

Exposure - Patrick Sells - Mongol Derby 2015

As the shadow of a lone cloud moved agonisingly slowly across the dry valley floor, I prayed for a breath of wind to bring it closer to my path. The heat was unbearable. Wilting from the saddle at half-mast like the steppe plants around me, I was slowly being cooked alive. Now on the third leg of the day, I had already forced down 8 litres of warm, brackish water, and peed just once in the last 24 hours. I could practically hear my kidneys grinding. Crippling diarrhoea sucked water and salts into my guts. Sweat poured from me, legs cooking under two layers of tights, leather chaps and boots, my head hard-boiling like an egg under the helmet. I chatted deliriously through cracked lips to my grandmother in the blue dome above. 'Durum patetia frango' she kept telling me, the Muir clan motto; 'I overcome difficulty by patience'. I sensed generations of my forefathers who had pioneered in Asia looking down with her at my crawling dot. 300kms in and I was beginning to realise why this was considered one of the most gruelling ultra-endurance events in the world... and there was no way in hell I was going to give up.

During that intense period of heat that lasted for the first 4 days of the Derby, riders succumbed to heat stroke one after the next. Fast horses turned sluggish. Watering holes and lakes marked on GPS were tracked down, only to find herds of thirsty livestock wallowing in mud patches. Both riders and horses were strong-armed by the medical/vet teams and put on intravenous fluids. On a slow horse, one single 40km leg could rapidly turn into a 5 hour nightmare. One rider, an endurance expert and Derby veteran, toppled from her steed, urinated blood and dragged herself into a nearby lake before medics could track her down and give her emergency treatment.

As I climbed into the mountains on the sixth day, the 39°C heat turned into a freezing, howling storm, driven by the prevailing Northerly wind that rushes from the Arctic down over Siberia. Having suffered extreme heat exhaustion earlier in the same week, I was shocked to find my body shutting down with hypothermia. By now travelling alone as the pack had strung out, it finally dawned on me that I was going to have to bite the bullet: I was going to have to stop, get off the horse and put more layers on. I should mention that getting off a Mongolian horse mid-leg is an absolute last resort (especially when riding alone). These animals were more feral than I ever could have anticipated, and losing my horse in that environment was a scenario not worth contemplating. As I swung down with rigid legs, the horse shied, jarring me painfully on the rocky ground. Thankfully, the icy wind and rain were worsening to the point that all the horse wanted to do was turn its arse to the North and lower its head. It was then that I realised I had stopped much too late. With hypothermia, decision-making becomes blurred, and events rapidly spiral out of control. I managed to pull the down jacket out of the saddlebag without scaring the horse too badly, and took off helmet, hydration pack and shell to get it on. After replacing the layers I realised my gloved hands were so numb I couldn't grip the zip to close the jackets. It took a full 5 minutes in the freezing rain to coax the zips together. Closing the saddlebag was impossible and I conceded dismally that the contents would become soaking wet. Realising that my hands were too numb even to activate the emergency beacon, I gritted my teeth, swung back into the saddle and pushed the horse on for the remaining 20km of misery in what was probably -10°C, considering wind-chill. If the horse had been a 'bolter' we would both have been finished. I later found out that the rider who had been tailing me for the previous 2 days, a tough Crocodile Dundee-like character from the Aussie outback, activated his emergency beacon at

around that time. I was beginning to realise why this extreme climate (remember, this was the middle of Summer) was responsible for shaping some of the hardest people and horses on this Earth. The mighty Ghengis Khan grew up in that very region of Mongolia near the Siberian border, and as a child survived in the wilderness having been abandoned by his tribe. Last winter, 9 million of Mongolia's 27 million livestock perished during the winter. Natural selection in that place is very much alive. When I finally reached the urtuu at the end of that miserable leg, I was a shivering wreck. Those kind Mongolians stripped the dripping layers from me, and sat me on a stool by the stove with a bowl of hot stew in my blue hands. The steam rolled off me and they sat in rows on two beds, staring at me as if I was mad, stupid or both. The rain hammered on the ger's canvas and we grinned at each other, all shaking our heads at my predicament.

As my Mongol Derby experience progressed, it turned into much more than just a 1000km horse race. It became a profound journey, exploring both the extraordinary Steppe, and my own boundaries. It became both a battle with the elements and a love affair with the nature, animals and people of Mongolia.



My Mongolian mates (shortly before I got hammered in a wrestling match)



Exhausted but elated

Semi-feral

In my preparation for the journey I had planned camping out, hobbling the horses to a hay-net full of rocks, even drinking venous blood from their jugulars. In the thick of it, all that went out of the window. I could never have anticipated the level of pain, exhaustion or exposure that my body would endure, nor the wildness of the horses. The prospect of staying anywhere other than in the safety of a family 'ger' rapidly became laughable. The Mongols, who are the best horsemen I have ever witnessed, call these animals 'semi-feral' for a reason. Even after domestication and regular work, horses can be turned away on the Steppe for just 10 days, only to need breaking in all over again when re-caught. At the urtuus (stations), I would always ask the herdsmen for "their fastest horse, no matter how wild". Frequently, this meant a horse that would try and buck me off. Generally the herdsman would jump on first to calm it down, but even so the animals were so unused to 'Nongolians' that the white of the eye would show when I approached. One or two herdsmen would have to hold the horse down, even with ear twitches, or spin it in a tight circle. I would focus on the calm of the Steppe, keeping a low heart rate and a soft voice, swing aboard as lightly as possible with my ruined legs, clamp both hands to the front of the saddle... and then hold on for dear life.

Once the horse had realised it wasn't going to shift its alien cargo by bucking or scraping me against a tethering post, it would bolt. My world would become a white-knuckle ride of whistling wind and blurred landscape. I would blink away tears, sweat or rain and strain my eyes ahead to try and read the fast approaching terrain, not that I could do much about it. 'Bolters'



usually had an uncanny knack of swerving around rocks, rabbit holes or hillocks at the last minute. Most could even read the subtly different patches of grass that grow over the top of marmot caves and steer around them. To ride over these underground burrows meant a high chance of a leg plummeting through the surface crust. Travelling at speed, this meant a stumble or fall, and at least once a rider alongside me suddenly vanished onto the deck with their mount rolling on top of them. Miraculously, the worst injuries sustained were broken ribs.

Much worse than dangerously fast horses, were unfit or lazy ones. To face a 40km leg in very hot or cold conditions on an unwilling horse that would travel at a 'jackhammer' trot at best, was something close to torture. Although my body adapted and strengthened towards the end of the week, in the beginning my feet, ankles, knees and groin were suffering so badly from the duress that the staccato of a Mongolian horse trot was unbearable.

Other horses were outright lethal, galloping with abandon, no regard for their own safety. I can recount several times when I thought my number was up, and even remember saying my farewells. Battling with the horse's head but still travelling at flat gallop over rocky, crevassed ground littered with moguls, ditches and rabbit holes, I experienced terror in its rawest form; that absolute certainty that a sticky end was imminent. The wild-eyed horse (a particular one I named 'Deathwish') would be flying headlong through the rough terrain when suddenly a deep, stony riverbed would traverse our path, no possible chance of turning away or even slowing. Down over the bank we would plummet, clattering over rocks at impossible speed, the horse literally scrambling to keep his feet, and then up the far cliff, only to dig his toes into the pasture and hit maximum velocity once more. Variations on this theme occurred again and again. But amazingly, it wasn't until the final day when I was lost and hypothermic that I hit the deck properly. Having had to ford a large river to get back on track, I was furious with myself for listening to someone's inaccurate directions rather than navigating myself. However, on board a serious racehorse and numb with cold, even reaching for the GPS to check my bearing had been far too dangerous for the first 10km of the leg. At flat gallop the inevitable dry riverbed suddenly appeared from behind a grassy crest... and the horse flung itself down the bank with characteristic abandon. We hit the far cliff at full pelt, throwing us both spinning onto the grass on the other side. Thankfully the horse rolled alongside rather than on top of me, and as I came to with stars in my vision, the lead-rope trailed past my face. I grabbed it, and rather than dragging me across the landscape, the dear boy started to graze.

Feeling the scrutiny of the satellites as we crawled with our trackers along the Earth's surface, it sometimes felt as if we were a part of the Hunger Games. Stories filtered down the lines through vets, medics and translators of other riders' woes. One girl, on her second attempt to continue the race was found hypothermic and lost in the forest, with a pack of wolves closing in menacingly. Four girls I rode with mid-race (all highly competent horsewomen) had a horrendous 24 hours of bolting, bucking horses, serious falls and lost horses during that freezing weather. Listening to their accounts afterwards, I was awestruck by their resilience to carry on. Catriona was thrown face-first onto a rock, splitting her cheek to the bone; Uma bled from the nose from the force of her head hitting the ground. Two riders further back in the pack had been kicked in the head, one unconscious. Riders helped one another repeatedly in heart-warming acts of camaraderie, loose horses were chased down, and the gruelling journey continued for most.

High contrast

Yet through the hardship of the Derby, came joy. Despite the pain, we rejoiced in the extraordinary surroundings. To be in limitless space, unfettered by walls and fences, was uplifting. For the same reason I crave being in the mountains, I found peace in Mongolia. The land was not divided and parcelled up, it was flowing, shared by all. Herds of horses ran free, the stallion leading, foals cantering behind the mares at foot. At one point, riding alone into the final urtuu on Day 4, I was faced with a vista of such beauty, I don't mind admitting that in my exhausted state I was moved to tears. A murmuration of starlings swirled back and forth as the sun dropped towards the mountains in the West; the only sounds were the horse treading softly beneath me and a large herd of yaks cropping the steppe grass nearby, some pausing to watch me pass. Smoke drifted from the chimney of the cosy, white ger just a little further down the river

valley, promising warm stew and a place to lie for the night. Such ecstasy at simple pleasures; an elated grin through tears of sheer wonder.

In every ger would be a shrine to the horse. Faded photos of their best racehorses in generations gone by, with medals hanging over plastic horse figurines. Roughly made felts and tapestries of



riders on strong steeds mounted on the wicker walls. Even in this modern age, here still exists a society that cherishes the simple but important things in life: family, horses, livestock and the land. To Mongolians, God exists in the Eternal Blue Sky, in the wind and the rain. He cannot be contained in a church or a mosque, nor in a book or text. Although an atheist, this makes far more sense to me than any other religion I've yet encountered. Ghengis Khan too found these foreign religions perplexing, but under his omnipotent rule he allowed freedom of choice for his subjects to worship whoever they wished. His was a ground-breaking meritocratic society, meaning that one's place in the community was based upon that person's merit rather than his breeding. He smashed feudal systems, and therefore in a way liberated millions under his vast empire. Of all figures in the short history of mankind, Ghengis Khan, quite rightly crowned 'Man of the Millenium', for me stands supreme.

Travelling through Ghengis Khan's 'Sea of Grass', at times I felt transported back through time itself. Watching a horse herd move slowly across a valley in a shimmering heat haze, I could have been observing a scene from a million years ago. At around 50 million years ago when the horse's ancestor (the dog-sized *Eohippus*) was browsing in the forest, some plant species came along that were quite unique. They were fast-growing, could colonise bare ground, were wind-pollinated so were independent of insects and could tolerate being eaten and trodden on as their leaves grew from the base. Of course, they were the grasses. As wide grasslands emerged, so did swift, long-legged herbivores thrive upon them. They relied on speed to escape predators, and so the claw of the middle toe developed into a specialised hoof: the biomechanical masterpiece that is the equine foot. For me, this structure is the ultimate in evolutionary genius. A complex system of suspension and support, aeons ahead of that of the most sophisticated supercar. As those hard horses transported me across the Mongolian steppe I often day-dreamed in wonder at the animal beneath me, tweaked and honed by evolution over millions of years, perfectly adapted to the environment around us, fuelled purely on a diet of fibre.

Somewhere mid-Derby, after the pack had been teased out, I found myself riding through a narrow, green valley leading up to a low mountain pass. It was that pleasant part of the early morning before the sun began to bake the Steppe, and I was ambling along, day-dreaming in

the cool shadow of the hill. Loping in the other direction on the opposite, sunny bank of the valley, a shape caught my eye. I stopped. It stopped. Although at least a hundred yards away, I could clearly see the tall, pale wolf staring fearlessly straight at me. I experienced a new sensation that caused the hairs on the back of my neck to prickle... the feeling of being weighed up as potential prey. I was, however fairly confident that a lone wolf wouldn't take on a mounted rider, and it was a thrill to see such an animal in the wild. I didn't think any more of it until I mentioned the sighting at the next urtuu, and the translator became animated, telling the herdsmen my account. "Mongolians believe that only very spiritual people can see the wolf", she told me. The herdsmen gathered close and looked into my eyes, clearly intrigued where moments before they had appeared disinterested in me. I grabbed the opportunity, realising I could play the situation to my advantage, in what would become a repeating theme at subsequent urtuus. "Please tell these men that I carry the spirit of the wolf, and they must give me their bravest racehorse in order for me to carry it to the front of the race," I said. At that stage I had no notion whatsoever of trying to win the Mongol Derby, but I *had* heard that Crocodile Dundee had been gaining on me that day, and there was no way on Earth I was going to be beaten by an Aussie.



Aftermath

Now back in the familiar surroundings of the New Zealand stud farm, it could all have been a dream. But, the reassuring ache in my limbs and the lack of skin sensation in my feet and groin remind me that it was very, very real.

Of Mongolia's 3 million people, half now live in the sprawling urban chaos of Ulaanbaatar, a city of pickpockets, black markets and karaoke bars. The number of former herdsmen moving to the city because of livestock losses and the promise of a steadier income continues to rise; slowly the nomadic population is shrinking. I feel blessed to have seen Mongolia before the

steady march of industrialisation and mining spoils its beauty. On that journey I forged friendships with kindred spirits that will last my life. I made memories that I look forward to recounting to my descendants. I reckon I did my dear Gran proud.

“The most beautiful mountain in the world is not the highest, nor the most difficult. It is personal. It is always the one I am currently dreaming about.”

Reinhold Messner