

## **SHAHZADA – MY FIRST ATTEMPT**

### **And an ODE TO JOHNE HOWE and EARS**

They say, unless you are the lead dog in a husky sledge team, the scenery never changes! And that is how my first shahzada was to be, following the butt cheeks of John Howe and his magical horse Ears' arse! Mighty fine butt cheeks they are though, as I doubt I have met a fitter man pushing 60. They especially looked good in the bright blue, checkered, ladies, size 18, horseland jodphurs purchased on special!

I claim to be the luckiest rider at shahzada 2011 having paired up, almost by chance, with John Howe and his stead, Ears. A more wonderful man and beast to guide me and my best buddy Aladdin, I could not have wished for. I have no doubt it was the main reason I survived and succeeded my first Shahzada, the self proclaimed toughest endurance race in the world and a claim that is very correct in its making. I have taken part in some crazy and challenging things in my time such as mountain biking off road from Canada to Mexico for my honeymoon encountering bears and mountain lions, I was wedded on a remote snow capped mountain on my snowboard, travelled far and wide around the world, worked for A J Hackett bungy jumping crew and suffered many a jump, (I say suffered as I feel faint on the first step of a ladder – heights just make me dizzy), hangglided, parachuted, raced some of the toughest mountain bike stage races in the world, suffered the grief and loss of a partner and yet..... I believe Shahzada is the toughest thing I have ever done. Who knows what my little trooper Aladdin thought of it all. But amongst the pain and toughing it out attitude, I'm convinced he too shared moments of pure joy, fun and euphoria with Ears, John and I.

I nearly did not make it to Shahzada, a season that began well soon fell apart with Aladdin suffering an abscess and a neck issue that led me to withdraw from a ride only a month or so out from Shahzada. Then my husband suffered a back injury so severe it required surgery. The guilt was shocking as I left him only a few days out of hospital, but being an elite world champion mountain biker – he knew the effort and emotion and cost that had gone into planning and preparing for such an event as this and gave me his blessing to go. Thank you Mark!

Being a Pom (please don't hold it against me!) I have no family out here and therefore could not find some poor unsuspecting soul to come and wait on my horse and I from 3am to 9pm every day for a week as my strapper. Even disguising the chores of a strapper as a holiday in wonderful St Albans along with the enticement of dinner at my favourite pub in Australia couldn't persuade anyone to join me and so it was, I arrived at St Albans on Saturday morning totally on my own and strapperless!

I searched for Sue Todd, concerned, nervous and alone, as my planned riding buddy – Rachael Kuhns (a successful rider with her wonderful horse Nessie in 2010) had sadly needed to pull out this year. Sue Todd was upbeat and helpful and with a smile that showed the confidence of someone who knew, loved

and had succeeded at Shahzada many times before said 'Don't you worry, Shahzada is a family that will help you out, I suggest you go and introduce yourself to John Howe, he will help you out.

And so I did, and so he was. Thank you Sue Todd.

A funnier man you could not meet, we literally hooted and giggled our way around Shahzada and I know that the check point volunteers heard us coming way before they saw us. But, this is what made those goat tracks and challenging, boulder infested trails, some of which, no word of a lie, were literally like scrambling up and down waterfalls, seem more achievable. Sometimes the firetrails disappeared beneath our cantering horses' hooves with ease as we roared at each others' stories and jokes and one liners. Those single track trails appeared so secret and tucked away that it made you feel like you were the pioneer that had discovered them and yet I would have never known they existed or had the privilege of taking on their challenge without Shahzada and the wonderful committee team and volunteers that is Shahzada and the man behind it all – Halifax Hayes. And so to them, I thank you all.

There was something of the classroom about John, the smell of chalk on him when he got going. If John wasn't resounding his repertoire of jokes or hilarious running commentary piss takes of the Royal family – with amazingly accurate accents of Prince Charles and Camilla Bowles, he was educating Aladdin and I to the history and makings of the trails or the bush flowers that I would gaze in awe at. Quite how did the flora and fauna succeed in growing in such harsh and surprising conditions, such as the orchids hanging off sandstone rocks thriving on seemingly no sustenance at all. But that WAS Shahzada, it showed me everything Australian. Everything that I would, no doubt, not have been witness to if it wasn't for participating in such an amazing sport.

Being the educator that John was, added to the exquisite experience of Shahzada 2011 for me. I mentioned earlier a fitter man you could not meet – as we had vowed to get off and hike up EVERY single mountain track and down EVERY single track to rest our horses backs. This was always going to be part of my strategy to nurse my virgin Shahzada horse Aladdin around successfully and how lucky I was to meet a man that wished to do the same and help his horse in the same way. This is what I respected about John, he cared for his horse like no other – even on his seventh Shahzada he had no wish to flog his horse or attempt a win – helping his horse out every step of the way and getting around and enjoying the moment was priority. We were the perfect match and our horses were too. They were so well paced together. Even after the first leg together it was as if Aladdin had an invisible elastic band that pulled his nose back to assume his favourite position, nose tucked into Ears' off side flank. No matter my guiding Aladdin to avoid mud and rocks and off camber trails – his nose would always assume the position, safely tucked into his now best buddies rump. He too took his turn to tow Ears around at the moments Ears needed the inspiration to keep going the most. They helped each other through the ups and downs just like John and I did. They really were a great team.

At the top of the mountain climbs I was left gasping for air whilst I sat in awe of John's ability to walk AND talk the entire climb. How he did this I will never know. How apt his horse is called Ears. I will never fathom how that beautiful horse still has a pair of ears as John has the ability to talk the ears off any man or beast. But this is what I loved about John, his continual joy de vivre through his prose.

I didn't know it at the time but during the Shahzada experience John was fast becoming my best buddy and it was obvious the horses were already there. I cannot thank John and Ears enough for making my first Shahzada such a memorable one.

I found myself posing the questions at the Sunday pre-ride talk and feel the undertow of their logic with nerves abound 'Was I serious about doing this? Could Aladdin do this?

Could we successfully take on the toughest endurance ride in the world – or were we both just ordinary?

I think the answer was yes to both questions. We were proof ordinary people and ordinary horses can do extraordinary things with a cocktail of a bit of luck and a lot of love and a heap of hard work, passion and dedication. Loving a horse more than I love Aladdin I cannot imagine – he really is my besty.

Having achieved Shahzada on my own I realize that it is still a team that gets you and your horse through – thanks to Geoff Manning who massaged my Aladdin to success and Darrel the farrier who very importantly looked after his hooves – even though he snarled at the unconventional Cera plastic shoes. Thanks to Clare Flemming who helped me use the Cera shoes correctly – they are fabulous and the reason I believe Aladdin had no concussive lameness, even though we went through two sets during the week they were worth it.

One last thank you has to go to my neighbours and best friends Wendy and David Porter they are my endurance gurus and have willingly offered their help, support and knowledge since the day I wished to switch from eventing and start endurance riding but didn't know how.

Wendy and David ..... A little bit of this shiny, golden buckle is yours. Thank you.