



MAN vs HORSE

This October runners will compete against horses and riders in an epic endurance race across Somerset's Quantock Hills. **CATHERINE WELTON** chases down the race's previous winners to ask about their nail-biting finish

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 Lühr

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

Photo: Jan Dolphin



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With the horses having a break, the runners were able to overtake again, including Robin who at this stage had no idea he was, in fact, in the overall lead. 'By halfway I was feeling good, the horses had to rest halfway, and I was just running my own race and enjoying the views across the Quantocks.'

Meanwhile Glenda and Boysey were now out of the vet check, still the first horse and rider, and gaining ground on the runners. 'I thought, I wonder if I can get past all the runners, but I didn't know if I would. I reached another water station, and they told me there were just a few runners in front of me. Then I came to a huge hill and at that point, I guessed there was just one runner in front of me. That was when I met Robin.'

That hill was Dowsborough, later described by some runners as 'brutal', coming as it did so near the end of the course. The steep incline meant Robin inevitably lost his advantage. 'I was running with the lead horse, but they beat me to the top of Dowsborough Hill Fort,' he remembers.

The course drew them back down into the welcome cool of the woods.

Here the tracks were too stony for Boysey to keep up his pace and the tables turned yet again. 'Robin came down behind me and asked if he could pass, and I said yes, so he went by,' says Glenda. But a final stretch of flat road evened things up: 'It was a better surface for Boysey and I, so we were able to speed up, Robin was sprinting along the road, and we were beside each other, the faster Boysey went, the faster Robin went, it was like something in a film.'

The final stretch of the race took them through a gate and across a field. With the finish line in sight, Robin recalls there was little between them: 'It felt pretty magical running neck and neck with a horse. I wasn't aware I was the first runner, but I wanted to do my best, so was just trying to keep up with the horse.'

Spectators spotted the approaching contenders and started cheering and clapping. As Robin and Glenda and Boysey crossed the finish line, it was a result that no one could have predicted.

'I was so surprised that I had managed to tie with a horse over a 23-mile race in such tricky conditions,' says Robin.

For Glenda, there was a nail-biting wait while Boysey passed his final vet check, before the historic tie between man and horse was officially announced. 'You don't take it in that quickly, I just thought I've finished. I was exhausted but Boysy was fine, he'd have gone on!'

Both Glenda and Robin will return on October 18 this year, to contend the title again. 'It is a challenge,' says Robin. 'But the scenery is magnificent and running with the horses just adds that extra element to it.'

'It's about preparation and fitness,' says Glenda. 'You've got to believe you can win, but it depends how it all falls together on the day, I think it's anybody's race.'

Further information about this year's race, including the best places to watch the action, is available on the event's Facebook group page: facebook.com/groups/1038387157588816

PHOTOS: NEIL ROOPER



