



LAND *without* FENCES

RÓISÍN MAGEE meets the two New Zealand women who conquered the 2019 Mongol Derby

I have no doubt that it is only a matter of time before a Kiwi wins the Mongol Derby. Physically gruelling, this 1000km test of horsemanship, navigation and general attitude almost feels like it was designed for the sort of riders that New Zealand seems to produce in droves.

Derbyists must ride for 90-120 kilometres a day for seven to 10 days, pausing only to vet and change horses, fill water bottles and grab a quick bite to eat. From farm kids to station hands, jockeys who came up through pony club; it seems that you're more likely to find people whose idea of fun is galloping through all weathers and across all terrain in New Zealand than almost anywhere else.

Mongolians are excellent horsemen

and women, but their horses won't do a rider any favours and this is not an event for anyone with a nervous disposition. If you can stay on, you'll have the time of your life, but if you can't, well... of the 44 riders who turned up to race this year, a punctured lung, a broken collarbone and food poisoning picked up in pre-race training stopped three from riding over the start line, and another 14 were claimed en route to the finish.

Several New Zealanders have ridden the race in considerable style since it began in 2009, Chloe Phillips-Harris, Eion Kemp, Charlotte Howard, Ben Wilks and Maxim van Lierde to name a few, but despite having earned a fearsome reputation as excellent riders with a can-do attitude, no Kiwi has yet won. There have been four Australian

winners, four South African winners, three Americans, Brits, Canadians and a lone Mongolian but... no Kiwis.

In late July, with that fact very much in mind, I caught up with Elise Stables, a 19-year-old show jumper and track rider from the Waikato, on her way to the Derby.

Appropriately enough, it was a bit of a scramble to get hold of Elise before she got on the plane, but when I managed I had to laugh – what a classic Kiwi Derbyist. She didn't have any particular reason for signing up to the race other than killing time before she started training to be a helicopter pilot, but there was one thing she was absolutely clear on. She wanted to win.

Elise had some navigational training from school, and was confident about her ability to find her way in the



OPPOSITE PAGE And they're off – riders at the start of the 2019 Derby
 TOP A Mongolian host making milk tea for the Derbyists. TOP RIGHT Justine battles through the rain. ABOVE It's hard to put the vastness into words; Elise at sunrise
 LEFT Mongolian dress has changed little since the days of the Empire
 RIGHT Elise refuels with porridge at one of the official race stations



wilderness. She had spoken to some former Derbyists, and had ideas about how to select horses from the line, even if some were a little unusual (for example, who knows what a horse with “bird eyes” looks like, or why it’s an undesirable trait!). She had been in touch with fellow Kiwi entrant, Australia-based Justine Hales, and they planned to ride together; they knew enough past competitors between them to know what they were letting themselves in for, and they felt prepared for the hardship. Justine was at that time working for Ciaron Maher Racing, the stable that produced last year’s joint winners, Adrian Corboy and Annabel Neasham.

Neither Elise nor Justine was interested in stardom, and both turned down the opportunity to feature in television coverage of the race. They were heading to Mongolia to do a job, and so planned a race strategy of eating breakfast, skipping lunch, and camping out.

This last isn’t a throwaway comment. In past years, being prepared to camp out is a requirement for a top-10 finish. The race runs each day from 6am to 8pm, with penalties for anyone who rides outside these hours. However, riders can choose where to spend the nights. Most opt to stay at the official race stations, with the guarantee of a hot meal, a fresh horse in the morning and

sleeping space in a warm ger (the larch-framed felt tents nomadic families live in year-round). But anyone who wants to win needs to ride every second that is allowed, and either sleeps out on the steppe, or with the closest family they can find to take them in.

“You take the risk of your horse disappearing, and be prepared for freezing cold downpours.”

Sleeping out on the steppe is another level. You have to hobble your horse, take the risk of the horse disappearing overnight (hobbled, or not!) and be prepared for the freezing cold and downpours, even in midsummer. This year, two British jockeys had to be rescued from their camp one night at 3am, freezing cold and soaked to the bone and, worse, Australian Jesse Byrne had to give up a good chance of winning the race when he woke up on day six of racing to find that his horse had disappeared in the night.

Suitably impressed, I waited for the riders and horses to assemble on the start line, not far from the capital of Ulaanbaatar. The race began this year under stormy skies with the usual international assortment of professional riders, amateurs from a range of disciplines and one or two dreamers with very little experience with horses. I discovered that Justine was only four-and-a-half weeks out from an operation to remove her gall bladder, and was riding against medical advice. Talking to her after the race, she was blasé and chatted breezily about how fit she was before the operation and how little it had affected her, but imagine her with a still-tender scar on a strange, tense horse, looking out over the empty steppe and waiting for the start gun to fire. “It’s hard to put it into words, the vastness,” Justine says.

The conditions make everything harder. Soaking jodhpurs soften the riders’ skin, constant friction rubs them raw and the heat that returned with a vengeance on day four aggravated the chafing with salt from the riders’ sweat. By the second day, Elise had chafing from the top to the bottom of both thighs and Justine rode for six hours with her boots full of water. For both, this was the low point of their race. As the rain came down in sheets, Justine thought to herself: “If it keeps raining, I don’t know if I’ll finish.”



FROM ABOVE Elise (left) and Justine rode together for much of the race. Hospitality is an important part of life on the steppe, and most Mongolians live in traditional ger (felt tents). Catching the tough, semi-wild horses is a job for the skilful. The horses are vetted carefully throughout the Derby



The team formed with such good intentions had seemingly come unstuck, with Elise slightly delayed by a two-hour vet penalty and Justine pushing on at the front of the race. Vet penalties are part of the event organisers' framework to guarantee horse welfare.

Both women were pragmatic about the imposed separation. "It's very

difficult to ride with someone," Elise explains. "You can't expect someone to sit out your penalty with you."

With grim determination, they got on with the job. At the end of day three, Elise had ridden herself back into contention and the Kiwis were in the lead. They drank Jäger with the other leaders, rubbed flamazine into their weeping chafes and watched the sun set across the river. Spurred on by the high, Justine was still in the lead at the end of day four, with Elise not far behind. Then on day five, with no warning, Justine surrendered her lead and would never see the front of the race again. Why? Her horse felt footsore, and worried about its soundness she hopped off, fashioned a poultice from a make-up pad and some duct tape, and gave up any hope of winning the 2019 Mongol Derby. Three days later, Justine finished in joint third

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place, Elise in tenth.

"If you really want to win," Justine says, "you have to be prepared to do what Bob [Robert Long, the all-round nice guy and eventual winner] did; ride out at the front on your own, navigating perfectly and totally focused on the finish line.

"The Derby is a race, but really it's an adventure."

Elise admits, laughing, that she still doesn't know how to pick a fast horse, and struggles to find words to describe what riding 1000km feels like. "But I fell in love with the Mongolian people and their culture."

The term once-in-a-lifetime is often bandied about, and in Elise and Justine's case, it's true. They won't be entering the Derby a second time. "It was more of a win to ride with the company we had," Justine says. "It wouldn't be the same if we did it again."

Like so many who came to Mongolia with dreams of finish-line glory, two Kiwi women found that the Mongol Derby really isn't about who does it first, it's about who does it right, and this year, Elise Stables and Justine Hales gave it a bloody good shot. ■

IMAGES: SARAH FAIRNS/WORTHMONGOL DERBY

8 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE YOU ENTER THE MONGOL DERBY

- Age is irrelevant. The 2019 Mongol Derby was won by 70-year-old Bob Long from the USA; the 2013 Mongol Derby was won by 19-year-old Lara Prior-Palmer from the UK.
- It doesn't matter where you're from or what you do for a living; former competitors have ranged from tech geeks to businesswomen to former jockeys, and hail from all over.
- You do need to be able to ride. You won't have to jump a five-barred gate or do a canter pirouette, but you must be able to cope with seriously long days in the saddle – it is a 1000km race, after all – across very challenging terrain (the Mongolian steppe bears no relation to a riding school arena) at speed. For those reasons, you need to be fit, light and balanced.
- What you wear needs serious consideration. You need to be as light as possible and as comfortable as you can be (that's kind of a joke, you won't be comfortable). The weather will be crazy; it can and does switch from torrential rain to sharp frosts to blazing sun. It's nearly never the weather you'd choose to ride in. Most Mongol Derby riders opt for pretty hi-tech stuff – but then there's Texan Frank Winters, who has just completed the 2019 race in fine style wearing his Wranglers.
- Fussy eaters need not apply. This is

the Mongolian steppe. There will be goat, and you'll like it. There will also be mares' milk.

• If you rely on GPS to get you to the supermarket, the Mongol Derby isn't for you. Navigational skills are crucial. You need to be able to read a map and read the terrain around you. It's hard, especially when you're exhausted and all your brain can think about is your bed back home.

• You need proper resilience. The semi-wild, fabulously tough and highly independent Mongolian horses will make a total fool of you – probably every day. They will buck you off, and they may well disappear, with your kit on board, into the blue yonder. But get them on your side and going and they will do what they have been bred to do for hundreds of years – carry you, at speed, quite brilliantly across this most incredible, most beautiful country.

• The Mongolians know more about horses than you will ever do. Their culture is utterly symbiotic with the horse; they are horsemen of genius and you will absolutely need their help and advice.

• If you love horses, love wilderness, want to test yourself to the limit, physically and mentally, you can find out more about the 2020 Mongol Derby at www.theadventurists.com/adventures/mongol-derby/#3

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