onto a ledge that led nowhere. To make room for him, I had to go down the slabs and my head would have been level just below his knees. I pointed him in the direction of the right way to go and bloody hell, he leaped neatly onto the other side of the track, a rounded boulder. If you can picture a circus horse balanced on a stool, you might be able to begin to picture Sqig, all 15.1 and a bit of him trying to get a purchase with 3 of his booted feet on the rounded boulder and his right hind stuck right up under him trying to find a spot to put the foot. I was amazed that the boots had so much grip. The rider behind me told me afterwards that he was amazed that my horse didn't fall on me. I told Sqig in no uncertain terms to get off the rock and get down to me and managed to step out from under him as he came crashing down.

There was about 10km of road work to do at the end of this descent and thankfully he didn't feel lame at all. I still felt I needed a miracle to avoid vetting out. Fortunately, a very nice lady called Jean Koek who offered to take digital infrared body images (thermographs) of Sqig through the week found no issues on our return to base. A huge relief, what a blessing it was to have those thermographs. Thankyou Jean!

The rest of the ride was very enjoyable. Before one leg, Jean told me that there was more heat in one shoulder than the other and to try to massage it when I could. I followed her instructions as well as continuing to be meticulous with changing diagonals. After that leg, Jean said that the thermographs showed that there now was more heat in the other shoulder! I stopped worrying about the shoulder and enjoyed the riding and beautiful scenery.

The next scary section of the ride was on Thursday where we had to climb down a sandstone bluff called 'The Steps'. The Steps is a series of narrow, uneven sandstone ledges and loose rubble and again, a very narrow track. The best feature about The Steps apart from the view is that the scary section is very short. Sqig was fantastic as he seemed to understand how important it is for his own welfare to study the track and think about where to put his feet. I was very careful about ensuring that he didn't try any alternate routes. Being on the side of a bluff, there is simply nowhere else to go.

Friday meant that we had to go up The Steps but it was feeling like 'old hat' and we had no trouble at all. I cruised around the last leg thinking how each day had been a blessing past the Tuesday but now, on Friday I just wanted to get that Shahzada buckle.

Back at base, the Chief Steward had made himself a sign that read 'Howzat'. The crowd watching the horses vet through on the Friday is known as the peanut gallery. As each horse trots out under the gaze of all the vets, everyone yells and cheers as the horse trots out and claps when the horse is sound and the Howzat sign goes up. Lots of sympathy is offered to any rider whose horse vets out on the Friday afternoon. Their names are added to what is known as the 'Friday Club'. I did not want my name added to the list.

I didn't cry but I was very close to losing it, Sqig passed all the vet checks and was sound. The cheers went up, people clapped and we posed next to the Howzat sign.

Our success was due to the team work in camp. Robert Howden, my barefoot trimming other half strapped for me during the week. I'm very grateful to Rob as he would stay up late and massage Sqig's hamstrings while I slept blissfully ignorant of all the hard work going on outside. He was very careful putting the Easyboot Bares on Sqig before each leg and Sqig managed to get through the whole 400km without any rubs. How did we do this? I came up with the idea before the ride of using Sportstape, tape that I've used in the past for my feet to prevent blisters on bushwalks.

I got the widest Leuko Sportstape and Rob taped Sqig's pasterns, making sure that the edges of the gaiter were on the tape. In the past, we have been able to do 80km rides without any problems with gaiters. Sometimes a bit of hair would be rubbed back where the gaiter sits over the bulge of the suspensory ligament on each side of

the pasterns but not enough to cause concern. We figured 5 × 80km rides in a row without protection under the gaiters would be asking for trouble. The tape only moved once on one leg but it didn't cause a problem. We will certainly be using the tape again for future endurance rides. Rob was also very generous with applying Curash powder to the inside of the boots and gaiters. At the end of each leg of the ride, only sand in the toe area would be in the boot making the boot a nice fit.

I'll be back for the next Shahzada if all goes well. Thank you to all the people who worked so hard to make the week a terrific success. Commiserations to those who didn't get their buckle, I vetted out on my first attempt and very glad to make it on my second.