

"So you are riding the Faraway Marathon this year?"

By Liz Terry

"It's only a few 40k rides."

"You'll be right, as long as you take it slow."

That's what they told me, but it was the longest 40 kms I have ever done in my life. As for going slow, well someone has to be the last completer over the line.

Louie, (Ausden Illusion) and I started our endurance partnership five years ago. From Christian Rebsdorf's Ausden Performance Arabians Stud Louie had been sold as a foundation stallion but was then picked up as a rescue horse, ably recuperated and started by Rachel Kuns before beginning to show his endurance attributes aged seven. Recently, I was told that I was a "conservative rider" which I took as a compliment. Louie and I have gradually accumulated plenty of steady 80km rides, a few elevator rides, 160k at State Championships, a mini marathon and a Quilty buckle. 2014 was the time to try a marathon, his being 12 years old and me being just over the half century.

I have had the good fortune over the last year to spend a little time with Ruth Dixon at rides and we had both encouraged each other to go for the marathon this year. Imagine my delight when Jim Green backed my float (yep – still hopeless at reversing in front of an audience) into camping position beside Ruth, next to Kim and Ken Moir and with the promise of Jackie Swan coming along soon. Ruth and Jackie, with their and my teams of supporters, were the main reason we were able to

complete. I have never underestimated the camaraderie and support of the wider endurance community but at this event it was exceptional. I could not believe the encouraging smiles and compliments on track that simply wearing a yellow marathon bib seemed to elicit. I was amazed by the generous offers of equipment, refreshments and painkillers (yes, everyone will want you to take the cocktail that works for them). As regards the Equivibe massage tool, thanks Leah and I don't know who was the more appreciative; Louie and his back muscles or me and my tight thigh muscles and neck.

At different stages out on track, we three riders hit a few challenges. On leg 3, my right ankle screamed at me not to bear weight which lopsided my balance. No way could I ask my horse to cope with this for another 190 kms. Had there been a checkpoint I would have called a taxi but fortunately Bob Sample, possibly with a little help from the gods, had placed them sparingly here. When I did find one, there was Bob himself, encouragingly saying it was only 3k down the track, turn right and then 10k common ground to Ride Base. Despite missing his riding companions and his being rather more in a hurry to get home than myself, Louie and I made an agreement then he would carry me sensibly into camp and then we would make our decision on whether to continue or not. There was not a chance of that. Having phoned ahead to tell my strappers that the horse was fine but I was crook and would be walking in late, they informed me that they had a treatment plan in place and were procuring ice right now. On arrival my horse was ably cared for, their

biggest challenge being that he really hadn't wanted to walk the last 25km when every other horse was allowed to trot or canter. Then they set about me with wonderfully relaxing Bowen Therapy (thanks, the gifted Wes Russell), strapping tape, splinting, cohesive bandaging, nourishing soup (I love my strapper, Michelle Beattie who has had a quick fire introduction to our sport and seems to have become addicted), and a 20 minute snooze with legs elevated. I was going to trial ride before going out again but Jackie and Ruth were adamant I was going out with them and that, if necessary, I could withdraw on track later. I even suspect they brought forward our

departure time so there was less chance for me to waver. What do you do in the face of such strong women? Go along with them. So out we went on the 4th leg and beyond.

On the 7th leg, Jackie sensed her horse was uneven and took the heart breaking decision to walk with the mare to a checkpoint and withdraw. I understand her love of that mare, wanting to do the best for her. Care now means success later. That is a true horsewoman for you.

Ruth's challenges were as she had predicted. She told me the sweet, gentle, obliging Romero would become more "feral" as he got fitter and fitter with each passing day. Instead of acting untamed, to me, who didn't have to sit on his back, it appeared he just got more and more enthusiastic about eating up the distance.

If you see Ruth, Jackie and I exchange knowing smiles at future rides; it is because we shared so much good humour in those forty or so hours on track and days in camp. We had a playlist, sung in moments of elation or desperation, admiring spectacular sunrises and mountain landscapes or tackling demanding technicalities on track. It included:-

"Things can only get better"

"I will survive"

"Ain't no mountain high enough"

"We are the champions" (hang on Ruth; we are only on the second leg).

By the third and fourth day, the kindness, cheeriness and resilience of all the marathon riders shone out. I will never forget Melissa Longhurst's wisdom to a group of eight or so of us, still out on the 6th leg, apparently a long way from base, as evening was beginning to fall. "Come on guys", she said, "we have to keep moving. We do not have to go fast but we have to move on". I am in awe of the juniors and their amazing stamina. I am appreciative of all the details attended to by ride organisers, volunteers, support crews, friends and family in order for us to take on these challenges. Thank you.

So if anyone asks me about the marathon, I will just shrug my shoulders and say, "It's only a few 40k rides. Why don't you try it for yourself? You'll be right, as long as you take it steadily."

Photo credits to Kevin Coppalatti

