

Aberdeenshire Sports Council

Ludlow 2009- Home International and Celtic Challenge- A Report.

My name is Katie Keith; I'm 31 and work as a French teacher at Aboyne Academy in Aberdeenshire. My horse, Jakhiri, is an 11 year old Arabian gelding, and we are a Gold Series Endurance combination. Aberdeenshire Sports Council recently supported me with a grant towards my attendance at the Endurance riding Home International where we went, as part of the Scottish team, to compete against riders from England, Ireland, Wales and Cornwall.

Endurance riding is not the best known of equestrian sports so I am often asked what it is and why I do it! Endurance riding involves racing up to 160km (100 miles) in one day across all kinds of terrain, and within veterinary parameters which mean that approximately every 20 miles the horse must pass a rigorous vetting before being allowed to continue. It is exciting, rewarding, gruelling and you build the most amazing partnership with your horse, especially if, like me you have trained and fittened him yourself over a number of years to be ready for the toughest of routes.

The Home International at Ludlow Race Course in July this year was certainly one of the toughest of routes! Jack and I had been selected to ride the 120km distance over two days. Our adventure started early on Wednesday morning when Jack, my friend Lisa and I set off on the long journey south from Stonehaven to Ludlow in Shropshire. 12 hours later, tired but excited we arrived on the racecourse where Jack was stabled and got him settled with the other team horses for the night.

Thursday was spent reconnoitring the route by car, preparing the map and the food and water supplies for horse and rider. Each combination is supported by a 'crew' who meet them at strategic points to feed and water and cool down horse and rider. So the crew car was packed that night, we attended a team briefing with our Chef d' Équipe, Vet and Physiotherapist, and the horses were vetted that night by our team vet to help the Chef with final selection.

On Friday the tension was beginning to mount, there were nation's flags flying all over the stables and the campsites and more and more people arrived at the racecourse as the day went on. In the afternoon it was the teams' official vetting. Here the vets decide if your horse is fit to start-potential heartbreak if you have travelled all that way and are eliminated

at that stage. Two riders were entered for the top distance of 160km, Grampian's Lorna Hogg and Border's Francis Bakker. Just before the vetting, team Chef Evelyn told me that Francis' horse is lame, and that Jack and I must step up to the 160km slot. I was overcome with pride and excitement, but also great responsibility and nerves.

The Scottish team prides itself on our great team spirit and our turnout, so we present our horses beautifully for the vetting, with tartan ribbon in their manes and tails, saltires' on their rugs and I even donned a mini-kilt to present Jack to the vet! He passed, and the other team horses did too, and after a final Team meeting, it was time to rest and gather strength for the next day. As I hugged Jack good night I told him I knew he could do it and I believed in him 100%.

The start of the 80km and 160km ride was en masse on the race course. The horses were fired up; we fought to keep them steady as they had a long way to go! Fast, reckless riding risks injury and elimination, but there are time constraints too, so it is a fine balance. It had rained and rained all day Friday, and it soon became evident that the going would be extremely tough. The soil was clay and the horses struggled for footing, especially on treacherous down hills. Lorna and I were tense, concerned that Jack or Marco might injure themselves. We progressed slowly but surely, making good time into the first Vet gate after 25 miles. The team vet and my crew took over, cooling and preparing Jack to vet. Once his heart rate dropped below 64 beats per minute he was taken up to the official vet. There were tense moments as I watched them present him, but he passed with flying colours.

On the next leg, the rain started and the going deteriorated further. We had to reduce our speed and were beginning to worry about time, as well as the possibility of a fall or an injury. We kept each other positive and the horses were amazing, trooping on the final vet gate, only 7km from the end. This time, Jack vetted well, but with a 'B' for gait, meaning that the vet had seen some slight irregularity with his stride. My heart sank but I tried to hide my feelings as I saddled him up for the last few miles. He was going beautifully, eating up the miles, still feeling fresh and excited. He floated into the finished to cheers and a sea of blue and Saltires waving on the race course. It was very emotional.

Met by my crew at the finish, we worked hard to prepare him to vet. His heart rate fell quickly and I passed him to Diane to take to the vetting. I

felt it was better not to go and pass my anxiety through to him as it might affect his heart rate. I sat with Lisa and waited- sick with nerves and apprehension. It seemed to take forever. Finally, Diane rounded the corner leading my beautiful boy; her face was inscrutable from a distance. As she approached me she shook her head, saying 'Sorry, he's lame'. He had failed the vetting.

I put my arms around his neck and let the tears come. He had tried so hard for me, carried me 50 miles on the toughest of going, and today was not to be our day. I felt I had let the team down, despite what everyone said. It is the nature of our sport, if it was easy they wouldn't call it Endurance! I needed a little while alone to gather myself and throw myself back into supporting the rest of the team as they vetted their horses. Cheers and happy tears this time as Lorna and Marco passed their vetting, and all the other team members succeeded in their classes. 2009 would see Scotland take Silver in the Home International and Celtic Challenge, and what an experience being part of it!

For Jack and I, the story is far from over. After a few months rest, his injury is healed and he is coming back into training. Ludlow showed us that we can aim for 160km, which before I hadn't dared to consider. We have new goals to aim for now and 2010 season will see us stronger, more ambitious and with more self belief than before, thanks to this wonderful experience.