



Two years ago, October 7 was an unseasonably warm, sunny day on the Quantock Hills. The small parish of Over Stowey was a hive of activity, with dozens of runners, horses and riders, volunteers and spectators all buzzing with anticipation. They were gathered for the start of the first Man vs Horse race to run on English soil, a 23-mile endurance challenge across some of Somerset's most unforgiving terrain.

The runners would be given a 15-minute head start, and the course was designed so that some sections favoured runners over horses. A betting person would still have put their money on the horses though. The race runs every year in Wales, and over its 40-year history only four runners have been victorious. Every other year a horse and rider have won.

Amongst the competitors were rider Glenda Smith on her Arab horse, Boysey, and Robin Fieldhouse, a runner from Bristol. 'I grew up on Exmoor, and have spent many weekends orienteering, trail running and mountain biking all over the Quantocks,' says Robin. 'I loved the idea of racing here against a horse.' Glenda wasn't as familiar with the terrain but couldn't resist the unique challenge: 'I'd not ridden on the Quantocks before, but I had walked there and knew it a little bit. When I saw the advert, I just thought, that looks exciting, let's go!'

Undertaking a race of this nature isn't for the underprepared. Glenda had been doing equestrian endurance since about 2008, alongside working as a nurse and

farmer on Bodmin. Boysey, who's actually her daughter's horse, was an experienced endurance contender, having completed numerous 50-mile races. Robin, too, had multiple running events under his belt and was already preparing for a two-day orienteering competition when he decided to enter Man vs Horse England. He was training three or four times a week, including two runs of 15km. But, as the runners and riders gathered at the start, the time for training was over. What unfolded over the next few hours would decide the winner.

'At the start, I was just telling myself to pace myself, as there was a big hill immediately coming up and a long way to go,' remembers Robin. Fifteen minutes later, and Glenda was on her way too, and feeling competitive. 'All the horses and riders had to go across this field and through a gate and I just thought, I'm going to go for it and get through the gate quickly. I wasn't the fastest to get going but Boysey gained momentum and we made it to the gate first.'

'Then we were into the woods, and I just carried on cantering. We went up a steep hill and then down a slippery, wet earth track where I had to go more slowly, and we were overtaken. At the bottom we sped up again, and soon made it back to the front. At that point we also started overtaking the runners.'

Animal welfare was, of course, paramount so the course included a mandatory horse check at the halfway point. Here, Boysey was untacked, offered water to drink and checked by a vet. It was such a hot day the horses were also sponged off with cool water. >

above: The runners are given a 15-minute head start, and the course is designed so that some sections favour runners over horses. Photo: Clare Luhr

right: As Robin and Glenda and Boysey crossed the finish line, it was a result that no one could have predicted.

Photo: Jan Dolphin

