

My Derby by Richard Killoran

Mongol Derby 2012

Monday 6th

Checking in at Heathrow's Terminal 5, just after about 9am. The queue is full of Russian athletes heading home after their Olympics. 4 years of their hard work put to the test in the matter of minutes or for some, seconds. We have our own goal which we are about to embark on, it wasn't 4 years of preparing for it though I doubt even 4 weeks! The idea was hatched in the cold wintery months, when I got a notion (I get a lot!).

After watching a friend of mine, Guy Disney whose leg was blown off in Afghanistan, was going to the North Pole with fellow injured soldiers. Walking With The Wounded aired on BBC and inspired me. Why don't I do something challenging, I asked myself? I knew Richard Dunwoody had gone to the South Pole and he had done some pretty wacky stuff, so I googled him. Racing, South Pole, 1000 mile consecutive walk in Newmarket, Strictly Come Dancing, Mongol Derby... It caught my attention, so after googling and YouTube's of the Mongol Derby I was sold. So I rang Richard, asked him a few questions, I think the last question I asked him was "Do you think I'm mad?" To which he replied "No, not at all!" But then again I was asking probably the maddest person I've ever spoken to!

Right, I was in but there was no way I was going on my own. After a long scan through my contacts in my phone I choose one. He's as nuts as me but in a different way, I've been to Vegas with him for a week and we got on great. He will tell me straight up whether he's in or he's not. I can't stand "Yes Men" After a long chat on the phone of me selling and setting the picturesque scene, he's revved, and I know he's in. Forgetting the fact that not even 2 months ago he lay on the good to firm ground of Ludlow's turf with a broken back, lucky not to be paralysed it was that severe. He confirms it, he's In. Richard Killoran & Donie Fahy are going for the Derby.

Arriving at the desk with passports in our hands, I'm looking at the itinerary, praying I haven't cocked up the dates or something since it was me who booked the flights. Thankfully bags go through and tickets in hand. We turn and look at each other. "We're going to f***ing Mongolia" replies Donie, it's just dawned on him that this is actually real. I give a sheepish nod, replying "There's no turning back now!"

Tuesday 7th

12 hours of travelling later we arrive in Ulaanbaatar via Moscow. Decide to change some money now, so we can pay for the taxi and whatever needs to be paid for. Just seen how much we get, over 2,000 tugs for one sterling pound coin. This is going to be annoying; at least we won't be needing money during the race.

Upon leaving the airport in the taxi, which can only be described as a local chancer driving a banger down this long pot holed road, to Ulaanbaatar. Twenty thousand tugs less later we arrive at

our destination, The Ramada Hotel, it's a 4 star, and we will have a comfy night's sleep before the sleeping bags are rolled out!

The weather, which I assumed would be rather warm, was quite the contrary. Dark clouds above, I thought it was threatening to rain. It was only 7am local time so maybe I was being a bit harsh, but I was rather tired after the flight. I decided not to go to sleep the night before till 4am so I could sleep on the plane so I would wake up as fresh as a daisy and the 7 hours ahead wouldn't affect my sleeping pattern. It didn't work; I barely got two hours sleep on the plane of the twelve hours we had travelled. So now I was bolloxed and its seven am, and our lectures begin in three hours, luckily in the same hotel.

10am, after power nap and much needed shower. We get the elevator down to the function room, bumping into the camera crew of Ivo's, who are making the Derby into a documentary. Very friendly. Walking into the function room, everyone is here. I got the same feeling as I did walking into my first day of secondary school, not knowing anyone. At least I'm not as shy as I was then and besides I've got Donie to my side. Scanning the room for Dunwoody for another friendly face, but I can't spot him yet. We sit nearer the back than the front, as those were the few seats left. I thought it was the other way round in school?

I start eyeing up everyone in the room, seeing what first impression I can make of them, who look friendly, nervous, quiet, excited and who looked like our biggest danger. Because after all we didn't make the 5,000 mile plus journey to have a little trek round, we were in it to win it. A few fillies caught my eye, but then I said to myself, can you imagine what they may smell like after no washing or showering for 8 days plus!?

Katy starts off the lecture, welcoming all of us and giving us the overview of the rules and protocols along with Maggie of the Derby. We get distributed our On the Steppe Packs and Vet cards. Then the weigh in, we had to be under 85kgs (over 13 stone) in our riding gear. I wouldn't have to use my light gear for this one! Followed by a course briefing, going through each 40km leg individually and looking at the Google Earth Images. I turn to Donie, "This is easy, why did we bother forking out all that money which equates to over half a million tugs for our GPS's!?" I naively chirped.



After going through how our SPOT trackers work, and how to use them and possible penalties for using them. Which will let all the people back home be able to follow us live on the internet on our whereabouts in the race we are but more importantly for the crew to know our exact location if some sort of an emergency were to

Back to school...

arise.

Lunch time, thank God I thought. I was starting to nod off again through the lack of sleep and it had been a long time since I sat in a classroom environment. Besides I was starving, hated the crap I was served on the AeroFlot flight over and was looking forward to what this 4 star had to offer!

After lunch, back to class or so it seemed. A quick briefing from our Scottish vet Harry, "Och aye the noo" and chief medic Australian Andy. Both seemed grand and looked like having a bit of craic also. I didn't want to have to spend much time with both of them, during the race that is!

Lectures done, £400 pounds of a deposit handed over. In case we broke or killed one of their horses, lost tack etc. I hoped to see those notes with the Queen on again.

So the bit of free time we had before we all met for an Indian somewhere downtown in UB, we spent up and down of the State Department Store. Looking for gear that we hadn't brought, mainly the saddlebag, the crew were shocked that we had not one even between us! Never came across anything useful apart from a Mongolian Hat I bought, typical me.

Dinner time, we gather outside the hotel to grab a taxi. Willie, Sam, Jess (Volcano), Donie and I squeeze into the taxi. We head off on route for the Indian, traffic is a nightmare and we are getting nowhere quickly. This Jess one is going on and on about some crap, if I said anything she'd know either everything about it or change to something she wanted to talk about. After a while someone tells the taxi man that we are going the wrong way and we should be going a different direction. We arrive at the new coordinates and it's a dead end. Nothing. After an hour of driving aimlessly around the capital we decide to abandon ship and walk back. I was wondering if the next few race days would be as hard to find the horse stations as it was a poxy little Indian in UB with the help of a local Mongolian.

Thank God that Volcano one decided to walk to the restaurant on her own navigational skills, the same ones that made the taxi change course. We whipped round for some chicken skewers on the top floor bar of our hotel. I told the lads if she tags along with me in the race, I think I'll lose the plot!

Wednesday 8th

Just after 9am and we saunter down to the outside of The Adventurists HQ to meet our bus that's taking us to start camp. We're late but so is everyone. It's a scorcher of a day. Can't believe I forgot to bring sun cream, I'll have to rely on Donie's bottle of factor 50. We all hop on the bus; it's crammed with all our gear that didn't all fit in the luggage compartments. Again little seats are left and we end up on the penultimate seats down the back. To my horror, f***ing Volcano is sitting behind us and she's already rabbiting on about some muck. Poor Cossie got landed next to her. We set off on the 4 hour bus journey and I already can't wait to get off, I asked if anyone had chloroform to shut her up. I end up moving seats after about 2 hours, it was bliss.

We arrived at the Start Camp, sometime in the afternoon. I've never ever seen a bus go down cross country, on little or no dirt roads like this one did before. Gear moved from the bus to the Gers (A Ger or a Urtuu is like a Mongolian hut/tent that the nomads live in and can move easily) provided for us, Cossie, Donie and I end up in the biggest one. With 7 of the women and us 3 stuck right in the

middle. My bed was right by Lucy's, I was happy with that! But I was even happier to notice that Volcano was nowhere to be seen, or more like heard!



The famous bus journey to the Training Camp and Starting Line. Volcano is dosing poor Cossie in the corner. Erin and Erik look disinterested. Donie & I are hidden. With Maggie on the left and Harry the Scottish Vet in the foreground.

After a spot of lunch, it's time for our first taste of a ride on a Mongolian horse, I'm a little nervous. Everyone keeps going on about the "Irish Jockeys" and that we are favourites to win this, I was thinking I better not fall off on this little test ride and make an idiot of myself! Donie, Jess (Not Volcano!), Lucy and I group together and we head off on the ride. We've gone about twenty minutes and mine is hopping lame, so we head back. I only trotted and did a little hack and its hopping. If this is the sign to come with the rest of them, it's going to be a long race with plenty of penalties.

Dinner time, followed by beer. Then Dunwoody whips out the bottle of Chinggis Vodka, firing it down the hatch neat. It wasn't going to be quiet night in the ger with the seven women that was for sure.

In the wee hours of the morning I stumble back to the Ger, in the pitch black, the only thing lighting my path back is the stars that shine brightly. I had noticed earlier (pre vodkas) that I had never seen the night sky like this before, it was remarkably beautiful. Now fully loaded it was all just a blur!

Thursday 9th

We wake up. Cossie, Donie and I are the only ones left in the ger, all the girls are gone for breakfast. Wonder will they bring us breakfast in bed?! They didn't, and I'd missed breakfast too.

Another training day and it's hot, high twenties I guess. A 12k ride, using the GPS for the first time. It was pretty easy finding the coordinates and returning back to base.



Training Day

It was nice to get back sitting outside the ger in the ever increasing circle, drinking beers and just relaxing. It wasn't going to be like this for the next week or so. It hadn't dawned upon me yet that the race was tomorrow. I was still in party mode; I could worry about the race tomorrow. Think I was more worried about, was it my round! We were all mixing really well and the camaraderie in the group was definitely building even though we had only really met a couple of days ago. The common denominator between us was being, we all must be a little bit nuts. To ride 1000 km across the Mongolian Steppe, I think you got to be a sandwich short of a picnic. That's what made the group from across the globe mix so well.

That evening we were given the chance to watch a traditional Mongolian race. It was a race over 10km, ridden by local Mongolian children. All who were under the age of 13. All looking natural riders with a great seat, it's a good job as most hadn't any saddles! After the race they pulled out some mare's milk for the winner. Then it was passed around our camp to try a sip, if you had told me it was mares piss, I would have believed you! Never again.

The final supper went down a treat; I hoped all Mongolian feeds along the way would match this. I remember Donie saying to me on the way to dinner, "Think we'll just have a quiet night tonight, so we can prepare for tomorrow." I agreed, thinking that would be the sensible option.

After dinner we all headed outside for a performance put on for us. Mongolian musicians with acrobats and very flexible dancers were put on show. It was very entertaining. Night fell quickly and the locals had built themselves a little bonfire, a few of us decided to go down for a look, the sensible plan was being dismissed fairly rapidly! They were drinking mare's milk. Although I was sensible to know that I wasn't trying this again, no matter how many vodkas I had inside me! More

and more flocked to the fire and with that the drunker Charlotte (a crazy Cornish girl, who was later dubbed Bridget Jones!) was getting. She was sitting and drinking the mare's milk with the locals, she was bonkers! Two South Africans, Simon and Craig were on flying form as was everyone else who had decided not to sleep. Mattias the eccentric Swede was there, who was taken the race so seriously (not that we weren't, but no point in getting carried away in the training days) had earlier told one of the guys that he wasn't getting drunk. Upon hearing this, Craig, kept handing out us a shot of vodkas that we were to give to Mattias and make it that he wasn't allowed to refuse. Everyone was in on it, and drunk he got. He even ended up wrestling one of the locals, he lost. Leaving the party, unknown of what time it was. The parties were finished and uncharted territory lay ahead for us, the 34 riders from twelve nations: England, South Africa, Sweden, Netherlands, Germany, Austria, New Zealand, Canada, United Arab Emirates, Australia, United States of America and of course Ireland would line up at the starting line of The Mongol Derby '12 tomorrow, Race Day.



Riders and Crew before Race Day, when we were all sill clean!

Friday 10th - Race Day 1

Day One of the race, again I wake up and it's only Cossie, Donie and I left in the ger. Cossie got up and arrived back with toasties for us, breakfast in bed! All the girls were coming back in to get their saddle bags and backpacks ready for the race. 5 kilos was all that we were allowed to carry so choosing carefully was vital. I had watched them pack their bags for well over an hour yesterday and they were packing again, 5 kilos isn't very much! I eventually arise and decide to get my ass into gear. Firstly, I have to sort out something that will do its job as a saddlebag. (A saddlebag was a bag attached to the saddle which would carry the majority of our gear) Everyone had one bar Donie and me. Now I had to do a DIY one for myself. I picked out all the gear I thought I would need for the trip, weighing in just under the 5 kilos. Cowboy Willie from Colorado gave me some long nylon rope, and with the massive help of Charles, one of the South African crew members who had actually won the first ever Mongol Derby, put all my remaining gear and sleeping bag into my waterproof bivy bag. Wrapped it tightly with duck tape and tied it to my saddle securely.

The day was a lot different to yesterday; the sun was gone and was replaced with light rain. Perfect conditions for an Irishman and the horses. Before I knew it was time to tack up. I picked what I thought looked hardy and had a bit of fight when you went near him. I waited till we had to go over the starting line. The majority were aboard trotting and hacking around warming them up. I thought the opposite; I'm going to be riding him for 3 hours I think I'll keep the weight off his back and let him conserve energy for as long as I possibly can.

We line up at the front of the pack at the starting line, upsides Donie. The big countdown from Katy and The Mongol Derby 2012 was off and running. Adrenaline must have been pumping because I was expecting a nice gentle getaway from the start by everybody but everyone was kicking and shouting. Before I knew it we were going a right speed aboard my 12 hands or so steed, the first of the twenty five of them. I took my first glance round after about 20 minutes and I couldn't believe how strung out we all were. Next second I saw a loose horse come galloping across me, we were already one down. It continued going flat out and brought Linda's horse with it, from what I could see it caught her off guard and when she lost her balance gravity came into play. Another one down but this was right in front of my eyes and she was doing some screaming, I hadn't heard anyone scream as loud as this before. I was convinced she'd broke her back; she lay motionless, except her mouth. She must have broken her back by the screams I kept thinking. I came to an abrupt halt. So did Donie and Ben. I asked her where was the pain, no response. I just kept saying don't move. After a while she calmed down and said she was just winded. We waited with her for another five minutes; she was now sitting up saying she was just a bit winded. There wasn't much we could do for her, so we kicked on.



10, 9.... 3,2,1, Go! Off and Running in the Mongol Derby 2012

The Mongolian steppe is peppered with the holes of marmots, ground squirrels, gerbils and any number of other critters that either make a good sized single hole. Our steeds knew all about these holes and would quickly avoid, sidestep or in a few cases jump them. We started to build into a strong canter and with their bloods up they started galloping. I hadn't realised it but I was heading straight for a marmot hole which must have been a 4 foot wide hole and was proper deep, thank God he spotted it and jumped it. I think I went as pale as a ghost. If he had put a hoof in that, it would have turned both of us over!

The route to the first station was pretty much flat and by the looks of the Google Earth Images we were given, the next 6 or 7 stations looked fairly flat. We were right up in the front again, surrounded by a bunch of the girls; Sonija, Michaela, Jess (not Volcano), Lucy and Heather. Heather a previous Miss South Africa and you could see why!

We arrive at Station 1, just less than half the starting bunch arriving each within ten minute intervals. Hearing Lucy was first to arrive, maybe this was down to her horse who looked like it bolted with her the whole way!? I may have overdone the cool down by leading my horse in for about a kilometre and giving him a pick of grass. But the last thing I wanted was a time penalty of 2 hours for having a horse's heart rate too high. I pass the vet check with flying colours. So it's time to choose horse number 2. An interpreter tells me they are looking for a good rider to ride their grey stallion. I told him I'd ride it. I fetch some water for my camelback for the next 40km. I see there's some noodles on offer and after a having a pretty small breakfast in bed earlier that morning, which seemed such a long time ago. I decided to tuck in. Maggie comes in telling me that Donie is looking for me. I come out and he's on board for phase 2 and waiting on me, he's not messing around! My stallion is tacked up and ready for road. I get on and he's got his back up, he seems very tense. I have a good hold of his head ready for him if he has a go to try and get rid of me. He tries but it's manageable, I say to

Donie "He's tense, he's wanting to get rid of me!" to which Donie replies, "I'm not surprised, you'd want to see him when they were tacking him up for ya!" Maybe I wouldn't have chosen him if I had saw what Donie was telling me but then again I can be stubborn. We pass Linda who has been moved forward by the crew in 4x4's, she will have a 4 hour penalty for the assistance at Station 9, but something looks odd. She's gone about 5km and she's only walking, so we ask her if everything is alright? To which she replies she is, so again we canter off.

Weather hasn't changed much and it's still raining. We've gone about half way and not a sign of anyone, we think we are in the lead but it's so vast and huge that others may have different opinions of which is the best route. So it's hard to tell. Donie turns to me and enquires what was taking me so long at Station 1. I told him I was tucking into a couple of bowls of noodles and mutton. "It's really nice; it was that good I could see it in a restaurant." "Really??" he replied looking astonished. Realising what I had said, "Errrr, well a bad restaurant!" He nearly fell off laughing.

We spot a rider in the distance to our far left, we could make out the blue coat and were convinced it was the German Sonija, who had a very dry sense of humour and whom I found very funny, many others didn't! As the blue speck started to get bigger it turned out to be Cowboy Willie, a cool dude with a great outlook on everything. If you were having a bad day, well he was the man to cheer you up. Although it was a race and we wanted to break away from the pack and get as much an advantage as we could, we were on route to the milestone of 80k with another 920k to go. Early days so I was glad to have his company.



My grey stallion riding to Station 2

The 3 of us arrive at station 2, I was sure we were the first group in. I was wrong. Sam the New Zealander had passed us at some point. He was riding on his lonesome. The grey stallion I had just ridden was a lot lazier than my first horse but responded well to plenty of encouragement. He

passed the heart rate check very quickly so we wouldn't have to wait long before we were off again. Sam was on his way to station 3 before I even had my tack off the grey stallion. Before we knew it Sonija and the two Swedes were in, Christoffer and Mattias.

These new horses on the line looked pretty fresh. The Mongolian horses are not used to saddlebags or anything sitting behind the saddle. Willie's horse was being tacked up by two Mongolians and was proving to be too much of a handful for them. His horse was going nuts and got loose, he took off bucking and plunging till something gave way on Willie's saddle about half mile from the station. I felt for him. It would take some time to get his saddle back and mend it before he could be on his way again, and there was nothing he could do but watch it gallop into the distance. Christoffer saddled up without any hassle but his horse was like a spring being coiled up and it all was released when he got on. It took off plunging; it was heading straight for the line of horses. I thought he was going to get decapitated by the rope but he managed to do a perfect limbo underneath it. It caught him off balance but he quickly regained it and sat like a pro bull rider!

Luckily we had none of these problems. We had asked for two quick horses and the interpreter passed on our requests to the herder and he duly obliged. Threw the leg over and without any bucking or plunging we were on our way. These two were quick. In fact they both ran away with us but I wasn't doing much holding back. If he wanted to do the 40km flat out the whole way I was more than happy to let him. We decided to follow the dirt track instead of going on the grass. It was proving a good move and made the first 10km in brilliant time. The road was starting to veer off the path we wanted to take, so it was back to cross country for the time being. We were now half way and although we weren't going the same speed as the first 10km we were still travelling nicely.

I could see some Gers in the distance but they were just one of the many local families we would pass on along the way. As we were getting close I could see two dogs coming straight for us and they looked like they meant business. I've never been afraid of dogs before but I was terrified when I saw these two coming straight for me. They looked similarities to German Shepherds, I hoped their bite was not as bad as their bark, but I wasn't hanging round to find out!

With about 15km before we reached Station 3 and it looking hardly unlikely that we would be making anymore inroads to Station 4 tonight as our pace from earlier had dramatically changed. Our earlier exerts had taken their toll as mine was pretty exhausted, we had to walk and not just for five or ten minutes. I hoped we wouldn't come across any more of these dogs! With us changing to a much slower pace, Julie and Charlotte who were riding together had caught us up. The latter, who decided to come all the way to Mongolia without a GPS and was relying on her Google Images and maybe now, Julie's GPS. They were proving to be quite a team, even though they both had never met prior to Mongolia and had come out on their own. Charlotte from Cornwall and Julie from across the Atlantic in Idaho USA seemed like they had known each other for years.

Realising that Station 3 was the furthest we could manage on Day 1; we just rode them leisurely with no great rush but just to make it in before curfew of 9pm. We managed to ride in with the girls with an hour to spare although mine was showing effects of a tough 40km. It took him a good 30 minutes before I got him vet checked and even with that rest I gave him, his heart rate was still too high. It took another 20 minutes before I passed the vets. Another 10 minutes and I would start to incur penalties; I can say I was pretty relieved.

The sun was setting quickly and we had a chance to pick our horses for the morning. This would be our only advantage for riding quicker than others into station 3 as we would all set off as one tomorrow morning. I gave one of the herders kids a pack of sweets, a little incentive or bribe for him to show me a good horse for the morning! He picked this little grey one. He would be the smallest one I had sat on but I liked him.

Again slowly but surely more riders flocked into Station 3. 15 riders of the 34 who set off just under 11 hours ago had arrived. Maggie, one of the UK's leading endurance coaches and the Mongol Derby pre-race trainer and course manager, was here to greet us. She filled us in on news from all that had gone on, and there was plenty. 2 riders were already out of the race, Paul de Rivaz, a 63 year old British rider taking part with his son Ben, was thrown from his horse on route to the first station. He managed just 10km of the race, and was left with a broken collarbone, we all felt for him. Then we heard news of Linda, who we knew something wasn't quite right when we passed her on route to station 2. She had punctured a lung and was also being sent back to Ulaanbaatar with Paul to the hospital.

Tucked into some more mutton and then rolled out the sleeping bag, I couldn't wait to lie down and get some much needed sleep. I covered myself in deep heat cream as I was aching all over; I didn't let anyone know how much discomfort I was in. Whenever anyone asked I said I was grand, said it was easy and didn't know why everyone was making such a fuss of it being so hard. The last thing I was going to do was show anyone any weakness. I thought if this was the start of worse aches and pains to come, it was going to be a massive struggle. I hoped it wouldn't. An eventful day for everyone and even with the herder's dogs continuously barking, I shut my eyes and fell asleep in no time as day 2 beckoned.

Day 2

I awake to the noise of my watches beeping alarm. Everyone is awake and some are already up, I get another ten minutes before I drag myself out. Still aching. Get dressed into my only set of clothes. I fetch some fresh water for the next 40km, duck tape and tie my homemade saddlebag to the saddle. My little grey steed is tacked up and ready for road. Our goal today is to do 160km, I think we should be able to manage this as we are starting today at 7am as opposed to 10.30am like yesterday.

It's now 6.48 and there is a bit of confusion. Joe, the South African has tacked up his chosen horse from last night, but Mattias, the Swede, had also chosen the same horse and is adamant he was in before the South Africans. So instead of just choosing another they check vet cards to see who passed first. Mattias was it states, so now Joe has to swap tack and find another horse. I thought it was very childish between the two of them but I was staying out of it, I had more on my mind.

We leave on the dot of 7am; we are now riding with Cossie the Australian. We had planned to ride with him from the start of the race but he had problems on route to Station 1 which cost him considerable amount of time. We are going at good strong pace and if we can maintain this speed we will be at Station 4 well ahead of schedule. I like my little horse, he's got a short stride but he's comfortable to sit to and above all he seems honest. Before we know it we've passed half way and we are in front, we decided not to stick to the dirt road as there wasn't really one to follow, the nearest one was a bit out of the way so we headed straight as the crow flies according to our GPS's. Up ahead in the distance I can spot 3 large black objects. I couldn't make out who or what they

were. They were too tall to be a dog and too small to be a man, too odd to be 3 kids in the middle of nowhere, the closer we get it becomes more visible that these are vultures! What a massive bird and a strong looking one at that, they couldn't care less that we are cantering right up and past them, I think I would be if they were circling me!

I notice on the GPS there's a large blue circle we are about to enter. It looks like a lake on the sat nav but there isn't a lake to be seen. It started to dawn on me, it was once a lake but it was no more but marshland now. The terrain was horrible. We had such firmer ground up till now. This was like a bog and you couldn't ride quickly through it, in fact we had to come back to trot and at some points a walk was the quickest you could manage if you wanted to prevent injury to your horse.

Barry & Joe were about a kilometre behind at one stage but they had quickly made up that ground and had now passed us. They knew all about the marsh land and had gone around it. It was too late for us to try and go around, we would waste too much valuable time doing so, and we had no option just to tough it out. Even with that hiccup we still had made fantastic time, we had caught up Barry & Joe and could see Station 4 in the distance. All in all it took us 2 hours with only our cool down of the last 1km to complete our first leg on day 2.

I pass the vets straight away and so does Donie, we decide to skip any food and just get out on the road as soon as. I had ridden all day yesterday with mountain boots and chaps. I had never ever ridden with chaps before and I had bought 2nd hand cheap ones. They had caused a lot of pain on the last ride yesterday so I decided not to wear them today for the first 40km and replace them with bandages I had brought them more so for the horses if they had a cut or something. I wrapped them around my legs to prevent rubbing. It made some difference and I was feeling good, so I whipped the chaps out of my bag and gave them to a local Mongolian herder. He was delighted!

In no time we are off on route to station 4, Barry & Joe had stopped for some food so there is no one hot on our trail. This next 40km looks tougher than any other we have encountered so far if the Google Images are anything to go by. The first bit looks mainly flat but there's a river running up the middle and will need to decide whether to cross early where its virtually non-existent or wait and cross on a bridge further up. These are key decisions that can make the difference between being in the pack and building a lead. We've gone about 8km and I can hear Cossie roaring behind me. He's pointing at my homemade saddlebag. It's come loose and is barely hanging on. I dismount, reattach and tie it on as hard as I can with the horse in hand. I'm so thankful that Cossie was behind and spotted it, I couldn't bare imaging what it would be like losing it and having no sleeping bag for the next 6 nights! We decide to cross the river early, we have to trudge through some more marshland along the way but we are through it pretty quickly and we find a dirt road which should take us pretty much all the way, or so we thought. My horse for this leg isn't half the horse my first lad was, even though he's a bigger and stronger looking type. It just shows you looks aren't everything.

Again like yesterday, we think we are riding pretty strong but out of nowhere Charlotte & Julie catch us up. Instinctively I'm disappointed that they have caught us as I thought we were starting to build a lead and there was no sign of them in the last station when we had set off, so we must have done something wrong. On the other hand I'm glad for their company.

The five of us ride on and we get to where we could have crossed the bridge. Up ahead, with about 10km remaining, there is a large hill with a road going up it. We decide, judging on the Google

Images that it's flatter along by the river. So instead of going as the crow flies, we will go around it saving the horses energy from having to go up and over.

The last few kilometres seemed to take forever as we rode; mine was knackered and so was I. We've ridden 80km and I haven't had anything to eat, I'm starving and it's having an impact on me mentally. I'm grumpier and pretty snappy. I untack my horse and pass the vet check. This has been our worst leg so far. Sam the New Zealander is here and about to leave, Michaela is in too. Barry & Joe are coming in the distance. We've given away some amount of time. It puts some negative thoughts into your head. We should have went straight over the hill, that's what the rest have done and that's what we should have done, but isn't hindsight great I think to myself.

After a few bowls of mutton, filled up my camelbak of water and handful of their sweets stored now in my pockets, I'm ready for road. I'm the last of our five some to tack up and they're all waiting on me. I throw my leg across and we are straight into full stride going downhill weaving our way between little bushes. This terrain is a lot drier than the others we have encountered, there is no marshland. I didn't get a chance to look at the Google Images of this route or check out my GPS but the rest have and I'm just following our pack. There are only 2 ahead of us, Sam and Michaela.

Once we reached level ground there was a dirt road to greet us gladly. This would take us till about halfway, and we rode monotonously on. We must have ridden about 18km and the dirt road started to veer off to the right towards the local soum (village), so we were back riding cross country again



Julie, Charlotte, Donie & I riding to Station 6

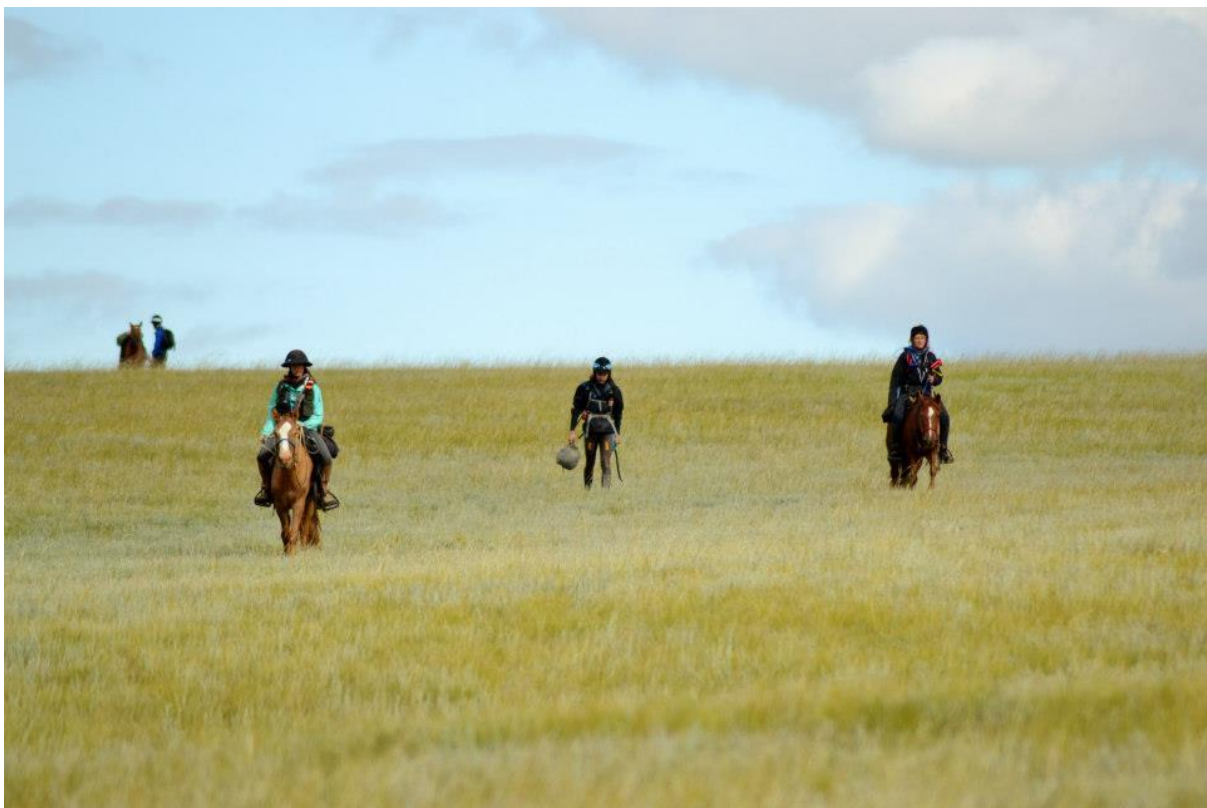
in a straight line as the crow flies. My horse was lazy and slow on this leg. He made me work, but to be fair the more I urged the more he responded. We were going again at good pace. Donie leading the way on his tiny little stead, which he wasn't that fond of until he found the key to him. He had to boot him along when he was out the back, being lazy and idle but put him in front and he was like a different horse!

We were meandering our way between the bushes and marmot holes and out of nowhere was this ditch. All I seen was Donie giving it a kick, he was going too quick to stop and if he didn't commit to

jumping it, it could have ended up with them going their separate ways or worse! Up he came and winged it; I didn't think it was in his little horse. I had more time than Donie and I did the opposite, I jammed on the brakes! I wasn't taking any unnecessary risks!

It wasn't long before we were on another dirt road and this would lead us right to the next station. Michaela was in our sights, she was far left and was making a beeline straight for us. I could see Sam was far away to the right. I couldn't understand how we were all going to same destination and there was nearly 5km difference in width between us at one stage. The funny thing is we probably all thought we were going the quickest way but the proof was in the pudding and we had gained time and we were all level again. We had about 8kms left and mine was really feeling the pinch, he was exhausted. I had to let him walk; at least Julie's horse had the same problem so she kept me company while they rode on.

The last few kilometres were painfully slow, I could see camp so I dismounted and proceeded to give him a chance of getting his heart rate down. Up ahead I saw Donie's horse that he was leading take off bucking and plunging. His saddle had gone round his belly, he was in panic mode and there was nothing he could do. He got loose and we were watching on in horror about what was going to happen next. This was the last thing we needed, I thought. How long was this going to cost us? Luckily he didn't go too far and something gave way with the saddle. Once it came off he stopped panicking and was quickly caught. The girth straps were revealed to have had snapped. Bollox.



Walking into Station 6, after Donie's horse galloped off loose.

Urin Burin, a very knowledgeable man and was well respected by all the Mongolian herders, and Donie fixed it somehow. It was a bit of a worry, considering it was only day 2 and it had broken. Ok, it was because of a horse but how long would a botch job last? Whilst they were fixing that it gave me a bit of chance of a breather whilst not either sitting on a horse or holding one. I ate some food and loads of sweets, they were surprisingly really good. I tacked up my next mount and went to help Donie to get ready for the next 40km. We had lost a decent amount of time through this mishap but alas it could have been worse. In the meantime Barry & Joe had caught us up. There changeover speed was quick and they were gone onto the last 40km of the day. Michaela had set off just in front of them, whilst Sam was taking a little break. He looked tired, but had ridden hard and quick. Maybe it was starting to take its toll?

Our little group as we'd known it had split up. Julie & Charlotte set off again together, they headed off without us because they didn't know how long we would be waiting with our tack problem. After all it was a race not a group trek! Cossie, whom I thought was riding well and looked in good shape, had told us he'd had enough for one day and was setting up camp for the night there.

Sam asked us if we minded him riding with us, to which we didn't. So the three of us mounted up and set off. We'd gone about a kilometre and we spotted Mattias and Christoffer riding into the station. This next 39km was going to be a tricky one, with mountains on one side and main carriageway where a lot of cars were a long way to the right. We would have about 5km before we would have to make a decision so we just rode on. Got chatting with Sam, who revealed that he was finding it tougher than what he anticipated he had let himself in for. He still seemed focused and said he not only wanted to win but he wanted to break the record in how many days it would take to do it. Funnily enough I had the same aspirations but I didn't want to go telling everyone. We had gone a few kilometres and I'd noticed my saddlebag was coming loose again; I was fairly paranoid about it falling off after it had almost done so that morning. I held it with my hand for as long as I could but inevitably I had to get off again and redo it, thus wasting more precious time. Sam had actually fallen behind on his horse and even though we said we'd ride with him, we weren't going to be going out of our way to wait up for him. He caught us up whilst I was fastening my saddlebag on again. We rode up this little hill and at the top we had to decide, left or right. Sam was keen to go left and go along a valley between the mountains. On the contrary, Donie wanted to head by the main road. I agreed with Donie. Again it was flat for as far as we could see, whilst the valley was just a bit too much of an unknown so it was a clear winner for me. We rode on. I looked around after 10mins wondering how far Sam was behind us. There was no sign of him. Where had he got to? I looked far over to the right and there he was. He was heading for his Valley route. We thought it was a little odd, even though that's the way he wanted to go he never actually said anymore about it and just headed off in his own direction.

I wasn't going to lose any sleep about it. We rode parallel to the main road beside some ploughed land where vehicles could drive along. We came to a dead end, a massive corn field; it was huge and was as far as the eye could see. We had a go of cantering through it but it was laughable. It was thick, taller than us, it was a no go. We made a beeline straight for the main road, where we knew we could get a chance to canter by the side of it.

This was a difficult 40km leg. Possibly because it had been a long day already after riding 120km but you couldn't ride in a straight line from station to station because of the mountains, thus adding

more painful kilometres. We couldn't have asked for two better horses though, very honest. At the start of the day, as the sun was dawning I rode out on a grey and now as the sun was setting again I was on a grey. Not that I was going for any romantic image! We didn't hold back, we rode them hard. We had to as time was against us, as it always was. They gave us all they had and they were out on their feet. With over 10km and about an hour left to ride before we started to incur penalties. It was starting to look ominous that we weren't going to get there before 9pm. I tried to keep thinking positively. As much as I wanted to keep pressing, our horses had to have a break. We had cantered almost the entire journey and the effects were showing. We walked for about 7 minutes and we decided to try and "choo" on again. Choo, a new word that had entered my vocabulary only yesterday, but had been getting a lot of usage already. Instead of clicking, chooing was much more effective at getting them to go. To our surprise they responded to our urgings and we were cantering again. The kilometres were tumbling off our GPS's but so was the speed the sun was setting and the darker it was becoming. We urged, squeezed and chooed. With around a kilometre left to ride, my watch let out a beep to signify 9pm. We had failed. It was now pitch black and struggling to see in front of us. We came up and over the brow of the hill; we could see the torches of camp. We were late but I was delighted to see it. It had been a long day and I couldn't wait to roll out my sleeping bag. 9.15pm arriving at camp, incurring a 30 minute penalty that would be served at station 9.

Barry & Joe were the only ones there to greet us in. They beat us in but not by that long. Considering they left station 6 a long time before we did, due to our saddle problem, we had ridden quicker than them. Always one to take the positives! There was no sign of Michaela or Julie and Charlotte who both had left before us. Sam was nowhere to be seen either. Ten minutes later the two girls ride into camp, so a 30 minute penalty incurred too. I had to use all the time allotted for my horse's heart rate to come down before another penalty would be incurred. He passed. Otherwise I would have had a much severer penalty with the thirty minutes. It was nearer ten o'clock before I got a chance to savage some food into me. Harry the Scottish vet came in wondering whether we had seen Michaela or Sam. We told him that Sam decided to go his own route and we had not seen Michaela. Minutes later it was radioed in that Michaela was staying in the local soum about 3km away. Sam had signalled that he was about 16kms away and would be sleeping out. Afterwards without wasting any more time I was straight into my sleeping bag. All set to do the exact same tomorrow!

Day 3

Six people were waking up in the lead of the Mongol Derby 2012 on Day 3 and that included Donie & I. I wasn't as sore as yesterday waking up but I sure did feel like having a lie in! We were all up and about before dawn. I strolled down to see the line of horses. Some were tied up but most were still loose grazing. I selected what I thought to be a good one, but so did one of the South Africans. And because they were there before us, they had first choice. So another ten minutes went by before I set my eyes on another I liked. I pointed to one of the young Mongolian herders which one I wanted. It took him almost twenty minutes before he could catch him and put the bridle on. Time was ticking but there wasn't much I could do.

7am, we could now ride on. The two SA were away followed closely by us with Julie & Charlotte tracking behind. I had a good look at the map beforehand. I thought better to go between the valley

and along a road rather than go as the crow flies across these mountains with no road to guide us. Up ahead I could see Barry and Joe coming off the road and heading right. I thought they were heading straight over the mountain. I thought they were nuts as I laughed to Donie. We kept riding along by the road and soon the two girls had caught us up. So once again we rode as a foursome. After a couple more kilometres the road just stopped and it became no more and there was a mountain directly in front of us. I was perplexed, according to the Google Image this road should take us all the way there. We decided to ride up it and hope that we come across the road again. It takes a lot of energy out of the horses going up and down these mountains let alone the 40kms they have to do. We get over and we see a road down below in the valley. There was the road we were supposed to be following. I soon realised that's where Barry and Joe went when they headed off right. I looked again at the Google Image and I had misread the map. There was a road with a dead end but I had thought we were on the other road. I was so annoyed, losing valuable time and energy but on the other hand I was happy to be back on the right track. The day had started cold like every other day but this morning it was starting to get warmer and you could tell it was going to be a hot day. We rode on through the valley and when we came to the end of it there was a massive opening where it was just flatland. So instead of following the road we took a shortcut as it was so flat and the ground looked pretty decent to keep cantering along. We passed many families along the route and every time we passed their Gers a pack of their dogs chased us barking. I was soon used to this and wasn't as bothered as the first time I encountered them! I had always wondered though what would have happened if I had fallen off whilst being chased by the dogs, would they savage me or was their bark really worse than their bite? I did hope that I wouldn't have to find out!



It could be a very lonely place on your own...

The terrain changed dramatically for the last 5km, from mountains, roads and grass it was now sand dunes all over. We rode as quick as we could, not letting up on the pace as we were starting to make some of the time that we had lost. The sand dunes were tricky to ride on as you were always going up and down them with the ground sometimes falling away beneath you. It wasn't long before our next camp was in sight. We crossed a little stream and gave the horses a well-earned drink. Dismounted and walking into camp for about 10.20am. It had taken nearly three and half hours to complete the first leg of the day. I'm pretty sure that I misreading the map cost us a good hour but there was no point dwelling on the past. Barry and Joe were just leaving the station, which I couldn't believe. I thought they would be much further gone. We all pass the Vet straight away. I fill up my camelbak bag with water and grab a good handful of sweets. It is very hot now and the sun is out with not a cloud in the sky, much to the contrast of the last two days. I have a good look at the line of horses with about 30 to choose from, they all look pretty decent. I ask the herders which one they like the best. They pick out two for us and we saddle them up. Julie and Charlotte leave just minutes before us. I had another good look at the Google Image of the next route but I wouldn't be reading into it as much after the last episode. We have a couple of choices, head straight as the crow flies or again the longer safer road around. It was a unanimous decision: the road.

We must have ridden less than a kilometre and Donie tells me he isn't really happy about the selection the herders have made about his horse. Asking whether he wanted to go back and change, he thought he'll be alright in a bit and maybe he is just being a bit piggish leaving his herd of horses and home behind. We ride on and no sign of the girls in front of us, we can see their fresh tracks though so it's not like we are lost again!



Such different terrains to encounter and the vastness of Mongolia with a lone rider.

I'm sucking away on my fifth toffee, one of the many sweets bulging from my pockets. They are top notch but everything possibly tastes nicer when you haven't got easy access to such luxuries like when you do back home. Although I'm starting to get a little fed up of the taste of mutton.

The terrain is similar to the last 5kms we rode, although not sand dunes, it's just like a desert. There are less families and Gers to see as it's so dry and for obvious reasons terrible for grazing herds.

We are back in positive spirits again, as the first leg was a real downer after getting lost but each new 40kms was like starting fresh. A new revved horse, a different scenario and knowing we are another leg closer to the finish.

Riding along the road, and following the dirt track listed on our GPS. Suddenly this road we are tracking, is now heading in the wrong direction. We have to bear off right, exiting our much loved dirt road. It's lying to me now, stating we are on a dirt road but we clearly are not as we are crossing a dried out river. I feel cheated!

15kms ridden. No dirt rode to follow but just whatever way the GPS's arrow is pointing. The further we are riding the piggier Donie's horse is becoming to a point where he just stood still. He won't move, like a mule that's had enough. Kicking and slapping with the leather lead rope, he still won't budge. I grab hold of his rein and try to lead it. We are barely walking. Not even halfway and we are going at a snail's pace, the sun is beating down and I feel like its cooking me from the inside out. It's about 30oC but feels at about 50. I grab Donie's lead rope and I tie it to my saddle. I give mine a choo, a kick and a slap. We are off again at a trot, heading up a hill, dragging Donie's like a broken down car. But this car keeps slamming on the brakes. It's painful. Donie has ridden it like it's been the last furlong in a 3mile chases for well over 5kms and we still have twenty kilometres more to do. The sweat, anger and frustration are showing on his face. The only fuel inside him are a handful of sweets as we had little or no breakfast and the quick changeover at the last station left little time for a bowl of mutton. We've ridden altogether 60kms this morning and we are now moving at a speed that it would take a week to cover the equal distance. Negative thoughts are beaming down like the rays of sun on my back and they are multiplying. We walk & trot on.

Wearing the journey down to around 7km left; up in the distance we can see a vehicle coming towards us, which is quite a rare sight. It's one of the crews. We flag them down and out jumps the South African Charles, after crying to him about our ordeal he gives us some advice. We then decide to untie the lead rope and it give it another try of cantering. We shout, scream, kick, slap and roar at it and he takes off. With no letting up and not giving it any excuse to slow up. We look like cowboys and are certainly riding like ones.

The last couple of kilometres of any stage feel fairly sweet but this one was feeling extra special. I couldn't wait to get off. I could see the camp on the other hill and with two riders riding out of it. Was it Julie & Charlotte or could we be lucky enough for it to be Barry & Joe? I do hope it's nobody else!

We fall into the station, we are sore but it's more of a mental sore. We are greeted by Dunwoody, Andy the Doc and Charles. We recite our tale over again. I think Charles feels a bit of sympathy towards us and ask the Mongolians to find us their best two horses. Charles is a top man, always helpful and a cracking sense of humour. Although I didn't feel like laughing right now, quite the contrary. This is Station 9 where we have a 30 minute penalty to serve for arriving late into station 7 the night before. This is why we planned not to eat at the previous station as we had the compulsory 30 minutes, which could be spent feasting on mutton.

They tell us that it was Julie & Charlotte, who we had seen riding out of the camp earlier, Barry & Joe left 2 hours earlier. It was a gutting feeling but one we had expected after having such a dreadful ride. It was a marathon and not a sprint and we were only past one-third of the race. After eating,

and refilling our tanks we were all tacked up and ready for off, again. With plenty of encouragement from the lads at the station trying to boost our morale, we rode quickly out of the station.

This looked a tricky 40km, there were more rolling hills and mini mountains up ahead, a cocktail for trouble? I had a good look at those Google Images, and as time went by we were to put little trust into those images. We were given advice to track alongside the road and that would take us between the mountains. We wouldn't meet the road for the first 10 km if we were riding as the crow flies towards the next station. I thought we could ride a straight line towards the station and we could pick up the road then, instead of diverting our course 5kms further out of our way to the West just to get on the road. Theoretically it sounded great but what I hadn't calculated was the mountains and the hills ahead. Donie wanted to just ride straight towards the road but I wanted to ride straight as we had lost enough time on the last ride and didn't want to waste anymore. As we rode on, the hills started to get bigger and bigger. We had two good horses which was a huge help but no matter how good they can be, the hills take some amount of energy out of them. We had ridden about 9km and there was no sign of the road, we were deep in a valley between two mountains. I could see the road on the GPS but what was in front of me was clearly a different picture. It was the opposite side of the mountain. Bollox. We decided to ride up the mountain, Donie was complaining of pain in his knees. I felt his pain; I had this on the first day. We thought if we ride up the mountain we will have a bird's eye view, and be able to see the road and possibly the best way towards the next station. It took a lot out of my horse heading up it. When we got up there eventually, it was lifeless and everything looked the same but for we were a long way up. With no road or anything really in sight except more rolling hills it gave us no more of an idea where to go. I could see Donie was at boiling point, ok we had gone this far together but I hadn't a horse that refused to move nor was I in as much pain, and it was I who had decided what way we would ride this leg, as he wanted to go the other way but I had put my foot down. He just let out "I'm going this way". So I had two options, follow him or go my own way and possibly for the rest of the whole race. It's not like I had been here before and that I knew which way was the correct way. So I chose the former. The race was hard enough without having to do it all on your lonesome.

In a short while, whether it was luck or judgement we spotted a road in the distance, it was the road we had been looking for all along, we were delighted. This road would practically take us all the way to station 10 and it was downhill, it all helps! I spotted a large bird, it was an eagle. Quite beautiful, but I was in no romantic mood, just had my mind focused on riding as hard as we could to catch up with the 4 in front of us.

As we meandered along the road, we see a small watering hole a couple of furlongs away so we made a beeline towards it to give the horses a well-earned drink. We only have less than 10kms left to ride and its flat terrain as far the eye can see, but our mood is very low. If we get to the next station in an hour we will have around 2 hours left to ride towards the next. Donie doesn't want to ride on regardless if we have 2 hours left to ride. Mainly due to the fact we've had a shocking day, we are tired physically but more mentally. Knowing we will have to sleep out under the stars and with a chance of waking up to find our horses have galloped off, would be a gut wrenching experience. I concurred.

Up in the distance there were two riders, as we got closer we could see it was Julie & Charlotte. We had caught them up, how could this be? They were an hour ahead of us and we got lost up in the

mountains but yet here they were. The closer we got to them, it was pretty clear how such events had come about, and you didn't have to be Sherlock Holmes to work it out. Charlotte was leading, what can only be described as a mule that would rather go backwards than forwards. So with us having resigned not to ride on past station 10 this evening, we went over to stroll back with the girls at a snail's pace. We tried our very best to give this mule the hurry up but it was to no avail. Having thought Donie's penultimate horse was piggy, this one took it to a new level. So I could feel both of Charlotte's and Julie's pain. It was nice to see the girls again though, not only for the race but it was nice for both of us to have someone else to interact with.

As we trickled into station 10 with the girls in tow, we couldn't believe our eyes. There was Barry & Joe. I tried to contain my delight, but it was hard to. They had problems of their own too. Joe's horse had what is called the "thumps" and wasn't allowed to leave the station until the horse could clear the vet. Their two hour lead just dwindled into all 6 of us back in joint first place. Their frustration was plain to see, and it fuelled Donie and I's delight. It was funny how all our negative thoughts which had built up from getting lost twice and having that horse which just refused to move with more than half way left to the station earlier, just change dramatically like a light switch into much more positive and happier thoughts.

Having ridden to station 10 out of the 25, 400km done and with 600km left. There was some serious amount of riding to go. We tried not to think of it as 600km but to break it down into much smaller goals like every 40km and how many stations we could manage each day. Try to keep things simpler as opposed to keep thinking of how many hundreds of kilometres left to ride. We would put all the past problems behind us and try to learn from each one of them for whatever the next 15 stations would throw at us. Tomorrow was a new a day and we would be setting off in front once again.

Day 4

Early start, once again. It's cold but feeling very refreshed after a good night's sleep. Good line of over 30 horses to choose from. Once again I take over 15 minutes walking up and down the line, casting my eye over them. After I find one I like, I consult with Donie. It's something we've done since the start and two heads is better than one! Tacked up and ready for another day ahead. Target of today is do 4 stations equalling 160km. This is doable again, as we had done it on Day 2. You just need pretty much everything to fall right, good horses and good navigational skills are a must. Being on a horse for 14 hours and covering that much ground, there are so many margins for error. A loose horse, a lame horse, tack breaking any like such could ruin any chance of getting 3 stations done let alone 4 and it could even get worse like receiving an injury which could mean the end of the race. Doing what we do for a living I didn't let any of these negatives gremlins enter my mind, today was all about being positive.

7am and we were off, straight into the lead. We must have got about half a kilometre on the South Africans, with the girls further behind. Not getting carried away as this lead was miniscule in terms of the race but still we were in front. I was keen to notice where Barry and Joe were navigating to, as they had ridden this race last year and no doubt this would be a huge advantage even with the openness of the steppe.

We crossed a deep stream and rode straight on; looking behind us I noticed the two lads hadn't gone in our direction. They had gone right instead of crossing the stream. We thought we'd better follow them instead of mapping our own different route. If we went wrong, well then we all went wrong together. Our group of six were a long way ahead of any other rider at this stage. Today was about getting the four stations done, that's it. We couldn't worry about what the others had set out to do today.

We crossed the stream again and now the two Springboks were right on our heels. The two girls were in the distance. So we rode along with Barry and Joe, this was a much flatter terrain, the grass was very lush as opposed to what we had been used to. Meaning one thing, it was very wet. There were many streams and plenty of marshland. So we tried to find the best possible path. We couldn't ride very quickly through this, more trotting than cantering. As we crossed a long puddle in a deep rut made by vehicles. We were riding in Indian file, with Donie at the lead, then me, Barry and Joe. For some reason or other Donie's horse spooked all of a sudden causing a domino effect. My horse just slammed on the brakes causing my saddle to go right up the horse's neck leaving me sit on his head! Barry's horse did the same and before I knew it I was head first into this puddle, I managed to hold onto the reins and keep a hold of my horse. Barry didn't keep hold of his reins but from all the loose horses they had last year they had decided to ride this year with an extra 7 metre rope attached from the bridle tied to them. So he clinged on to that for dear life as the horse started to dart off with him but he managed to keep him from galloping off. We readjusted our saddles, and were back on board in no time; although I was soaked from head to toe it could have been worse! (That lovely old cliché)

We did laugh about it later but I doubt we would have been if we both were searching the open steppe for a loose horse. The girls had caught us by now and we were riding all together. We were all having a bit of craic and a joke, nothing I enjoy better. I had my competitive head off and I was just enjoying it again. I was telling them all about my first encounter with having to use a "Mongolian Toilet". To those of you who have never experienced it. It is a large hole over a metre deep; two planks lay across with about a foot of a gap between. A term I thought I would never use but, there I was walking the plank! The smell I'm told is revolting, surprise surprise, so I decided to go in holding my breath so I wouldn't have to inhale these toxic fumes. I put either foot on the plank, praying they would not give way! I pulled down my breeches and got into the squatting position. I quickly realised that the position I am in now, whatever comes out of my backside may result in more of it going into my breeches which are around my ankles than between the planks and straight into the hole. I couldn't risk shitting into my only pair of riding breeches! So I leapt from the planks and came back to them with breeches off! Job done but I told the lads I can't help but get these Mongolians a brochure of some toilets back home and what they could do if they put a bit of effort into it!

It was great to be back into my normal happy self as yesterday I was anything but. If there was an airport yesterday at station 10, I would have felt like getting straight on the first plane home, although I don't really think my conscience would have let me after us raising over £10k for our charity, The Injured Jockeys Fund. Imagine riding only 3 days to just give up, sure anyone could come and do that and I don't think I would have been able to live it down.

This turned out to be a pretty quick 40km and we rode pretty quickly. The weather was pretty overcast, with the sun trying to break through. With the next station in view, we dismount about

half a kilometre out to try and get their heart rates down. It's a tactic we've been doing all along so far. Even though the Mongol horses aren't used to being lead like our horses do at home. Once we enter the station we have 30 minutes for their heart rates to drop below 64bpm to pass. If we didn't there was an automatic penalty of 2 hours. So before we would enter the station we would take our saddles off. Donie would feel their heart beat and count the beats. I would time it on my watch for 10 seconds. So if he came back and said it was around 10 beats, then we were sure to pass. (10beats - 10secs x 6 = 60bpm) If it was 13 or 14 we would walk them around outside before entering to give us every chance of not incurring any penalties, so we could be on our way to the next station as soon as possible. The two Springboks had brought stethoscopes with them so they could do the same thing too. They had all the gear, and to think we were asking each other only a month ago naively "Would we need sleeping bags?!"

I passed my vet check very quickly. It's a massive help when the weather is overcast and not really warm, a flat terrain and places to give our horses a good drink was a good recipe for a 40km ride. Not as many horses to choose from at this station but a couple caught my eye. I do a quick interview with Dunwoody about our earlier episode of Barry and me falling off! Tucked into some mutton and a handful of sweets for later and we will be back on course for station 11. Barry and Joe also passed the vet check, and they were out of there very quickly. It's not like we were slouching but we were just too slow.

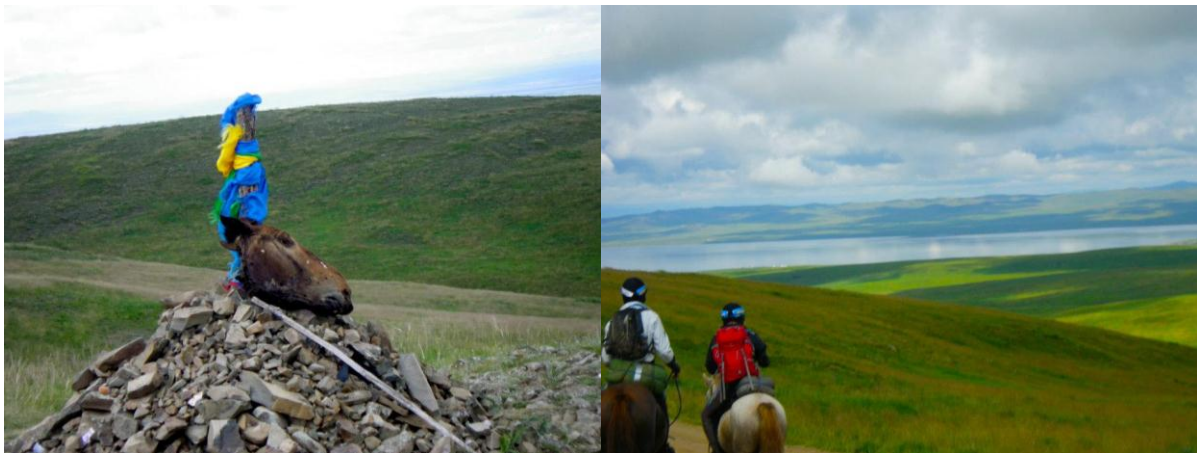
The four of us leave station 11; Barry and Joe are out of view. They have stolen a march on us. We ride on but it's not long before there's some more drama to unfold. This leg was a gradual incline but without any great hills or mountains like we encountered yesterday. There was a trail running parallel to a main road, which looked freshly tarmacked or just never used. It worked well for us, not that we rode on it but it was a great marker to help navigate towards the next station, trying again to keep things simple. Donie was back up in front leading the way. There were some unused tarmac and rocks just dumped on the side of the road along the trail we were riding on. Donie's horse spooked at the pile of tarmac, then spooked at the other pile of rocks and then it tried to jump over the rocks but stumbled and fell over, firing Donie head first into the dirt road. He managed to keep hold of his horse as well, thankfully. He had cuts to his face and he looked like he was fairly shook. We gave him a few minutes and before long we were back to cantering again. Another incident that could have gone horribly wrong but we didn't really dwell on it at the time; we had more things on our mind.

We were well ahead of schedule of the allotted 14 hours we were allowed to ride for. Planning to ride the 4 stations meant we allocated 3 and a half hours for each station (14 hours ÷ 4 stations = 3.5hours). Since we had completed the first station in just over two and a half hours meant we had a spare hour for if we had a mishap later on. As we rode along I could see freshly laid tracks of two horses in the dirt, so we knew we were on the same track of those two Springboks and they couldn't be that far away.

It started to feel warmer as the sun was breaking through, but wasn't as hot as yesterday. It was perfect riding conditions. As we rode up over the ridge of the hill still on the trail and following all of the evidence of Barry & Joe, I spotted them on the far ridge in the distance. Looking at my watch, I thought I would time how long we were behind them, it turned out to be 10 mins, so I presumed they were about less than 2 kms ahead. Nothing much to worry about. Again this was turning out to

be another of the easier 40km stages, a few rolling hills, weather was perfect, had decent horses and we were going the right way!

We rode up to the final ridge; it would be all downhill from here to station 12. At the top of the ridge there was a shrine. What made this shrine different to any others of the numerous we had seen, was that this had the head of a horse on it. Couldn't believe it, but then again this was Mongolia. Stones were all put into a pile with a large stick sticking up out of it with the head of horse on it, with a lot of blue cloths like ribbons tied around the stick. One thing was for sure he had some view! The view was beautiful, and apart from the normal rolling hills to mountains there was a huge lake. It was special. Later we found out that they place the heads of their best horses on these shrines to honour them when they die and then they eat the rest.



The sacred horse overlooking the stunning views of the lake ahead.

Riding down from the hill with breaks of sunlight peeking through the gaps in the clouds reflecting on the lake was quite something, a picture. At this stage I was listening to my mp3 player which I had brought with me but had seldom used it. Perhaps I had shouldn't have brought it, to try be technology free whilst negotiating the Mongolian open steppe. One of my passions is music and I thought this could get a bit monotonous and be boring at times and music could occupy my mind. At the same time, I thought it may be a bit ignorant to ride with Donie and be listening to music. So at times when the four of us were riding together I would listen to a few songs, which genre was all down to what mood I was feeling. I went from Arctic Monkeys to Beethoven, quite a diverse range. At this moment riding down from the hills overlooking the lake I had The Dubliners pumping out of my ear piece. I chuckled to myself, I wonder how many Irishmen would have ridden around the openness of the steppe whilst listen to the powerful sound of Luke Kelly, Ronnie Drew and co of The Dubliners.

We watered the horses at the lake and continued on to the station which was less than a kilometre away. As we walked our horses into the station Barry and Joe were mounting and preparing to ride out. It didn't take us long again before we passed the vet check. The temperature had been gradually rising and it was now a warm day. We decided to pass on food and to push on. We could eat later, possibly even tonight when we finished riding. I picked a bigger type of horse for our next ride. I used to ask the interpreter to ask the herders for their fastest horse but recently I had changed it to pick out their best horse. I don't know if it really made a difference but I seemed to get better types. Obviously I didn't go with exactly what the herders suggested but it all helped. None of

the herders spoke any English, and I decided to have a bit of fun. I spoke to them with my swan noises. They didn't know what to think, they kept speaking to me in Mongolish and I kept responding as if I was a swan. It was bizarre and it kept me amused. I think they enjoyed our conversation too!

The next 40km stage was a lot shorter as the crow flies. Our GPS was pointing us to go straight over the lake. We headed out to the right of the lake along another dirt track. We had plotted how we would ride this next stage while we were tacking up. We were only gone about forty minutes and it started to lash rain, it was so random and it with no clues. I decided to quickly put my raincoat on. It didn't last long at all, possibly only ten minutes and it was gone, replaced with dark clouds looking to threaten us at any moment with another blast of rain. It was strange, but every day I was beginning to learn to expect the unexpected. We rode quickly to our first checkpoint; it was a bridge crossing the end of the lake which had been reduced to only a river about 12kms further up than the station we had left. Upon crossing the bridge we would follow a dirt road that should take us right there. Simple. One of the vets 4x4's passed us to be at the next station in time to vet us and prepare the next horses for the following ride. They hadn't gone far in front of us and they got stuck in the mud literally. They needed a push to get out but we were in no position to help them with horses in hand. This was a hint for the following 10km to 15km. The dirt road we were following wasn't the same one it stated on the GPS, we were going off track according to the device. So we cut across country to get back on the original road we were supposed to be on. It quickly turned into marsh land. Very bumpy and it was almost impossible to canter on with the boggy wetland under foot or more so hoof. It would be proving to take far too long continuing in this terrain; we had to find this dirt road that was on the GPS. Another 400 metres went by. The device was telling me I was on this illustrious dirt road we were searching for but it must have vanished as nothing had changed. We had to turn round and get back on the dirt road we left about 20 minutes ago. Then disaster struck, Julie's horse had gone lame. My heart just sunk, like the bog land we were riding on. It could just ruin your whole race. We gave her horse every chance to recover. We just walked back the way we came in out of the bog, hoping none of our horses would go lame in what seemed to be like quick sand. Eventually we were back on the road and we decided to keep following the road. It was obviously a much longer route but we could maintain a strong speed. All that time walking back did the trick, as miraculously Julie's horse seemed fine again. We gave him a little longer before we started cantering again just to be safe. So with Plan A out the window we had to divert to a made up Plan B. We would stick to high lands above the maze of wetlands and bogs below. Looking at the map, we were going to be zig zagging our way to station 12. It would probably add around 10km to the stage, making it one of the longest we have ridden. In the long run it would be much quicker than trudging through the bog land. The dark clouds had disappeared like that road we searched for and it was now at its warmest and even though it wasn't as hot as yesterday, the extra degrees and kilometres were going to take its toll at some stage.



Barry and Joe, the two Springboks who were our biggest rivals, who set most of the pace.

We meandered along the high ground on the dirt road, eating away at the kilometres left. As we followed this dirt road, it no longer came up on our GPS's which was a bit of a worry. We spotted a Mongolian coming towards on a motorbike, we flagged him down. Obviously he won't know any English but what we did have to help was our Mongol Derby Handbooks. Charlotte produced hers, and found out the name of the family we were riding to. We said their name and he pointed in the direction we were heading. It made me feel a bit more at ease, so with him riding his bike coming in that direction I hoped it meant the ground wouldn't turn into more wetland that was behind us now. My horse was beginning to tire, he was a lazy type anyway and he was beginning to labour even more. I tried various methods to keep him going. I tried to avoid being aggressive and bullying them, as that would only work for so long and it would then turn them sour to it. I humoured, cajoled and gave him the odd tap with the leather lead rope. It seemed to be working but it was hard work, for both of us.

I loved looking at my GPS when we had got down to single figures to our destination. We were behind on our scheduled three and a half hours, so I was glad we had that hour in the bank. It wasn't long before the station was in sight. We dismounted and led them in from quite a way out. My horse was exhausted, so I was concerned with his heart rate. He was by no means my best horse that I had ridden but at least he was honest and gave me all he could. I don't mind horses that aren't much good as long as they give you their all, it's when they have all the ability in the world and have no interest, and it really annoys me.

It took a long time before his heart rate came down, I am pretty certain that if I had rode straight in and went for the vet check, even with the 30 minutes allowed for it to come down, I would have

failed incurring a 2 hour penalty. I lead him near the station, removed the saddle and gave him plenty of time to recover. We duly passed the vet check after an elongated ride.

Barry and Joe were just leaving the station as we were coming in, so they weren't gaining any more of an advantage on us. We weren't really bothered as they wouldn't be able to do anymore stations after this one tonight, so we would be all back in the lead for tomorrow morning, well that was the plan! We thought we had an edge on them also. In the next 40km there would be a river that needed crossing with no bridge. We would have to meet a local Mongolian who would ride with us across the river. He knew where it was at its shallowest; to the naked eye you wouldn't know it. From what we gathered, the interpreter had tried to tell Barry and Joe about the river crossing man but they had just ridden off. Advantage us, well, I thought so. Again we were eating into our three and a half hour allotted time, which left us with a decision. We decided not to eat and leave it till we got to the next station. We had gone 80km without any food and we were aiming to go 120km. It sounds nuts but I didn't feel that hungry, I was hungrier to get back on the dirt road again. So we tacked up, grabbed loads of sweets for our pockets and we were back on the trail once more. These horses were very fresh, with a lot of energy such a contrast to what we were sitting on about forty minutes ago and we were to meet the river man after we passed three lots of Ger's.



Julie (waving) and Charlotte, there was no getting rid of them!

The route was flat with a dirt road, we kept our eyes peeled for these Ger's to which would indicate our river crossing man. My horse was keen to get on with things; I was keener for him to conserve his energy. It makes such a difference when you have a horse wanting to go. The four of us were in good spirits, we've had a good day of riding with little mistakes and we were on good tracks to finish at station 14 tonight. As we were riding, a local Mongolian came out of nowhere; he was riding like an Indian! Shouting and screaming on his mount cantering around us. It was really weird. To all we knew, he could have never seen anyone like us before. I decided to join in as did the other three. We were shouting and screaming, we probably used a bit of unnecessary energy out of our steeds but it was a bit fun.

It wasn't long before we arrived at the point for us to cross the river. A local herder was on his mount waiting for us. I was nervous. I can't swim and the river was flowing at a strong current. It was over 50 metres wide; I sure did hope that this wasn't that deep. It sure looked like it was. His local knowledge of this river was one we needed, crossing the river was slow. The water came up a hand below the horses wither. It was quite hypnotising crossing I thought, we were moving but it didn't feel like it. Just the water was flowing and it felt like we were stood still. I had both legs lifted up like I was a jockey again to try and keep my legs from being saturated. We had crossed without incident, much to my delight. Donie gave our trusted Mongol river crossing herder the equivalent of a fiver, he was happier than me and that was saying something!

I thought to myself, surely we will have some upper hand over our two Springboks who were ahead of us, and who were possibly ahead of us on the wrong side of the river. Without using the herder to help cross, it looked like you would have to swim across which looked daunting. A little drink and a pick of grass and we were back cantering again.

We pass a Soum (like a village) to our right. The terrain is like dried out wetlands. It wasn't marsh land but there were definite signs in the ground where water would have run. Its flat and it looks endless. We push on even stronger, we have ridden a good stage so far conserving energy. The four of us have decent horses and are responding to our urgings. The kilometres tick down slower than the time we are permitted to ride. I calculate if we can keep this pace up we will arrive in Station 14 with ten minutes to spare, this could be tight. We are into the final hour and as the sun is setting the sky is now red. Charlotte is quick to point out the old saying "Red sky at night; shepherds delight. Red sky in the morning; shepherds warning" I hoped it was right. We push on again, fatigue in both human and equine is showing more than bad poker trying to bluff an expert shark player.

With less than 2km left to ride, we can see there's a ridge up ahead. To our right appears a river which I hadn't noticed up till now. As the minutes ticked by so was the day light. We come over the ridge and below in the valley, only half of a kilometre left to our destination and disaster strikes. I can't believe what I'm looking at. Our mood which was so positive albeit exhausted has turned into one of utter disappointment and disbelief. There below was a river which could have been 100 metres wide and it didn't look like it was in a considerate mood of what we had just been through of the 159.5kms that day. It was flowing at treble the speed of the last river we had crossed. We ride further down looking for some hope, where it could be applicable to cross but to no avail. We turn back; Julie wants to brave it, risking riding across hoping it's not too deep. I'm petrified. This isn't like being in your local swimming pool with lifeguards at the ready. Thank God Julie's horse wasn't keen on it either, they knew better. We come back over the ridge, I hoped the river there wasn't as ferocious. Once again disappointment. We were now riding after the permitted 9pm, so penalties were starting to incur, with less than half a kilometre from the station but had no chance of getting there tonight. All of a sudden it was so dark, struggling to see yards in front of you. It was quickly turning into a nightmare. With nowhere to stay, we are all exhausted and since we had planned to eat once we reached Station 14, we had ridden 120km without eating.

Not far away we could see a little fire by a Ger; we unanimously decided we should ask them would they mind us staying with them. Bearing in mind these local Mongolians would have no idea of the Mongol Derby and may never have seen "Westerners" like us before, never mind speaking English! As we rode over with our flashlights in hand and shouting out Zambanu, meaning hello in Mongolish.

Charlotte had a Mongolish phrasebook, so as we are walking over to them, she fumbles around and produces this little book of phrases. The Mongolian family start walking towards us after us making such a commotion. She's flicking through the book looking for something to say. It's proving difficult so I hold the torch to help her read. By now there are 10 members of this Mongolian family staring at us puzzled. We are all waiting on Charlotte, whose beginning to panic trying to find the right word to say, over a minute goes by and she looks up at the family, pauses, and says "Can we stay with you!?" I burst out laughing, at her attempt of Mongolish that sounded like English. She persisted with gestures of her using her hands as a pillow and resting her head on it, like they were toddlers who were up past their bedtime. We got lucky; one of the sons had pigeon English and understood some of our key words. We were told in training that Mongolians were generous people and very hospitable. They took our horses off us and hobbled them for us tying two together. They were extremely interested in our saddles we were using. The younger kids were so excited, running around trying to help out. We were then shown into the main Ger after we had finished with the horses, the four of us sat on a bed on the left. The family trickled into the Ger one by one, sitting on the right hand side bed. I counted 10. Silence. We sat there staring at them exhausted not knowing what to say, they were staring at us with inquisitive eyes. It reminded me of a kids disco, where you get all the boys stood at one side of the hall and the girls at the opposite with everyone too nervous to make the first move. The son, who had little English, offered Donie a drink. It was mare's milk. I was dreading my turn. Donie necked it in one. Julies turn; she had a sip and refused the rest. He topped it back up and it was my turn. I just went for it, I drank it all and it wasn't as bad as I had thought it would be either. It tasted like gone off yogurt. Charlotte had a sip and refused the rest. I didn't want to refuse as I thought they could be offended. Main course was on the way, they handed me a bowl of goat's fat with goat meat. The fat was thick, white and slimy, reminding me of the uncooked fat on bacon. There was a small bit of cooked meat in it too. I ate it all. I was starving, I didn't care what it tasted like, and I needed some much needed fuel. Shortly after dinner it was time for sleep. We lay our four sleeping bags in the middle of the ger, between the two beds. Four of them jumped into each of the two beds leaving two others joining us on the floor. We were like sardines in a tin. We remained fully clothed and slid into our sleeping bags. I didn't even think about how we were going to tackle this river tomorrow morning, all I had in my mind was how I was going to enjoy this sleep and to try and relax. The lights were switched off and we lay there in silence. One of the kids farted. Followed by a little giggle, we joined in giggling too. Even if we didn't speak the same language and our life was totally different to theirs, it was nice we shared some little things.

Day 5

Waking up in the middle of Mongolia, in a Ger with some random Mongolian family surrounding us, it was quite surreal. I awoke with the view of my horse right in front of the door grazing on some grass, I rolled over. I had thought we would have to get up early in case our horses had decided to vanish during the middle of the night, but there was no need now. I finally clambered out of my sleeping bag. We got our saddles back on to be ready to go at 7am. We started to wonder how we were going to tackle this river, would we have to go back to find a bridge or something? We pointed to our Mongolian hosts where we wanted to go. He tacked his own horse up and would ride with us to cross the river.



Preparing to leave after staying with a random family, 14 of us stayed in the nearside Ger.

7am, and we were off. I think he said the river was too deep to cross down below the ridge, so we were to cross up beside their Ger. Our host starts to cross first, followed by the rest of us. It was deeper than the last river we had crossed, it came right up to the horse's wither. I was shitting myself. Julie in front of me, her horse stumbled and looked like they were both going under. Even the herder looked scared for Julie; I didn't have time to think. Luckily it managed to find its footing again and we managed to cross safely. It was a cold morning but I wasn't feeling it after having gone through that. We gave our host about the equivalent of fifteen pounds, he was delighted. They may not have been a 5 star but for what they did for us with their generosity and hospitality they were every bit of a 5 stars in my eyes.

The next bit, we had to negotiate was over this little mountain to get to the next station which again was less than half a kilometre away. We started climbing up it, the further we went up the more I knew the further we would have to come down. When we finally got to the top and I looked over hoping for a gradual descent, but oh no that would be too simple. I have a few fears, one of which drowning as I can't swim and the other is the fear of heights. I had to tackle both within a half hour, not ideal. As I looked down, wondering what way to deal with it. It was far too steep to go straight down so we were going to have to zig zag our way down it. The stones below my feet were crumbling all the way down, like something you would see in a movie. I spotted a vulture flying, but it was soaring below me. That's how high up we were. I could have to change my pants after this, but we had to tackle this first. Donie was trying to reassure me, as were the others, but it was no use. I couldn't stop thinking that if the saddle goes up his neck like it had done before going downhill, I would end up rolling all the way down to the base of the hill with that vulture circling above me, and the thought was petrifying.

Somehow we got to the bottom safely, the day had started dramatically and we were now a stone's throw from this next station that eluded us last night. As we rode in there was Barry and Joe, I couldn't believe my eyes. I thought they would have had stolen a march on us after us not showing up the previous night. We exchanged our stories with what had happened to us last night. They crossed the first river like us no problem and then crossed a bridge back near the soum. If we hadn't have met that kind Mongolian who had shown us how to cross, perhaps we too would have had to ridden back to the bridge, which was 20km back therefore losing 40km on already weary horses. I couldn't bear to think of it, could you imagine what mood we would have been in then, more than likely losing all chance of winning the race on such a small error. They also had problems of their own; they hadn't ridden in to the station till 10.30 last night because of two horses that had refused to go, so we weren't the only ones to have encountered such stubborn horses. They would have a longer penalty to serve at Station 19 too. It put us back in good spirits. They have been waiting around for some time for horses to be caught from grazing to be put on the line to be ridden.

I was straight into to Ger for some much wanted breakfast. Most families had the same sort of food but with slight differentials. Rice pudding was on the menu here and it was lovely, really sweet. The bread was nice too. I stocked up. We had plenty of time to as this station was a bit shambolic with how long we had to wait for our horses to be brought in for us to ride. There wasn't any choosing like every other station of about 20 or more to choose from. We were giving the first four caught and that was it. I wouldn't have chosen this one but I just had to get on with it, it was a fresh new day and we had lost a couple of hours already so we had to get on with it. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and the sun was getting up, it looked like it was going to be a hot day. The next stage looked straight forward it was straight along a dirt road and we would only have to change course onto a new dirt road later on. We would ride parallel to the river which this time would be on our left hand side.

We were off again chasing the two Springboks. They had 45 minutes of a head start on us. We weren't even that long into our ride, possibly 2km and my little horse was acting more like a mule than a horse. He was proving to be hard work and I knew it was going to get harder for both of us. I tried to humour him for as long as it kept working, but it didn't last long. I tried to bully him later on, which was a bit more effective but they become numb to it. In the end I gave Charlotte my reins and she towed me like I did Donie a couple of days ago. At about half way, Donie's horse too is becoming increasingly difficult. He won't go either. Julie acts as his tower. It's so demoralising. They just do not want to go. I don't care if you were A P McCoy or whoever, they would not go for you. The harder we tried the more frustrated we became, it's a vicious circle. Both Julie & Charlotte are trying their hardest to keep our mules going. I felt like jumping off him and just letting him loose and walking the rest on my tod. If you had horses like this at every station for the whole way, you would not be able to complete the race within the allowed 10 days of riding. I suppose I was lucky enough not to encounter one till Station 14, but if someone tried to comfort with me with that knowledge to me right now, I'd tell them where they could go.



Riding at a painfully slow pace, sometimes not even riding. It could get very frustrating.

We continued on at a painful pace, we were now leaving the view of the river and heading down a valley between two mountains and it was a big flat open plain between them. There were no chances of making 4 stations today and we certainly let the 45 minutes that Barry and Joe have on us lengthen. We just had to take each station one by one today. As we crawled into station 15, Pete the South African vet came to greet. He was always in a good mood, a cheerful guy. I was so fed up and grumpy after riding such a horrible horse, who wasn't fit to be taking part in race if you were to ask me. I let him know what I thought of the mule I had just ridden and what we had gone through. I could tell he felt our sympathy. After a while and some food I calmed down and in an apologetic way I told him that I that I didn't mean to be taking it out on him but it was very frustrating. He was understanding and asked the herder to find their best horses from the many that were on offer. The herder at this station took great pride in all his horses; he tacked all the horses up for us. He wouldn't let us near them till we had to mount. In every other station, the herders or their sons would put the bridle on for us and we would fit the saddle on ourselves, but not here. Once we were ready to go, he along with his sons mounted their own horses too and ponied us like they do going to the start of a race in America. It was odd but he may have thought they could give us difficulties to begin with. This was generally the time these Mongol horses would give their best shot at getting rid of you. After five minutes and no mishaps he let us off. I liked my horse; he had a lovely stride to him and moved very well. It was just what the doctor or in the case the vet had ordered!

I didn't see it but at the last station the girls and Donie were talking about a foal that was close to death after being attacked by a wolf. I had noticed before heading to Mongolia that grey wolves

were present here. I was glad not to have witness one at first hand. This stage had the first Mountain Pass in our GPS, we would have to go via the mountain pass to do this stage, and there were no corners you could cut on this leg. Within 8kms we were about to tackle the mountain pass, you could either go straight up or follow the zigzagging road, we chose the former but mine really struggled, so half way up I reverted to going up the rest by road. At the top of the mountain stood some very tall pine trees, we gave our horses a breather and just soaked up the stunning scenery surrounding us, quite beautiful.



Donie riding up the Mountain Pass, the photo doesn't do the scenery justice.

We headed off towards Station 16, there was a winding and twisting dirt road down off the mountain pass which opened up to a massive open plain for again as far as the eye could see. Some hills to our distant left and one to our immediate right. We set off at a good pace. The two girls had little crackers and were having to wait on us again. At least ours were only slow, not uncooperative and mulish like the ones before. Without the help of Julie & Charlotte, I'm pretty certain we would be still on our way to Station 15, they could have just left us there but they decided to help us, which I couldn't thank them enough. It would have been interesting if the roles had have been reversed to what we would have done.

My grumpiness had worn off and I was in good spirits again. By the time we had ridden to the bottom of our descent, Julie wanted to go off to the right but I was adamant to stay more to the left. I showed them my GPS to show them what I was looking at. I didn't want to put my neck on the line for another navigational cock up but at the same time I knew if we went right we would be making a

mistake, so I let them judge for themselves. I got my way and we rode on. We past a Mongolian who was squatting, we waved to him but he was the first not to wave back, one of them said he was going to the toilet, no wonder! We had a good chuckle to ourselves. Up ahead there was another river running perpendicular to us, this river would lead us to the next station, so we took a right up near it and followed it. The ground was marshland between the dirt road and the river so we stuck to it like glue till the last few kilometres. The road was then going too far out of the way so we just decided to trudge our way through the bog land over the last few couple of kilometres. I dismounted and led him in again like we did at every other station.

Once again there to greet us were Barry & Joe, I couldn't believe it. After our penultimate ride, they should have pulled clear unless they encountered something similar to which there could be every chance due to unexpected of Mongolia and what it could throw at you at any stage.

They were the first to break the news to us that the race had been stopped for 3 hours because of a medical emergency. The thought was frightening, what had happened and to whom. We had heard there was a problem with Will and Sam crossing the river that had caused us problems, it was a bit like Chinese whispers as later we were to find out that it involved Ronald, who had ridden in the Derby the previous year, he had fractured his vertebrae in his neck but thankfully it was a stable fracture and he would be ok but his chances of trying to finish the Mongol Derby for a second time were over.

It was 5 o'clock and with this 3 hour stoppage for us we wouldn't be able to leave till 8 o'clock leaving only one hour for us to ride before the 9 o'clock curfew. It was frustrating to say the least but there were others in a worst case scenario than us, no need to be selfish. The six of sat inside the Ger while we refreshed on some food and tea. Barry and Joe always keen to mimic our Irish accents and take the piss out of us, well at least try to. Our memories of our penultimate ride were still fresh in our minds, we joked about the ridiculousness of Mongolia and what had possessed them to put their bodies through all this again, at least we didn't know what lay ahead for us whilst they knew only too well! They struggled to give us an answer, I just told them in a teasing way that they were absolutely nuts.

The two Springboks had served their 3 hours and were off again at 6.30, giving them a squeak at being able to finish the next 40km before curfew or at least put a massive dent into it. We were to make the most of our 3 hours, first of all we had the bewitching Belgian Barbara the vet here to keep us occupied, she couldn't stay for long though as she had to get to the next station for Barry and Joe's arrival and to vet the horses for their next ride, it was disappointing news! As the sun was still high in the sky, we stripped off to let our clothes air out a bit and we headed to a little stream where we bathed. I was reluctant at first, but once you were in it was so refreshing. Our own spa! We came to a decision, that with only an hour to ride before having to find camp for the night, we wouldn't bother and that we would give it a good go in the morning. We hoped that no one would catch us up tonight with the 4 hours that were just spent laying around, but everyone was in the same boat, we all had to serve the 3 hours but with our refusal to go for the final hour we made it 4 hours.

Unbeknown to us a van had turned up at the Ger. It was a mobile shop! Upon news of this we flocked straight to it. I was craving a can of coke; it was all I had wanted for so long. The small things you take for granted back home, with so many things at our disposal are luxuries not like out here. No coke, bastard. But they had beer and plenty of it. We purchased many bottles and biscuits. We

would feast like kings tonight! Once again night fell quickly and we sat around a little table in the Ger with Dunwoody, drinking beer out of cups and munching on biscuits. Julie whipped out a bottle of fire whiskey she had brought along her. We had a great night, I loved it. The craic was mighty and all that was missing was a bit of music! None of us got that drunk but we went to sleep in a merrily state ready for tomorrow morning.



Having the craic with Charlotte and Dunwoody, drinking beer out of our little teacups!

Day 6

We woke with a spring our step, once again it was cold and there was dew to be seen on the Ger. Donie helped me fit my manmade saddle bag. It was so important that it was fitted tight, for very obvious reasons. The girls chose their horses very quickly and there were plenty to choose from. I really struggled to find one that caught my eye. Eventually Donie and I settled on two right beside each other, they were two chestnuts and looked like twins. Maybe going together, they would go all the sweeter. Dunwoody had instructed us he wanted us to ride upsides together leaving the Station, to get a good photo.

7am and we were off. I went upsides Donie and we started cantering, within seconds they were both bolting with us, I couldn't get a swing out of him and neither could Donie. We were going flat out and in no control just pointing them in the right direction. Out of nowhere there was a ditch, it must have continued from the stream we had bathed in the evening before. I shit myself, I was going flat out in no control and there was a ditch up ahead, with no time to stop without gravity taking effect

and me being fired out of the saddle or we would have to jump it. He was only about 12 hands high. I clinged on tight to him. Donie gave his a kick in the belly while I let out a girly scream and we both jumped it, about 6 foot wide and we both cleared it much to my relief! I pulled my irons up when I eventually got him to stop. All four of us looked like we had chosen great horses.



Choosing our fate at Station 16 before 7am; a typical Mongolian line of horses. Then riding out of the Station on two enthusiastic horses

It was going to be a fairly flat 40km which went along by the river. We decided to go by the road to avoid the marshlands near the river. The roads which went over a few rolling hills, were fairly parallel to the river and were always in its sights. Donie and I's horses took off again with little control, they wanted to go and I tried to harness it but to little avail. We covered the first 20km in an hour, blistering time. Those two Springboks had two and a half hours advantage on us but if we were to keep this pace up we would catch them in no time. At half way we decided to give them a good walk to give them a breather as they didn't do a steady hack with the only one gear being 5! I pulled out some biscuits that I had saved from last night for breakfast. I had 4, so one for each of us, a nice little treat to a great start to the morning.

The 2nd half of the first 40km didn't go as quick but I was expecting this as there was no way we could have kept up such a pace. They were pretty tired as we had to cross through the wetlands over the last 5kms. Nevertheless they had given us their all and we had finished the 40km in a great time. The views along the way were just marshland on a massive vast open plain once again with mountains in the very far distance; it did look endless and typically Mongolian.



Riding into Station 17, this captures the vastness of Mongolia brilliantly.

We strolled into station 17 to be greeted once again by Barbara the vet. It took a little while for our horses to come down to the required 64bpm or less but it didn't take too long. I was one of the first to pass, so I filled up my camelbak with some more water. We decided against eating, and could have that a bit later on. The herder at this station told us that under no circumstances we were not to water them at any stage. We thought this was very odd, considering we had never heard of this before and we would always stop to give our horses a good drink, sometimes taking a detour just to do so. There weren't as many to choose from like at the last station but I had my eyes on one so I was happy with my choice. I hoped he would be like my racey chestnut. We were all tacked up and ready to go pretty quickly. We mounted, leaving hot on the heels of the two Springboks. We had

eaten into their lead according to what Barbara had told us that they only got to the station that morning and not the evening before. Happy days.

The four of us gave them a giddy up and a kick in the belly. My lad was a little bit lazy leaving the station but nothing I was too concerned about, he didn't feel mulish. A pack of dogs came out of nowhere, usually we would see two or three at each family's Ger's but there wasn't a Ger in sight and there were six of them. My horse clearly didn't like them and he took off with me. I told the others I wish those dogs followed us the whole way; it was much easier than kicking and cajoling him the whole way. The sun was up and it was once again a beautiful day. I could feel the tops of my hands were beginning to burn, I had little else exposed to the sun. It was hot but it wasn't blistering by any means.

We were heading away from the flat lands and heading towards a mountain valley. After 20kms we started climbing little ridges in a narrow valley between the mountains. It wasn't as high up as we had ridden on previous days or at least I had hoped it wouldn't get any steeper. My horse was starting to test my patience he was becoming even lazier. Julie's horse was proving harder work though. It was like a strung out 3 mile chase on heavy ground. Charlotte and Donie's horses were going on sweetly in front. I was a couple of hundred yards behind with Julie even further behind. She would be pulling up if it was a 3 mile chase but I decided to go back and help her. She evidently needed it as she was shouting at it, singing songs and whatever else. I think she was starting to lose her mind! Maybe I looked like a mirage to her?! My horse though was in no fit state to tow another and I was pretty tired from kicking him along. Once the others saw what state we were in they came back and began to give us a badly needed tow as the ridge was starting to increase quickly. The valley was becoming even narrower. Donie towed Julie and I had Charlotte at hand once again. At the top it was full of tall pine trees; we meandered our way between them. I was looking forward to the downhill part which wasn't too far way with a lovely gradual descent. It was beautiful scenery once again in the valley, lush green grass and a stream running down on the far side. Charlotte turned to me and said it would make a lovely golf course! I couldn't contain myself; it helped take my mind off kicking him the whole time laughing at what she just said. I told her I wouldn't fancy walking up the mountain looking for my ball!

Near the bottom of the narrow valley lay Station 18; much to Julie and I's relief. They were both exhausted and so were we. We strolled into the station, greeted by the South African vet Deon wearing his familiar cowboy hat. He checked our horses and their heartbeats were very high, he said they looked dehydrated and we told him about our earlier instructions from the herder before, Deon looked baffled and told us to take them to the stream below for a drink. I think we were naive about not giving the horses a drink regardless of what we had been instructed on such a warm day. I thought my horse was going to drink the stream dry!

It took a long time but eventually we passed the vet within the 30 minutes without any vet penalties thankfully. We decided not to eat again as we would have a 30 minute penalty to serve at the next station for passing curfew a couple of nights ago. We would have plenty of time to eat there. There were a lot of horses to choose from here and this family looked pretty interested in us as there were loads of the kids following us around trying to help us pick a horse.

They helped me choose a strong looking grey horse. I did like the look of him; a big strong type. It wasn't as hot as it was earlier in the day; some clouds had come out to cool us. Again we didn't

waste any time at the station. We were quickly mounted once we had a look at our Google Image of the route ahead.

Riding out of the station a kid from the family we had just left knowing where we were meant to be going showed us the way on his motorbike, our own personal escort! He took a left at the end of the narrow valley we had just ridden through. It opened up into another massive plain. There were mountains in the far distance on the right with a large river just before them. We again would stick to the trusted dirt road which was running parallel to the river but the river was at least 5kms in between. Our personal escort left us after a few kilometres but it looked straight forward. Our GPS said virtually straight ahead to our destination and with no mountains to be seen in our path, it wouldn't take long before we were at station 19.

We had covered almost halfway in decent time, our horses were nothing out of the ordinary but they were honest and did as much we asked. We passed another soum which was positioned just on the far side of the river. There was a bridge to it but as it was out of the way and with no need to be playing Mr. Tourist we had two Springboks to close down on. After each 10km we gave the horses a walk for a few minutes, it worked well. This stage didn't take long to complete and in the last few kilometres we had to cross that river but by now it had dwindled down to a stream so it was pretty easy to do so. We watered our horses at it. It had got increasingly darker; it looked like it was threatening to rain. We only had 3kms left to ride which we took pretty handy as we had ridden them hard but we had willing partners.

As we lead our horses into Station 19 we were greeted once again by the familiar faces of Barry and Joe who we still serving their penalties. Of course we had a penalty, but it was only 30 minutes and that wouldn't be long passing by the time we had fed and watered. Maggie with her clipboard in hand was here to oversee the penalties. Then she dropped a bombshell on us, Julie had incurred a 2 hour penalty on a previous horse that turned out to be lame which we were unaware of. What a bastard. What were we to do now? Of course Charlotte was staying by her side but what were we going to do. My head reminded me that we came here to win the race, Donie and I. Not Donie, Richie and two girls. It wasn't a holiday or a trek it was a race after all. So we were to kick on and leave them behind. That's what my competitive head wanted to do but my heart wouldn't allow it. This was no sappy romantic story with a happy ending, but it wouldn't be right to leave them behind after all we had been through it together. If it wasn't for Julie & Charlotte on route to Station 15 where both of our horses had refused to go and they towed us virtually the whole way, when they could have deserted us, I'm pretty certain we'd still be trudging along that road now. No, it wouldn't be right if we deserted them now. So that was it, we came to a unanimous decision to stay with them and ride the 2 hour penalty all together. It would mean that there would be no more riding this evening as it just past 6.30. It didn't mean our chances of winning had been dashed, not by any means but it certainly didn't help. We had caught Barry & Joe after giving them a two and a half hour start today, and they would have an hour and half on us by tonight with us staying behind. There were 6 stations left to ride, 240km, so a lot could happen in the meantime.

Maggie couldn't believe that we were going to stay behind; she gave Donie & I a hug. Dunwoody was there in the background, capturing this huge double rainbow that was behind us and the line of horses at the station. I wondered what he thought about what we had decided to do. I know he was

rooting for us to win it, but I had a feeling he thought we were mad to stay behind and not kick on. I know he would have gone.



The double rainbow that greeted us at Station 19, was nicer than Maggie's clipboard full of penalties

I didn't dwell any longer on our decision, it was done, end of, finished. I was starving and that was now top priority. Food. I placed all my tack and gear in our Ger and proceeded to the family Ger to be fed. This was different to any other Station. As this station had a hut built out of wood and was probably 4 times the size of a Ger. As we sat around the table, Malou, Dunwoody's assistant, produced a large bar of milk chocolate. We shared it out and it was heaven. The family's kids came in and sat down opposite us. They were very young but adorable. I started doing my swan and duck noises, the youngest kid who looked like he was 5 or 6 was in hysterics! So I kept him entertained till dinner was served. It was a stew like and was also a nice different treat. I finished two bowls of it then downed the last drop of my black tea and then I was ready for bed.

Just before 9, as I lay there in my sleeping bag in our Ger, I heard that Mattias, Christoffer and Michaela had arrived. It was a sinking heart feeling. I think Julie read our faces and apologised profusely. I wouldn't accept it though, it wasn't her fault, we had made our own decision to stay and besides any one of us could have chosen her horse. We were all just unfortunate. Mattias, Christoffer and Michaela came into our Ger to greet us. It was the first time we had seen one another's since Day 2. I gave probably the biggest fakest hello back, and rolled over to go to sleep. I was done with Day 6 and Day 7 couldn't come soon enough.

Day 7

Waking up in Station 19, the last of the two stations (Stations 9 & 19) where penalties were to be served. Anymore penalties from now on would have to be served there and then at the current Station, apart from the last ride where it would be added on at the end of the race. Mattias had incurred so many penalties that both Michaela and Christoffer had decided to carry on without him. We were up early to get back on the trail of the two Springboks again. This would hopefully be our final full day of riding obviously barring a serious mishap. Julie and Charlotte had organised our horses yesterday evening upon the herder's recommendations. So all the horses that were on the line yesterday were let off to graze during the night and they were only rounding up the horses that we had chosen last night. Time was marching on, it was now twenty minutes to 7 and our horses were still not in, my blood was simmering and wasn't far off coming to the boil. We would usually be tacked up by now and waiting on the clock to turn to 7. There was no sign of Michaela and Christoffer, I think someone had said last night that they weren't getting up at the crack of dawn and were going to have a little lie in, which baffled me.

Finally I was pointed out my chosen horse, I initially didn't like the look of him, and he looked weak. When I went to tack him up he was quite a handful and I didn't like the look of his eye. I needed someone to give me a hand, Donie duly did but he had his own to tack up first. We wasted so much time, it was half past 7, not a good start especially when these are the things we should have been able to control. We mounted. My cheeky little bastard of a horse, decided to try and get rid of me. Not only he wouldn't let me tack him up, he was trying to put me on the floor now. I was in no mood for falling off and I sat to his pathetic bucks.



Riding out of the Station aboard this mule, wouldn't be long before I would be returning.

We had worked out our route last night during our spare time; it looked a tricky route with many ways of tackling it. We even asked the interpreter to ask the herder which would be the best way. Although we had settled on the way herder had instructed us to go, I was beginning to question his judgement after picking this little creature out. We would head directly up to the lowest part of the ridge and then go right hand down after in the valley. There looked like a lot of wetlands in the valley according to the Google Images, so we would have to meander our way around them too.

We rode away from the station and my lad was being mulish, maybe it was just because he was leaving his home. I had probably only ridden over a kilometre and I was getting tired from kicking him and hitting him with my whip. I had lost my patience, not only been late leaving the station but now this creature didn't want to go. I couldn't keep this up for another 39km. Sometimes you have to take a step backwards to take two steps forward. I told Donie I was thinking about turning around and swapping. He agreed. I turned him around and I rode him as hard and as fast as I could back. By the time I got back to station all the rage inside had built up and I couldn't help but let it be known. I exclaimed to whoever was present when I came back, "Is this a fucking donkey trek along a fucking beach or is it meant to be a fucking race!" I was bulling, they had only just brought two horses in that were now on the line ready to be ridden. So I had the choice of them or try going back out on this creature. I chose the former, easily. I wasn't thinking straight and I didn't know which one of the two I should go for. The Scottish vet Harry was on hand and he picked one of them for me. We transferred the saddle as quickly as we could, and I was back on my way to catch up with the trio who were waiting for me just over the ridge. The difference in horses was monumental. He was a little flyer and wanted to go, it just shows you what a difference and a lottery it is when it comes to choosing your horse. Not only physically tiring it can be but even more mentally. Imagine what mood I would be in if I hadn't turned round to swap and had ridden the rest of the stage on him. I didn't want to think about it. I wouldn't have chosen that horse anyway in the first place, not that I was blaming the girls for it but I should have at least casted my eye over him yesterday evening.



Amazing how different it can be with good horses like this one on your side.

It didn't take me long before I was back with the trio again, I was greeted with silence. I think the girls were a little taken aback by my outburst and thought it may be best to leave me be. Julie started singing to me after 10 minutes, maybe to change my mood. I think she did the trick, because her ridiculous singing cracked a little smile. We followed a twisty dirt road which avoided the wetlands. There were a few rolling hills but nothing too extreme that we would have to climb. As we followed the dirt road, coming over one of the ridges I noticed that the road we were on started to trail off not in the direction we should be heading in. We would have to cross the marshland; there was another dirt road on the opposite side. As we tried to trudge through it, it was coming up to their knees. It was shocking and there was no way we could keep going. We had to turn back. The marshland was expanding the further we were going. So we decided to actually go back till we found a decent crossing point. Didn't take too long before we were on the far side of it. It was becoming increasingly warmer. We would usually be at our 2nd station of the day by the time it had gotten this hot, but we were an hour behind so we would have more than likely been there by now.



The Fabulous Four! Charlotte, Me, Julie and Donie on the way to Station 20

We had about 12km left to ride. This new dirt road if it continued straight as it did according to my GPS, then it should take us straight there. As we started to trot up one of the many ridges Charlotte declared she wasn't happy with the way her horse was moving. We all had a look at it in a jog and he didn't look sound. We decided that we would walk a bit longer; perhaps he could shrug it off by some miracle. We walked for a further ten minutes, then he tried a jog again. He had gotten worse. Bollox. With less than 12km left to ride, there was zero chance this horse could go any quicker than being led at a walk. Another heart sinking moment. A weary silence came over us all, no one said anything. We were all deep in thought, wondering what this would mean. If we stayed again, and

undoubtedly thought any chance of winning this race would be over for us. I wanted to kick on and leave them behind but producing what I was thinking into words was proving more difficult than I thought. So in a cowardly way I stayed quiet, I wanted to see what the others would say first. Of course I would have loved to have continued to ride with Julie and Charlotte but it wasn't the right thing to do. It wasn't being unselfish; if it were then we wouldn't have stayed behind with them yesterday evening. Julie and Charlotte declared we should go and leave them behind. We ignored it at first but they repeated it. Donie and I looked at each other and we agreed. Even though it was easy decision thinking about it, it actually was tougher to accept it. Maybe my heart wasn't as stone cold as I had thought. Julie's GPS wasn't working that well and Charlotte didn't even have one, so Donie swapped his with Julie's. We told the girls to catch us up and we wished them luck.

We cantered off into distance leaving Julie and Charlotte who we had ridden with for days behind. You could cut the atmosphere with a knife between Donie and I, the only time it was worse than this in the whole race was on Day 3 after being lost twice and having that horse of his that refused to move. We barely said a word to each other for the remainder of the 12kms. The dirt road did take us all the way to Station 20, I thought looking at the Google Images this 40km would prove to be difficult one to ride with the marshland, an early mountain ridge and so on. It actually turned out to be one of the toughest rides mentally with having to go back to change horses resulting in losing an hour and then losing our fellow riders along the way. It shows you never to underestimate Mongolia and what it could throw at you.

As we walked into our first station of the day, Jess the South African vet was assembling a group of people into one of the 4x4s; she said that they had received an emergency callout from Charlotte's tracker. Their situation had obviously gone from bad to worse. We filled them in on what had happened, to let them know it was going to be a veterinary matter and not a medical concern.

I passed the vet check pretty quickly, 10 minutes before Donie's did. My horse that I had was probably the best ride I had so far on the steppe. Delighted now that I had gone back to swap. I filled my camelbak right up with water. Donie's camelbak had broken many days ago so we had to share my water. We were going to need it more than ever for the next 40kms, as the sun was at its highest point in the sky and it was scorching. I topped up on Donie's only bottle sunscreen of factor 50.

We got through that Station quickly, trying not to lose anymore unnecessary time. We hadn't gone far and we passed over twenty vultures. It was quite a sight, incredible. They didn't observe or take as much interest as we did in them. What powerful ruthless looking birds, with a bald head and their brown rough feathers, looking worn and shabby. Like an old dirty brown coat. It wasn't a safari we were on, so we only watched them for as long as they were in sight whilst we were cantering. This next stage looked straightforward, one long dirt road and it would be just before a soum on our left. No rugged mountains to climb only the common rolling hills. The dirt road wasn't like any of the others, it was like 4 or 5 dirt roads in one, and perhaps it was a Mongolian motorway! It must have had something to do with the soum which was at least over 40kms away. The heat was going to be a real issue, so conserving energy and finding proper watering holes was going to be a top priority. There were many potholes in the dirt road filled with water. It was muddy, dirty water and was of little interest to our steeds. The atmosphere had passed through of leaving the girls behind but we were all the more concerned upon hearing Jess being called out. We hoped it wouldn't be that serious. We were back plotting how we were going to catch Barry and Joe. Although it may have

been pretty straightforward as a Mongolian 40km stages go, but it was so monotonous. We were riding at a decent steady pace, and the kilometres were dwindling down. We were coming up to what looked a lake on the GPS on our left hand side, but the closer we got it became apparent that a lake it was no more. It was dried to the bone, leaving only cracks in the ground hinting to where water once lay. The only other lake on the GPS was a further 10kms on which would leave only a few kilometres left to Station 21. We were desperate to find a watering hole for them, we couldn't afford for any penalties. If we were feeling dehydrated, how would these horses feel?

We had to settle for the lake only a few kilometres before the station. We made a beeline to the right for it. We walked them straight into it and continued to walk them all the way through it. After watering them we rode directly towards Station 21, we walked them over the last kilometre and lead them for the final five hundred metres; it was our standard routine that we got so accustomed to now. We were greeted by Helen, another South African vet but more importantly we recognised a more familiar South African face, Barry. There was no sign of Joe to be seen though. Barry was just leaving the Station as we were leading them in. Helen told us that Joe had a problem with his horse and he was leading it the rest of the way, she seemed very concerned about it. Seeing Barry gave us a big spur on.

The flies at this Station were a real nuisance, and very annoying swarming around both my and the horses head. I was told that flies go to the highest part of your body, so there I was walking around with my left arm bolt up in the air. It didn't really work and I looked like a right idiot. Who cared I was in Mongolia, who was going to see me, only some random Mongolian family! Our horse's heart rates were high; I was concerned because they were higher than any other station. We couldn't afford to have a penalty. Helen thought part of the reason could be the fact of the annoying flies. I started walking him around the line of horses, perhaps that may make a difference beside the rest of the horses. I had to take the full 30 minutes before she checked again. I brought it in close to another horse. I had no control, just standing motionless with flies still swarming around me but I'm more concerned by what body language Helen is showing, giving me the first hint of good or bad news before she had the chance to develop it into words. 15 seconds, is a long time, but I had passed by the skin of my teeth. Donie had also passed; he had the same problem as I had. We were both relieved.

The weather had a dramatic turnaround, from blistering heat which proved difficult to ride in. The clouds had turned, and it was now very dark in the middle of the day. In the direction we had just ridden from, a thundering bolt of lightning lit up the scenery. It happened again a few more times. The noise of the thunder too was deafening. With that it started lashing with rain. I ran over, picked up my saddle and bag and fired it into the Ger. I couldn't believe my eyes, a 2 litre bottle of Coca Cola. Whose was it? I had to have some. It turned out to be Helen's and she permitted me to have a drink. It felt like heaven. I don't know how many times I told Donie, I just can't wait to get my hands on a cold can of coke when we have finished the race. So now I've had the coke prematurely, what had I left to ride for!

The rain was so heavy. We had timed it well; we were inside the Ger refuelling on mutton and black tea, looking out at the pelting rain. As we sat there devouring some part of a sheep, in walked Michaela and Christoffer. Not a great feeling. We chatted for a while and it turned out either of them hadn't served the 3 hours when the race was stopped days ago. No wonder how they had

made up so much ground on us. Joe had turned up too with his poorly horse; his horse had the “thumps”. Helen was administering a drip to Joe’s horse, as we were tacking up during what seemed like the eye of the storm. It had gone eerily quiet, no rain but the dark clouds remained. Helen informed both Michaela and Christoffer that they would have to serve their 3 hours at this station. We were leaving on the trail of Barry who probably had 45 minutes to an hour on us after being held up at the station. Was Barry a sitting duck in front of us or was he a breakaway rider like in the Tour de France riding away from us? It was too early for a sprint finish and I had a feeling we would hear him quacking, if not this evening I’d settle for tomorrow morning.

We didn’t stand on ceremony; we got into gear quickly, riding down to a little valley that would take us all the way to Station 22. There was a meandering river to our right which was nearly as twisting and winding as the dirt road we rode alongside it. We thought the storm had blown over when we left the station earlier but it was soon obvious that we left in the eye of it. We heard the deafening thunder again, and the heavens opened once more but this time we had no Ger or anything to shelter us from what the Mongolian weather was throwing at us. We were soaked; I was as wet as I was when I fell into water a few days ago now. Then as soon as the rain concluded, a gale force wind opened up blowing from behind us. It was quite incredible; it was that strong that Donie who was only at arm’s length away from me couldn’t hear me shouting at the top my voice. It lasted for over ten minutes, which seemed longer and then it was over. The storm had passed; it was odd that it was quite refreshing. The dead heat would drain your energy, which we encountered on the way to Station 21. So we had welcomed the storm after all we were Irish and we are more used to lashing rain than blistering sunshine!

The valley we were riding down was beginning to get narrower; the river was coming closer to our nearside mountain. At one stage it got pretty tight, leaving just a little gap for us to squeeze between the mountain and the river. I was sure the station would be on this side of the river, so I hoped we wouldn’t have to cross the river as we would have to cross it again at some stage. We had two big types of horses; they were lazy types both of them but responded well to our cajoling. If they could get away with it I’m sure they would have went at their pace, a walk. They weren’t obviously in the same urgency we were to get to Station 22.

All the way along I was calculating what time we could reach the next station and what time we could be away on route to Station 23. Our GPS stated at the speed we were riding at we would reach our destination just before 6pm. If Barry had upheld his hour lead on us he would be there for 5pm. Joe would have little chance of being able to leave the Station for a long time with his horse that had the “thumps” and would have incurred a further penalty of 2 hours. Michaela and Christoffer who were hit with that 3 hour stoppage that they had to incur now because we all had done days ago would mean they could get to Station 22 at the earliest of roughly after 8pm, leaving them only less than an hour left to ride. I thought all going well we could be in prime position for the final day.

We arrived at Station 22 just before 6pm; greeted once again by Pete the South African vet. He informed us of Barry and his progress, he still had an hour lead on us, as I’d predicted. This next stage looked difficult, probably the most daunting of any of the stages and I’d been dreading it for quite some time. What faced us was a wall of mountains, trying to find the right passage was going to be challenge. Mountains are and were our biggest fear, apart from being lost. They became our new swear words, and you wouldn’t dare mention either of them, definitely not in the same

sentence anyway! 3 hours left of riding and if we got stuck and lost up a mountain at 9pm in darkness, didn't bear thinking of.

We passed our vet check, and chose our next horses. They all looked fit and as opposed to most other stations where you're trying to sieve through with a fine tooth comb as to which ones looked good. I don't think it mattered with this lot, they all looked great. I picked a little strong grey looking type. As the herders tacked up our chosen horses, Donie and I went to refuel ourselves with some more mutton. There was a good chance as we may not get to Station 23 before curfew so it was imperative we were fed and watered well for what could be a long night. Pete gave us some new coordinates for our GPS's as the location of Station 23 had altered slightly from what was already programmed into our GPS's. It hadn't changed by much distance but it was still important. The herder showed us on our Google Images which direction we should take. It was up a tiny valley between the mountains. There were many little valleys but some could close to nothing leaving us to climb the mountain. These tips were vital. Pete had told us that Barry left the station to the right as opposed to what the herder had instructed us to go left. Advantage us, I thought. We finished our lovely dinner, as mutton went this was by far the best dinner we had out on the steppe. They had tonnes of sweets too, and my pockets were left bulging upon riding out of the Station.

My horse looked fresh and rearing to go. I jumped on and he coiled up like a spring. I sat tight waiting for him to release his energy into bucking. He had a go at it but it was nothing to worry about, he was just showing us he was fresh and well for the journey ahead, I hoped. We were cantering down the hill with a daunting sight of the wall of mountains. We were heading towards the valley that the herder stood and pointed at. I was standing directly behind so I could work out exactly where he was pointing. The closer we were getting each mountain looked the same; there was no exact landmarks to go by. We started to climb up a little hill which would later turn into a mountain if we were to carry on. I felt uneasy. I wasn't sure this was where he had told us to go. Being so close to the mountains made us disorientated; it was difficult to know where we were to go. We decided to have a look at the GPS's and the Google Images to try and determine where we were. I hadn't a clue, and the last thing I wanted to do was to be guessing. We came up with a plan. There was a soum half way along in our 40km stage, with a dirt road to it and then another dirt road from there to our destination. The only problem with going with our trusty dirt roads, which had yet to fail us, was that it was going in a zigzagging direction between mountains thus adding possibly another 10km to our ride. We decided to follow the dirt road, for the simple fact as I stated, they were trusty. I do remember the herder saying don't go as the crow flies because if you go up the wrong mountain, well it could be curtains. I was happy to follow the road; we knew what was in store for us this way, even if it meant it would be now a 50km stage for us. There was no way we would make Station 23 by the curfew, but we could ride our horses hard up till 9pm straight and they would have all night to recover.

Even though we were following the road it was hilly but nothing like what surrounded us, I was comfortable following our little dirt trail. We rode them pretty hard, my horse was starting to get a bit lazy, but the Soum was in sight now. Our first mini target reached. We would now swing a left just before the soum going up a very narrow valley. Time was against us, and with every minute that went by was evident by how dark it was becoming. Question poised on both our lips, was where were we going to stay tonight? Will we locate a nearby family and try and stay there, with only two words of Mongolish and plenty of hand gestures or sleep out under the stars. Along the valley we

were riding there were wooden sheds up in the hills, this is where the livestock would be protected from the harsh Mongolian wintery weather. With us still in the summer months, they were empty and plenty to choose from. We unanimously chose the sheds in the hills, there were so many that we would settle on which ever was nearest at ten minutes to nine, our curfew.

We rode up to our new lodgings for the night which needed no advance bookings and it looked perfect. There was a little pen with grass, where we could put both horses and be able to build it up with wood available. We untacked both of them and escorted them to their pen for the night. We hobbled them, just to be sure. Then we built up the entrance with the wood on hand, it was about 5ft high all the way the way around, there was no way they would be escaping from our Fort Knox! It was comforting to know that the horses would still be there in the morning, one less thing to worry about. We had rode really well, with only 12km left to ride in the morning we were in great spirits as we thought we must be in front. For our own sleeping arrangements we went for the suite in the back left hand corner. It looked the most sheltered. We rolled out our sleeping bags, ate the final few sweets that I had still left over for supper and we both clambered into bed. It was going to be our last day riding tomorrow and we both sensed each other's excitement.

Day 8

Waking on what should be our last day on the Mongol Derby. With well over 900km covered, we could smell the finish line. I awoke first, glanced at my wristwatch. We've slept in but there's no real need for panic. We still had an hour to kill before we could ride, I woke Donie. I think it's the first time in the Derby that I've woken before him. We both have an extra spring in our step escaping from our sleeping bags when I inform him of sleeping in. I told him I had dreamt that we both had slept in till 11 o'clock; coincidentally he had a similar dream. How odd. I didn't sleep well at all, which is rarity for me. I couldn't get comfortable and I couldn't help popping my head up every now again to see if both our steeds were still locked up. They were still there when we eventually woke.

Dismantle our pen, both hobbles have broken. Good job we had the pen and didn't need to rely on the hobbles like we did a few nights ago. We tack them up, pull them out and give them a pick of grass. We were counting down till 7am. It's pretty amazing how quickly it becomes light, it's cold once again which we are well used to by now. It wouldn't be long till the sun rises and with it the temperature.

7am and we're off. The hardest part of the stage was completed. Once we ride our way through the meandering narrow valley, it will once again open up to another flat open plain. From what we had gathered from the last station, Barry had gone the opposite way to what he was told. Joe would be a long way behind because of his horse with thumps and would have incurred another penalty. Michaela and Christoffer would have had less than an hour to ride last night and we should have 3 hours of a head start on them. We concluded we were in front, but by how far. We continued at the pace we set yesterday. We only had ridden 7km and we had about 5km left to ride. Our horses were pretty exhausted, either that or they had turned into mules overnight. We were cajoling them along. We had nowhere to water them yesterday evening, so we were on the lookout for a nearby watering hole.

After riding out of the valley onto another once again mammoth open plain it was a more welcoming sight than the sight of mountains that greeted us leaving Station 22. Ok, we went the long way

round but I was more than content doing that then getting lost. We found a watering hole and our horses nosedived to drink the water. Out of the blue, we heard greetings from a more familiar tongue, not one of a native Mongolian. We turned round to see Michaela and Christoffer. I couldn't believe my eyes nor did I want to either. How could this be? From our calculations there was no chance they could have ridden this quickly. It's not like we were hanging around and taking our time, I know we went the long way but still this made no logistical sense. We replied with two friendly hello's but I couldn't help showing how deflated I was. It was plain for all to see and I didn't care less either. Michaela, an Austrian was very friendly and had a natural seat to ride; she was always in a good mood. Christoffer, a Swede was one of the tallest in the line-up of the Derby, was a professional showjumper and a good rider and he showed this on Day 1 when he sat to a bucking fresh horse at Station 2. We later found out they had paid a local on a motorbike to show them the quickest route through the narrow valleys in the mountain. Why didn't we think of that?

I felt empty inside like they had just both punched me in the stomach. Enough water I thought let's get back on the road. Michaela and Christoffer had decided to walk for a bit so we were trying to press on. They were sluggish still and had no interest in helping us. Anger was building up inside. I wanted to get the next station as quick as possible, I wasn't asking for a flat out gallop merely a steady hack canter but I was at pains to just get him to trot. Donie was in the same boat but his responded better to his urgings. Up ahead was a mound like a tiny mountain out of place. Our GPS's stated it was directly over it, do we take a left or a right around it. It was six to half a dozen between; I thought. We elected to go right while the two behind who were now cantering had decided to go left. As we came up to the ridge it was clear it was the longer way round. They were now in front of us. Their horses looked fresher than ours. I thought after 10 hours of a break last night they would be fresh and willing to go today but they were anything but. The last few kilometres was excruciating painful for us mentally. We both were now leading them, more like dragging them along in the last kilometre. All we could do was watch them untack in front of us while I pulled my unhelpful grey along.

When we finally arrived at Station 23, I couldn't believe it. Barry was here too. He had just mounted and he was now leaving. Game Over. We were well and truly fucked I thought, we had blown our chances. From assuming we were well in front we were now tied 4th. I had broken my number one rule, never assume. If we were going into this station knowing we were in 4th I'm sure we would be conjuring up a plan on how we could win it. We were in such high spirits this morning, dejection was written all over our faces.

I unsaddled, felt his heart rate and he was high, too high. Michael and Kevin were here who were filming all the riders all the way through our adventure for Ivo's movie documentary of "All the Wild Horses". Kevin stuck a microphone right under my face asking me some daft question, "How was that 40km stage?" I replied shortly and abruptly "Slow!" and I walked off. I was in little or no mood for this. I had my own concerns. This grey's heart rate was at the top of my priorities right now. Harry the Scottish Vet was here to vet the horses. He checked mine, he failed. I had 30 minutes now for his heart rate to come down otherwise I would incur a 2 hour penalty. It was quickly turning into a nightmare. I tried to think positive; negativity wouldn't get us anywhere but make this experience all the more tougher and longer. So I was walking up and down the line checking out which horse could get us back in the race. Michaela and Christoffer were tacking up and would be leaving shortly. Donie's had just passed and was now looking for his next mount. We were desperate to get two

solid good horses. The interpreter let the herder know our feelings and wishes. This man looked a living legend; he sat on the ground with his legs folded, hiding behind an old hat and small sunglasses. He was old, intriguing and looked like he could tell a story or two. He kept to himself and looked on from the background, sitting there smoking his long pipe. It looked wrong to disturb him but he duly picked out a couple of good horses for us. I casted my eyes over them and agreed with his choices, all I had to do was pass the vet check. If I didn't, well it was more than likely curtains.

I passed, just. Thank God. I needed all of the thirty minutes though. Michaela and Christoffer had left over twenty minutes ago. Donie was tacked up and helped me to tack up mine. We had little time to waste and had to push on. There was 80km left to go and I suppose anything could happen to the others but I didn't want to rely on other peoples misfortunes. Barry had nearly an hour on us, Michaela and Christoffer had around twenty five minutes. We needed to ride efficiently and quickly more than ever before. We left the Station and went straight into a steady canter. These two seemed as keen to do our penultimate stage as quickly as we did.

We rode over a ridge and came down into a downhill plain. At the bottom of it, lay a watering hole. We decided to give them a chance for water now in case they hadn't been watered in a while. They had a little but were more interested in carrying on, and weren't going to stop them. It was a warm day but no way near as hot as it had been on other days. It was gradual incline up to the next ridge on this plain. We couldn't follow any dirt roads as there were none heading in our direction. The ground was firm with not as many marmot holes. We rode cross country at a decent pace. Over the following ridge we had caught up with Michaela and Christoffer and passed them. We had our sights on Barry now, but all we could do was worry about ourselves. Keep this gallop up and we could have a chance in the next 40km. The plain was now being funnelled into a valley which was becoming narrower with another little incline. I constantly looked round to see how close our pursuers were trailing us. The further we went their images, turned into little dots and soon there was nothing. We optimistically scanned the foreground on the lookout for Barry, but to no avail. We kept positive; these two horses were keeping our beliefs alive. We rode through the narrow valley again on another gradual descent. Then it opened out to another valley which but was much wider. We didn't break stride and had ridden well over half way. We had only stopped once to give them a drink to which they had little interest. They were putting in a gallant effort, but we've had a few of these that couldn't keep it going for the final 20km, could these be different? We hoped.

We continued on at the same pace, anxious not to get too greedy and ask for too much. We were happy for them to dictate the pace they wanted to go now, and we stood up in our stirrups as mere passengers trying not to interfere but just point them in the right direction. As we were descending down into this much wider valley, Donie spotted up ahead in the distance a figure of some sort. We weren't close enough to give anymore description other than it was moving. We eagerly and optimistically hoped it was Barry, not a local Mongolian, vulture or a mirage because we were so desperate to see him. We didn't interfere with our steeds though regardless of the excitement we were feeling. We were drawing closer and with that we could confirm it was Barry in his dark grey clothing that he wore. He still had a couple of kilometres on us but we were growing in confidence, with a bit of luck we will catch him, soon.

The kilometres dwindled by, Barry looked to have been struggling when we first spotted him. He must have seen us as he was riding with a lot more urgency. He had only a slight advantage over us.

As we rode up what would be our final mound. It was steep but not very high, many things could be seen from this location, but the only thing that mattered was Station 24, and there it lay with less than a kilometre and downhill too just for good measure. Barry would keep his lead to the Station but only by a whisker, all that mattered was the next and final destination. Barry was already leading his horse the final few hundred yards; we copied as this was our usual routine anyway. Both horses had served us indomitably, and I couldn't owe enough to them. I wasn't getting caught up in the moment or thinking about their non-stop of cantering for 40km, I was worried about now; the present. The vet check was head of priorities and then finding another one that was half as good as the last ones would suffice.

As we were leading them I said to Donie, I don't spot any vets. It looks just like a normal Mongolian family. He disagreed stating he could see Barbara. I looked again and thought he was mad. The closer we got all was revealed, Donie was right. There was the delightful Barbara dressed in traditional Mongolian clothing, a bright shiny red one with blue patterns on it for that extra touch. She wore her fancy red wellies to match! She greeted us with her usual big smile. I was a little more anxious than my usual laid back style of greeting her which she probably wasn't used to. We whipped the saddles off. Donie was the first to pass the vet, before both Barry and I. My horse's heart rate felt high. I walked him around the line of horses hoping that may help bring it down. I was trying to kill two birds with one stone again. I was leading him while checking out the selection of horses on hand. Donie had already picked his horse, which was by the far best looking of the bunch. As I walked him around, I spotted one that caught my eye. He was hiding between two, I shooed them away and had a good look at him. I liked him. I asked the interpreter to ask the herder what he thought of the one I pointed at. He proceeded to take it off the line; there was a mix-up in communication. I didn't want it taken off the line. I wanted to know was it any good. Barry was yet to pass the vet check and whoever passed would have next choice. Alas Barry passed before me and chose my horse. Whether he would have spotted it without me picking I'll never know. I didn't want to know either, didn't want to give him an edge knowing I was annoyed or give him any satisfaction. Barry was quick to tack up and get on his way. Barbara came over to check if my gallant horse's heart rate had come down. She asked me in a serious way, "Are you in it to try and win it?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing I replied with a bit urgency and confusing in my voice "Fucking right I was in it to win it, what else do you think I'm in it for!" She then proceeded to quickly check my horse. He just about passed. I asked the interpreter to find the herders best horse and quickly. He picked one and threw him my bridle to put on. I ran over to grab my saddle. Donie's was saddled and was ready to go; he was in refilling my camelbak with water. I shouted to him to let him know we could go. Barry was gone possibly ten minutes. As we mounted Michaela and Christoffer were just strolling into the Station, they wished us luck and told us to go catch Barry!

We rode out in full pursuit. There were mountains either side with a few rolling hills to ride over. There was a mountain pass that we all would have go through and then it would be a flat open plain on the far side with about 6km left to ride to the finish after the mountain pass. We were going at a decent pace, the same speed as we had done on our previous two. I was struggling a tad after we had gone 8km to keep up with Donie's. I couldn't believe that I picked this little bay; I looked down and noticed the stumpy gut on him. What had I done? I had come so far to blindly pick a fat little horse. I know the herder picked him as his best but not all herders can be trusted entirely, I didn't even cast my eye over it. Donie, saw that I was struggling, he asks me a bemusedly "Why did you pick that, it's fat!" I replied sharply, "I know." "Then why did you pick it?" he asked again. "I

panicked, ok. He picked it. I panicked.” I protested in a weird sense of a way, knowing I’d fucked up. I had panicked, in the heat of the moment. Barry had gone and I didn’t want to waste any time. I should have thought to myself, we gave him an hour head start and we had caught him. He had ten minutes on us, five more minutes choosing a horse wouldn’t have made that much of a difference, but I panicked on the most important leg of them all. What an idiot, I hoped I wouldn’t regret it. I would soon find out.

We continued on at my horses pace. We spotted Barry, he was on our far left, couldn’t work out where he was going. It looked like he was going the wrong way, either he was or we were. I went to my GPS for a second opinion; it was going in a straight line towards the mountain pass. I ignored Barry and we rode on, either he realised that he was going wrong or saw us, but he started to divert our way. It wasn’t long before we had caught him or more like he came towards us. I wanted to stay away from him, we both did. He came over waving the white flag. He gave us a speech that he couldn’t go on, that his horse wouldn’t go on his own and that he’d given up and semi congratulated us. Did he think we came over to Mongolia on a motorbike? We didn’t buy a second of his Oscar performance. We all just walked together for a little bit. We started cantering again; he was sticking to us like glue. He wouldn’t leave us alone; he looked round to see how I was going. I tried my best to bluff him that mine was going really well when in fact I was struggling. I was continuously monitoring the horizon behind us to see if Michaela and Christoffer were anywhere in the vicinity as the three of us had really eased off the gas. There was no shaking Barry off, especially with the kind of type of horse I had. I was trying to figure out how the end may unfold. We were just hacking along, like it was a trek with no real urgency. Donie and I had from the get go decided we would ride together and finish together as one. Now that we were upsides Barry and it was going to be a struggle to shake him, I had to come to a decision. It was an easy one. I was on the worst horse of the three. Donie’s looked the best by far. Was I going to sacrifice this whole race just so we could finish together, it was a simple answer of no. I went upsides Donie and I said under my breath, don’t worry about me, when the time comes kick on and win it. I know he was keen for both of us to finish together, but under the circumstances I wasn’t prepared to hold him back. I’m certain if the roles were reversed he would have said the same. We didn’t let on to Barry what we were saying but the wiry old silver fox knew we weren’t talking about something like the weather.

We were starting to climb up the mountain pass; it was quite steep but not as steep as any of the other mountain passes we had passed along the way. It was a good vantage point to try and spot our pursuers but we were in total isolation. The three of us were reminiscing of life as we had known it, and what we were going to eat when we were finally back to reality. How we all craved to shower and other little luxuries that are taken for granted in everyday life. We reminded Barry how much of a nutter must he and Joe be to be back tackling the 1000km, once again. Barry, who was never short of a few words, went pretty quiet, like he agreed with us. His silence said so much. We were told that they had many difficulties last year and when Barry broke his collarbone near the end, felt they owed themselves another crack at it, but we were going to do our utmost to spoil their party. I enjoyed our conversation through the woods at the top of the mountain pass; I knew it wouldn’t last much longer till one of us made a move with less than 6km to go so I made the most of it. As we walked down the descent of the mountain, the chat was becoming less, shorter with each other’s answers. It was like a game of chess, I could see Barry and Donie were over thinking their next move. Who was going to pull the trigger first? It was getting tenser. Barry said “Will we all cross together?” 2 against 1, I preferred our odds. Donie replied with “Will see what happens sure” as if to say nice try

but we weren't giving in that easy. We were back on flat land once again. It was another huge open plain with mountains in the very far distance either side. With that we broke into a steady trot from our casual and lethargic walk. I looked at the GPS 5km left to our destination. The tension was being released through our horses and we were starting to build on the speed, within minutes we were doing a strong canter. I was trying to pinpoint where exactly the finish was in the distance. All three of us were going as equal. It was stepped up another notch; I asked my horse for more. I threatened him with the long leather whip by twirling it round and round followed by a kick in the belly. I would save my whip for as long as I dared to. The kilometres were tumbling off the GPS; we were down to only a couple of kilometres left in the 1000km Derby. We were all neck and neck, to come this far and there was literally nothing in it. Surely something had to give. We started riding a finish, kicking and growling at them. A dried up stream was in our path, we went for the one, two, three jump but they were having none of it and did a quick a quick shuffle down and up it and we were back in fifth gear again. I was putting mine under severe pressure, I had the leather lead out and it was being put to a full work out. I was pushing and kicking, my horse was beginning to crack, and he couldn't keep it up with the other two. I tried desperately to keep him going. I was shouting loudly at him, I had come so far, come on horse I thought, come on. We hadn't much further to go, just give me everything you've got. The distress levels were growing and I could tell, like all the hazard lights had lit up on dashboard. I was blind to it, I had my mind focused on what I wanted but unfortunately he couldn't keep it going, although he did try. It was a horrible feeling knowing I wouldn't be winning but I knew my faith much earlier in the stage, so it didn't come as a shock to me. I admitted defeat in the last kilometre, I stood bolt upright in my irons, looking and willing on Donie. I don't ever recall shouting for a jockey in front of me to win before in a race. It was too close for me to make out who was in front, then Barry crossed to the right and Donie switched to his other side. Bollox. Barry has it, bollox. "Come on Donie!" I roared. Willing him and wishing him to pass him. Again it looked too close to call; I had no idea who won as the crossed the line. I just hoped.



Barry and Donie fight out the finish.

I let my horse coast to the winning line and let him walk across whilst waving to the mini crowd that had gathered to watch us home, it was no Cheltenham crowd let alone a Catterick crowd but it didn't matter who was here to watch us finish. What mattered is I had finished, more for self-fulfilment than anything else, not who was here to see me in. Officially I was 44 seconds behind in third but who had won? Dead heat it turned out.



Too close to call, and a dead heat seemed fair.

It was too close to call and it would be too unfair to too. I guess they didn't have a camera on the line for a photo finish, who would have thought after 1000km of navigating these semi wild Mongolian horses for it to finish in a head bobbing finish. Not me for one. I was glad that there wasn't a camera there either to determine whose sweaty Mongolian horse's whisker finished in front of the other. A dead heat seemed fair, the right result I guess. I would have debated it not right if we had said at the top of the mountain pass, "Oh let's all cross together and be nice to one another, and everything was rosy in the garden." No, I personally wouldn't have had agreed to such nonsense. Because everything wasn't rosy in the garden, there wasn't even a rose. We all had flown halfway across the world to be here. Ridden 25 Mongolian horses over 7 and a half days, with us fuelled on rations of mutton and water, a weight watchers worst nightmare diet. We all had made so many sacrifices to take on the challenge that was The Mongol Derby; we had scrounged to everyone that could make this possible and raising over £10k in the process for our beneficiaries, The Injured

Jockeys Fund. Tales would be spilt over beer in the after parties; these tales grew from the roots. The best stories are the ones, that at the time may seem like nightmares but they only become possible by everyone putting their neck on the line to make it a race and be competitive. I'm pretty sure if we all just held hands and went for a steady hack and a trek across the Mongolian steppe that we would have little, certainly less stories to tell the grandkids. Cracks emerge when you are putting your body on the line for one another in our instance, our group of two and then four. The strenuous of us riding as fast and as hard as we could within reason, made for some unbelievable times and some excruciating hard times too for both body and mind, in particular the latter. What it did do was bring us together, bonding us. I'm sure I know them in ways that none of their friends back home would have experienced them and they too would have seen a side to me that majority of people I'm friends with will never see. So if you were to ask me now after what we had put our bodies and minds through to get this far by racing for us to just call it off after 995km and walk across the line in unison? It may have meant my name is joint 1st on the record of the 4th Mongol Derby in history. It wasn't what the race had meant to me, this was a race and not a trek, and to me it would have admitted defeat, taken the easy way out. It would have been like the three of us were losers not winners, because we wouldn't have been. The 5km dash for the finish was fitting, what this race deserved and to me it was what the Mongol Derby experience meant to our team and to our rivals from South Africa. Blood, sweat and tears could be seen on our faces as we battled it out from a distance from what was a long way from the finish in our jump races back home on more familiar grounds. Even though I faded into third the scenes which I looked on at, kept my heart pounding. The willing and hoping was all I could do. I couldn't do anything else, I had shown my hand and it wasn't good enough, 44 seconds not good enough in fact. It ended in a dead heat for Donie and Barry. It was fair, neither had admitted defeat and giving it a fitting ending to a mind blowing experience we all had encountered. They were both winners and had done The Mongol Derby justice.



Donie, Me and Barry celebrate finishing the Mongol Derby '12 with a cold a beer

I went over to congratulate both Donie and Barry. All that pushing on from station to station without taking really a moment to relax, had reached its climax and now it grounded to a halt and was over. It felt odd, it was over and we were finished. We were handed a cold bottle of beer, it tasted sweet and rewarding but not before Katy had ambushed me with a bowl of fermented mare's milk. It was tradition so I tried it but, it tasted none the better since my last encounter with it. We were given an extra hour for us to pass the vet check, so we could ride them over the winning line as opposed to what we'd done previously at every other station by leading them in. We continued to walk them around, but it was clear that Barry's horse didn't look right behind. He was getting worse by the minute. Barry's horse was lame behind which resulted in him incurring a 2 hour penalty. We felt for Barry, we did say to him no matter what they officially did; we wouldn't forget the ding dong battle we had all the way to the line. Granted it moved me up a placing, giving us a 1st and 2nd in the race of the 34 who started on the starting line over 7 days ago. We accomplished what we had set out to do. It was relief to a degree but more so satisfaction.



Katy ambushing me with Airag, fermented mare's milk full of alcohol. Disgusting stuff

We were cheered home by The Adventurists crew; fellow riders who had to withdraw due to being injured amongst them were Erin, Linda and Paul. Paul who we heard had broken his collarbone on the way to the first station; his Derby was over before it really begun. Linda had gotten a bit further before we witnessed her fall which later resulted in a punctured lung which caused her to pull out too. Erin had gotten as far Station 4 had snapped her medial ligament in her knee due to her leg being caught behind the saddlebag and when he bucked it twisted her knee out. It just shows you how something so small and a tiny error or misfortune could end with enormous consequences.

Michaela and Christoffer came across the line together over an hour later, followed later on by Joe shuffling poor Barry back to 6th place. There was no one expected to be joining us for quite a while, so we transferred all our gear to one of the luxurious Gers that were on offer for us, which had beds! Also our other bag of fresh clothes were in there awaiting our arrival. We didn't waste any more

time for our eagerly awaited shower. The shower was poor, with little to no pressure but it was warm and given what we had been used to over the past week, it was nonetheless heavenly.

Finish Camp, was made up of 16 Gers with beds of 4 in each. A circular main reception room where we would eat and certainly drink was alongside them. Upstairs was the dining area with a 360 degree view of the surroundings. We had some dinner, it was fancier than what we had survived on too, and I washed it down a can of coke. I was sitting back like a pig in shit. I was washed, in some fresh clean clothes and was just drinking away my can of coke in my own little world. There were only 6 riders in but by tomorrow evening everyone would be here.

As darkness was beginning to fall, we got word that they were expecting the arrival of Julie and Charlotte. Donie and I along with everyone went to greet them in. It was getting that dark we were struggling to spot them in the distance, but lo and behold they appeared to finish before the 9pm cut-off time for joint 7th. I was delighted to see them again; the 4 of us were reunited once more! They wanted to be the first girls in but Michaela had beaten them to it. I'm sure if they hadn't such a mishap they would have been but this was Mongolia and nothing was going to be straightforward. They dealt with it brilliantly, they were tough as old boots the pair of them and went about it with a great attitude and they were always smiling. From early days Donie and I couldn't get our heads around how hardy and tough they were and they surprised us. Both of them didn't know each other before Mongolia but their friendship blossomed out on the steppe. You would swear they had been friends for many a year but that just shows you the nature and character these two girls were. We owed them a lot for what they had done for us out there, and it wasn't to go unforgotten. We would make it up to them at the bar, they worked hard and they certainly played hard!

We drank till the wee hours of the morning sitting around in the dining area, sharing stories with a few shots of vodka for good measures. We looked forward to seeing everyone tomorrow when the proper parties would commence. Withdrawing to our beds that night, it was quite the contrast to our shed we slept in last night. It was a nice feeling to know we had done it, I could sleep happy tonight.

Day 9

A lie in was just what the doctor had ordered, I'm sure we deserved it. At breakfast time we were told that Mattias had ridden into finish camp in the wee hours of the morning. The crazy Swede had done so against the rules of the riding time. We were told he paid a local on a motorbike to lead him the way so his headlight could show them the way, what a lunatic. The unexpected would be what was expected from Mattias though, much to Charles's annoyance that had to get up in the middle of the night to see him in.

Everyone sat waiting in the dining room for the next group to arrive. A team of 4 came over the horizon, so we went out to meet them. Simon, Craig and Heather, the three South Africans and Sam the New Zealander rode in as one. They were all in high spirits, capped off by the beaming smile of Heather which was as broad as the horizon behind. Simon and Craig who were mighty craic and such gentlemen too. In their company, you were sure to be either laughing and joking or getting up to mischief, particularly under Craig's influence in the mischief department. I couldn't speak highly enough of both of them, who had welcomed us from day one. Heather was a gem. Beautiful, elegant

and in equal measures with her stunning good looks she had guts with a fantastic bright attitude. She was the navigator for both Simon and Craig, as they both couldn't see the dirt road markings on the GPS. I'm sure it would have been a lot of laughs riding with the three of them. Sam, who we had ridden with on the way to station 7 before he decided to go his own way. It was the first time we had seen him since. I couldn't say a bad word about him, a good guy. I think he slightly underestimated the challenge that was a foot; I suppose I could have been guilty of that too. His father had come all the way to see him finish the race.



Cossie sharing a joke with Simon, Craig, Donie and Me while Michael is capturing it on film.

I welcomed our fellow riders with a cold bottle of beer in hand for them; they certainly deserved it as they had their own number of thrills and spills along the way. Both Simon and Craig picked up injuries. Si had broken three ribs and Craig had fractured his scapula we later found out but their pain was not evident on their faces at the finishing line. Simon had endured his broken ribs for 3 days. It seemed when the tough got tough these guys just got tougher. Their determination had gotten them to finish camp, they may not have been two spring chickens as they were dubbed them F.O.G.'s, but where I'm sure a lot of other more youthful bodies would have called it a day, they certainly didn't and not a cry or moan to be heard either. I admired their spirit.

Not too long to wait after, Ben, Cossie and Will rode in together. 3 different characters from 3 different continents. Ben from England who played polo for the Army and takes part in UK Ironmen challenges, a thorough gentleman who enjoyed a pint or three. Cossie, who we left behind on Day 2, was an Australian Vet with the wittiest sense of humour of the whole field who made the ride seem a lot shorter. Will, from the USA who we dubbed Will the Cowboy, who said what he thought. A good horseman and a good man to boot too. All 3 brought something different to the table but what they shared in common was that it was to be done in the best nature and was to be enjoyed. I looked forward to our antics later, where we could recommence where we left off on the training days.

It wasn't till nearly the end of the day before Sonja and Wendy who were the final two riders to complete the race. Sonja who had a very dry sense of humour and made a lot of the early running on Day 1 before she too had problems sleeping out on the steppe waking up to find her horse missing. With not much time left to ride, the final few riders strolled in. They who for one reason or another had to be brought forward skipping stations aboard the 4x4's, therefore they weren't given a ranking. A total of 18 finished, out of the 34 who started the race over a week ago. Mongolia could be cruel be at times, luck, skill and determination were some of the key ingredients you needed to finish let alone to go and win it.

We partied till the early hours of the morning; it was great to be reunited with everyone again to share our experiences over beers and vodka. The memories of the night are hazy and most I don't recall which I suppose meant it was a good night!

Day 10 & 11

Waking up worse for wear in the middle of nowhere in Mongolia. It would be our final day at the campsite before we returned to Ulaanbaatar tomorrow morning. Most of us decided to spend the afternoon climbing up to the summit of a dormant volcano. It looked not far away but it turned out to be 6km, distances are so deceptive but you would have thought we would have known better by all our recent experiences. It was surely a cure for anyone nursing a hangover. Talking of volcano's, Jess "Volcano" had called it a day halfway through her Derby, I thought even less of her now but I was surely delighted not to have had to listen to her again at finish camp.



Some of us who climbed to the summit of the Volcano; stunning views.

When we finally got to the summit which was much harder than I had anticipated, the views once again from any high vantage point were stunning. We soaked it all up, and cameras were produced to capture it. I refused the bottle of vodka that was being passed around like holy water in Lourdes. By the time we got back it was time for the Presentations to begin. We were each handed out our own Deels, traditional Mongolian dress. We won best team too and we were presented a silk blue cloth each, which is a ceremonial scarf in Mongolia and is used to tie to sacred objects or to offer gifts to people or deities.



Above; Being presented with my own Dell.



Right; Donie, Michaela and I in our new traditional dress

After the Presentation Ceremony concluded it was time for some traditional Mongolian music and some native Mongolian wrestling. Both Erik and Andy the Doc had a go at tackling the wrestlers but were unsuccessful in particular Erik's bid at turning them over. We witnessed Cowboy Willie trying to lasso a goat, which was comical to say the least!

It was time for dinner, we had a curved table so everyone including riders, vets and crew could all sit together. Tonight was going to be one of the final nights we were all together, even though some had left already, like Si who had went to hospital in Ulaanbaatar because of his broken ribs. Everyone was still dressed in our Mongolian traditional dells, after dinner we all had to give our own individual toasts. I think I came out with a corny one, I knew I should have stuck to something comical. We all vacated the dining room and went outside where a bonfire was lit, where we spent the rest of the night having the craic. Barry and Joe were like outcasts, no one really was talking to them. Not many had liked them, maybe because of their arrogance and being obnoxious. They did themselves no favours turning up only the night before the race missing all of the training days. I didn't mind them and I felt pity for them now.



Ben, Cossie, Will and Me on the top of the Volcano.

Many funny stories were told and shared but I think Cowboy Willie's topped everyone's story, and he told it brilliantly. It was on the way to the station where you had to cross the river. He too had to swim, he was wet, exhausted and his horse didn't want to go on. Then nature called. So there he was, with his jeans pulled down and was squatting with the reins in one hand. With his free hand he went to pull out some tissues out of his pocket. As he did the tissues blew in the wind spooking his horse away a few feet away. The reins lay there dangling, his instincts were to leap and grab them before his horse bolted away. So he did what he thought and the horse obviously was even more spooked and took off with him dragging him along the ground with his jeans around his ankles! He let go, he couldn't stop him. So as his horse galloped off into the sunset, all he could do was watch and pull his jeans back up. A local Mongolian spotted the loose horse and took off after it on his own steed. Minutes went by and Will probably thinking the worst, over the hill came this Mongolian and Will's horse in hand. Will was overjoyed, and pulled out a baseball cap to give to the Mongolian who had helped him out so much. But this wouldn't suffice, the Mongolian pointed at Will's watch, that's what he wanted as a reward and Will duly honoured his wishes of giving him his watch. He took a photo of the Mongolian with this fancy watch on his wrist. We all laughed in hysterics. The bonfire may have been going out but the craic sure wasn't. I stayed up for as long as I could; I was something like the 6th last left before I too had to retreat to my bed.

We had to be up early for the bus journey back to Ulaanbaatar and be on the bus for 7am. There was a slim chance this would happen considering the beer flowing last night, we were an hour late leaving at 8am. It was a long bus journey, around eight hours. We didn't arrive till after 4pm and I was happy to be finally off the bus, our flight home tomorrow morning was going to be even longer, which I didn't want to even contemplate. We hadn't even booked a room to stay in tonight so once again our teammates stepped in to help once again. Julie had booked a room for both her and

Charlotte so we would be joining them once again, this time in a room and not a Ger. The power shower was unbelievable, it felt great and to finally have a shave too although I was in no way as hairy as Donie who looked like a homeless man. Well I may not have looked it but we would have been homeless if it weren't for Julie tonight!

After we had found some food, which was ordering from a bar not grabbing a lump of mutton out of a bowl. We set off to our final party in some club which was walking distance from the hotel without the need of our GPS to help us find it. In the club, upstairs had been hired out for us. This would probably be the last time we would see and spend time with one another, if not the last time it was surely the last time us as a group would be all together. We celebrated it; we all did in high spirits, ending up on the dance floor downstairs. What seemed strange was we had known everyone for about two weeks; we met as strangers but ended up most of us being very close friends. There was a great atmosphere in the room and we kept it flowing till the wee small hours.

We, Donie, Julie, Charlotte and I, stumbled back to our hotel room. For Donie, Charlotte and I we only had an hour before we would have to be in the airport to fly home so it left little to no time of sleeping. We packed our bags of filthy gear, by the time we closed our eyes and opened them we were up and in the back of a taxi.

We boarded our plane going home via Moscow. We'd been there, we'd done that and we'd got the t-shirt, or in our case, dell. We were going back to reality as we had known it but I knew Mongolia would leave an everlasting imprint on me and maybe this was the catalyst to other adventures, I thought as I strapped myself into the seat. This plane was only taking off.

Reflection

Many months have passed since the epic journey that the Mongol Derby took me on. So why Mongolia? Why the Mongol Derby? Questions I don't really know the answer to. I wasn't doing this for popularity; I was doing it for me, myself and I. Of course raising 10k for the Injured Jockeys Fund is a tremendous feeling for a body that have helped me out when I broke my jaw. The easiest answer I suppose was it's the challenge. And it was to a degree, but I wanted to get more out of it than just that I think. See the world, take myself out of my own comfort zone, do stuff that not many will or could ever do and could only dream about. I thought beforehand it was going to be tough, I didn't know how tough. I wondered would it break me, it didn't. It did test me on several occasions where I lost my cool and tempers rose but not at one stage did I say I can't go on. I learned that I actually am stronger mentally than I had ever thought I was. It's a comforting feeling, but it's built a desire for me to test myself further, to what and what extremes are yet undecided. The Mongol Derby is a rarity that I feel I was privileged to do. Of course they (The Adventurists) had a few hiccups that could have been done better but to be fair The Derby was only in its 4th year. Our fellow riders, the majority I struck a chord with straight away and some who'd be friends for life but at the same time I was a little disappointed. This was a race after all and I felt that there wasn't enough competitiveness in a lot of the riders. Most just wanted to finish to the race, of course I did too but our goal was to win it. I wasn't saying you must have the mentally to win at all costs, not at all. This is probably why I liked Barry and Joe much more than the others did. They were arrogant and at times obnoxious but they let it plain for all to see that they were here only to win, which I respected. They set the standard and the pace of the race, something for us to target. They made the race in my opinion,

they made us work and I'm sure it would have been a duller race without their presence. They feel aggrieved thinking they should have won it, as they were punished with constant Vet penalties. We never failed one vet check over the course of the 25 horses we each rode. Were we just that lucky and was it a coincidence that we passed them all, I don't think so, we were better riders than them but it's what we did for a living so we ought to have been. It's ironic to think that the horse I wanted on the last leg Barry chose and it ended up hopping lame dishing out the biggest blow that he encountered in the whole race. One thing I wondered about was how the race would have turned out if 35 jump jockeys would have lined up at the start, it would be interesting to say the least!

What I did love was the way we spent 3 days together beforehand and afterwards. Even though we may not have seen them during the race till 8 days later and we had only known each other for 3 days previous to this, I felt like we had a connection and we had something to share. They knew exactly how you must have been feeling. It's hard to describe what happened over in Mongolia to people when I came back home, they couldn't really understand without witnessing it first-hand. From the lows of being lost up on the top of a mountain, not knowing what to do, to the highs of experiencing riding through the untouched beautiful landscape, the stars that lit up the night and nothing was artificial it was all natural beauty. No picture could capture this; I find my words difficult to do it justice. This is what I can share with my fellow riders, my new friends who by the end you felt you had known each other for much longer. With no mobile phone or communication with the outside world, all I had to worry about was riding from one station to the next, my fellow team mate/s. Such simplicity with nothing else to worry about that was going on in the real world; that could all wait. There are so many people to thank for making this the experience it was, but at the top of this list was Donie. If it wasn't for him to agree to it last winter, I'm sure I wouldn't have done it. I wouldn't have come on my own. We had our highs and our lows as everyone else did, but even when times got that tough we didn't fall out. If we weren't happy we would let each other know about it or go silent depending on the situation. We knew each other and us going through this adventure together has made us closer for it. (It wasn't like Brokeback Mountain before anyone thinks it!) We went through it together but it will go down as Donie winning it. Was I envious of him? No, I think envy is too strong a word, perhaps slightly jealous. I'm not going to lie, it would have been nice to have both our names as the winner, but it's not to be. I wasn't or going to lose any sleep over it. I'm happy he won it, what a journey he's had from breaking his back to riding 1000km across Mongolia in less than a year. What a story and I wasn't begrudging him of that on the contrary I was happy to have been a part of it.

Words have never been a forte of mine; I prefer numbers and solving math. This has taken a long time for me to write, much longer than actually riding the 1000km! Simon who rode in the Derby and later broke 3 ribs which didn't stop him from finishing summed the race up beautifully in an email to all of us.

"I think every person on the derby had an extraordinary experience and no two were alike. I think of Huxley's words "the martyrs enter the arena hand in hand, but die alone" rings true.

For me it was the need for focus and to maintain an awareness and to trust our intuition, far more than the idea of feeling happily insignificant in wide open spaces. The result was living every moment in the present, - **feeling sooooo alive.**"

Hear hear Simon; I second your wise words.