

Being an animal lover from England, with a history of horse riding in my youth, I was delighted to be asked along by John Howe, a work colleague, to see him set and his horse 'Ears' set off on one of his many endurance rides. I am 35 years old and a recently new resident to Mudgee. Being asked to attend a horse event in Australia was a great opportunity for me to experience and soak up the atmosphere of a sport I had been quite curious about, ever since I watched a documentary on the famous Shahzada.

The drive to Dunedoo from Mudgee was a close, leisurely 40 minutes away and the show ground was easy to find. I just had to look for all the parked horseboxes or 'horse floats' as the Australians call them. What a perfect spot Dunedoo show ground was to stay overnight with your horse and prepare for the long ride ahead. Plenty of space to park up and set out your own temporary horse paddock and just the right size to be able to chat and meet up with the other competitors. The atmosphere was relaxed and friendly and not at all snobby, like most horse events in the UK. I quickly became convinced that this is a sport I would like to take part in.



I felt particularly privileged about being able to stand alongside John while he carried out his vetting duties as Chief Steward. I could sense this could be a bit of a nerve racking moment, hoping that your horse would stand patiently through the necessary prods and checks, and having a thermometer stuck up its bum. It became clear that many of you and your horse companions are extremely used to this stage and as a consequence went through without any drama. It was at this point that I was struck by the professionalism and seriousness of the event. After all, you guys are riding 40 - 80km so it is a ride both horse and rider have to thoroughly prepare for to get through without injury. As someone who is constantly concerned about animal welfare it was reassuring to see such thorough checks and to know that the horses would be monitored again at the half way stage and at the finish.



After listening to the pre-ride talk I went with John to watch him saddle up his horse 'Ears'. I enthusiastically looked on at some of the horses being warmed up through a quick lunge. This also gave me a great opportunity to take some photos of these stunning animals being put through their paces. I could see that these were no ordinary horses and that they were possibly worth serious money.



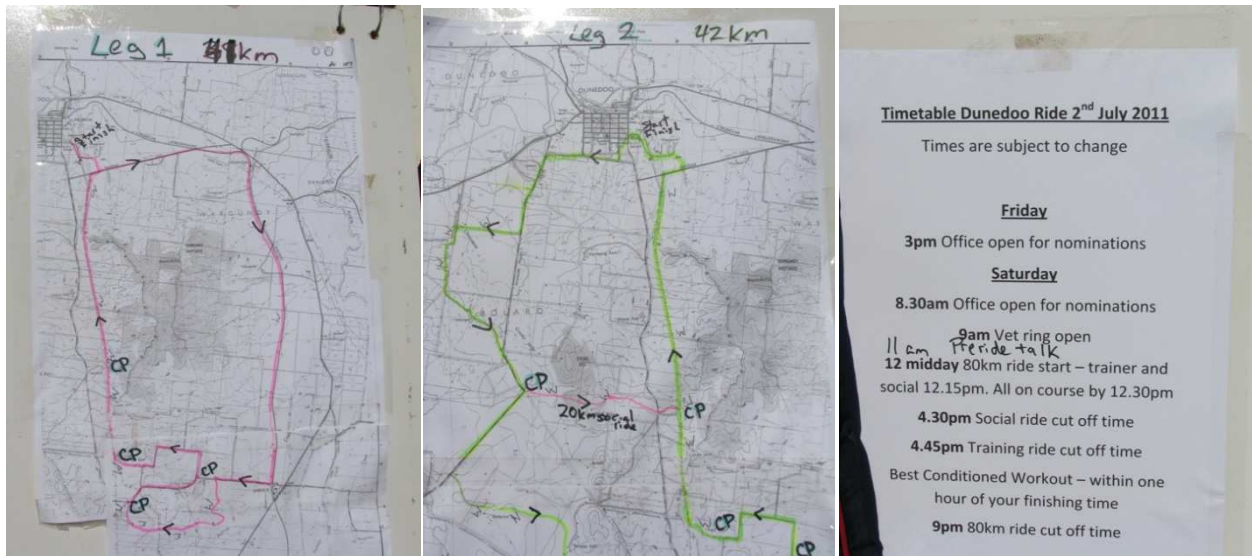
It was interesting to see that the majority of the horses were of pure Arab blood lines with the occasional Appaloosa in attendance. I guess I had the misconception that a welsh cob or stock horse would be the best for long distance riding. **But, John put me right through his explanation of a horse's _____**

When I was a youngster I had a part-Arab and part Welsh pony and I took part in a couple of sponsored rides which would stretch no more than 20 miles. I remember having to put in quite a bit of training to get myself and my pony fit. This is just a fraction of the distances you do and it gives me an appreciation of how much preparation and how fit you have to be to get through a whole 8 hours of riding in a single day.

It was closing in on 12 noon and 'Ears' kept whinnying. He seemed very keen to get saddled up and on his way. In fact, I noticed how all the horses were really excited and eager to get started. Even a rugged up horse in a nearby paddock was galloping up and down desperate to join the competitors. I felt sad that he had to stay behind and miss out on all the fun. I too would have loved to have been the one riding and competing, after all, what an amazing way to see the country, particularly when the sun is out and you get to navigate across stunning bush country that you would never see on foot or in a car. I waved goodbye to John and Ears and wished that I too was trotting off on a long, arduous, but no doubt exciting riding competition.



From an observer's perspective the whole event seemed so well organised, from the numbering system, the vet checks, the pre-ride talk right down to the signage of the ride rules and map of the course. The atmosphere was buzzing and the quality of the horses was impressive. If I wasn't currently pregnant I am certain I would be looking out to buy my own Arabian so I could join in on all the fun and excitement of endurance riding.



Thank you to John Howe for allowing me to get an insight into what to me is a specialized cultural horse event that is a fun, serious and professional sport. Hopefully in a couple of years I too will be able to join you and 'Ears' with my own loyal horse companion.

