

# *The toughest* HORSE RACE *on the* PLANET

Ever wondered what goes on behind the scenes at the Mongol Derby? RÓISÍN MAGEE shares some expert insight into this epic and extraordinary event

**T**he Mongol Derby is a horse race like no other; longer, tougher and wilder than anything else on the planet. Every August for the last 10 years, riders have raced semi-wild horses 1000 kilometres across the steppe, changing horses every 40 kilometres and navigating their own route between stations in a re-creation of Genghis Khan's postal system.

If you would like to join this band of brothers, or are curious about what it takes to turn up to the start line of this epic race with a good chance of crossing the finish line, here is some expert guidance.

## How to prepare

How do you train for 1000km on horseback? Maggie Pattinson, the chef d'Équipe of the England Home International endurance squad, and official race coach and referee of the Mongol Derby, has trained 10 years of derby riders. Every year she tells them: you can't train for the full distance. Instead, she says, learn how to ride one stage – 40 kilometres – well.

Also, there is no substitute for hours in the saddle.

New Zealand's Chloe Phillips-Harris, a three-star eventer, trainer, adventurer and journalist rode the race in 2013 and has crewed several derbies since. Her advice for derby training is to ride as many different horses as possible, and in as many different ways as possible – short stirrups, long stirrups, fast gallops, long slow treks – preparing for the derby is a great excuse to relive your pony club days. And if you're still in touch with your local pony club, ride some naughty ponies!

You need to be fit enough to jog 20km leading your horse. The principle of no outside assistance is at the heart of the race; if, halfway into a leg, your horse goes lame, you have to get your horse to the next station.

Katy Willings, chief of the Mongol Derby and former international dressage rider, completed the first edition of the race and has directed every race since. When training for her race, she would book four or five horses to ride in a day and cycle from one property to the next.

Train for the unexpected. The riders, weather and course are different every

year and you should learn to feel comfortable when you're not in control. And you're wet. And tired. And hungry. And lost. You may be an international show jumper, but what are your decision-making skills like under stress? Maggie suggests you "do something that makes your palms sweaty."

And practise riding with a GPS. It won't stop you getting lost, but it might stop you panicking when you do.

## How to pack

The general rule is to ask around, but trust your own experience over other people's recommendations, and test out your gear thoroughly before you leave home so you are familiar with it. Maggie says that every year, competitors turn up with caged stirrups they haven't tested, having asked endurance riders for advice.

Louise Crosbie, a horse trainer from Western Australia, completed the race in 2015, crewed in 2016 and this year ran horse selection and manned the blood wagon, so she knows all about pitfalls waiting for riders out on the course. She advises investing in quality, lightweight equipment and recommends prospective

The joint winners of this year's Derby, Annabel Neasham (GBR) and Adrian Corboy (AUS)



LEFT A herder and his son watch the proceedings RIGHT The Mongolian way of handling horses may look different, but it's effective BELOW Stickability is an important skill! BELOW RIGHT Michael Turner navigating by GPS; it might not stop you from getting lost, but will help prevent you from panicking about it



LEFT Karrin O'Loughlin mounts a feisty one with help from herder Byambadorj Batbileg. TOP LEFT 18-year-old Saif Noon of Pakistan was the youngest rider this year and rode the whole race in borrowed kit because his bags were lost en route. ABOVE The Mongolian horses are wild, self-sufficient animals who live out on the steppe in all weathers

### How to get along with Mongolian horses

To win a start on this race, riders must be able to demonstrate good horsemanship. Erik, who often interviews potential Derbyists, says riders need to have the horse skills to understand and ride green and hyper-sensitive horses. "You also need to be able to understand and manage horse health – heart rate, dehydration, lameness."

Chloe's advice is to watch Mongolians and be aware of how they ride and handle horses. It may look strange to you, but it's what the horses are used to and it is also an opportunity for you to learn. Come with a flexible attitude. Number one rule: never let go of your horse.

What makes this race a true test of horsemanship even for the most skilful riders is the variety of different temperaments and abilities you will meet in your 30 (or more) horses. There are four elements: picking a horse, getting

on, staying on and getting off.

**Horse selection:** All riders do this slightly differently. Sam Jones, who won the 2014 race and represented Australia at the 2018 WEG in endurance, asked the herders for advice but didn't always take the horse they suggested, relying instead on her own instincts. Devan Horn, three-time Derbyist (runner-up in 2013 and third in 2018) chose horses that looked fast and wild, this year even taking a horse rejected by the eventual winners as too crazy.

Annabel Neasham, joint winner this year, felt like horse selection was key to her victory: "You've got to pick a horse with a bit of length to it, a deep girth and a good shoulder, that shows a few ribs... it was about picking the herder's own horse that they use to go and check the herd, because they're fit."

**Getting on:** Always approach from the left side. Make sure the stirrup length and girth are sorted before you get on, your

horse is pointed in the direction you want to go, and your coat is done up before you mount. You'll need more than good luck sorting any of that out from the saddle – Mongolians like their horses to go and go quickly, even if you're not on an actual bolter.

**Staying on:** Complacency leads to injuries. Ride each horse on the Derby as if it were a green youngster on its first ride; even if your horse has been plodding along for 30 kilometres, don't think it can't flip in an instant and turn into a bronc at the slightest thing.

Don't expect to ride like you do at home. Common mistakes include:

- Taking your feet out of the stirrups to stretch your legs
- Ripping velcro
- Dropping GPS units
- Turning around to talk to your friend and putting your hand on the horse's backside
- Letting go of your reins.

These horses are not schooled. They are wild, self-sufficient animals who live out on the steppe in all weather. They can (and do) run from wolves.

Trust them – they are the local experts, so let them go at their pace and trust their instincts when it comes to picking ground.

**Getting off:** Like getting on, this is best done quickly and quietly. Don't jump off, or you risk spooking the horse and being dragged. One rider who attempted a trick dismount swung his leg over the horse's head and the horse bolted, taking his thumb with it.

We shouldn't need to say it, but... don't expect to teach Mongolians how to ride, break in horses, tack up... They invented horse riding and conquered the world from the back of a horse.

Derbyists take chafing seriously. Every year, terrible rubs put good riders out of the race. If something rubs you slightly and turns your skin pink in training, it will wear a hole through you on the Derby. She also stresses the importance of finding a simple and secure way to attach your saddle bag to your saddle. Keep anything you can't afford to lose on your actual person.

Erik Cooper, who was born and raised on a horse farm in the United States, completed the Derby in 2012 and has worked on each race from 2014 to 2018. Here is his list of Derby essentials:

- Waterproof jacket. Avoid loud zippers, big velcro patches and bright colours – the horses hate them
- Hydration pack. Those designed for ultra-runners to be lightweight and unobtrusive are good
- Sunscreen
- Multi-tool, zip ties, para cord and duct tape for fixes en route
- Good jodhpurs, tried-and-tested by you. Lots of riders opt for a seamless compression tight underneath, but choose what works for you
- Boots you can walk/jog in
- Stirrups you've ridden long distances in.

Three-year-old Sarnai Sugarjav looks into the doorway of her family ger; the family run a horse station on the Derby



## How to be a polite guest in Mongolia

Dulguunseren 'Doogie' Sergelen is a freelance tour guide based in Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar, and has worked in race HQ for the last four years. His advice to foreign visitors is to be easygoing. Don't expect everything to happen in a rush or even on time. Enjoy the slower pace of life. Be prepared for a diet full of dairy and mutton and the potential havoc it can wreak on your digestive system, but persevere! Any stomach upset doesn't last and don't miss the opportunity to try buuz (dumplings) and khuushur (deep-fried meat pies) – they're fantastic.

There are some surprising cultural differences. Don't touch a Mongolian person's head. If you want to give someone something, give it with your right or with both hands. Don't ever throw something to a Mongolian – they only throw things to dogs. Try and learn some Mongolian, even if your efforts end up as entertainment for your hosts' children! If in doubt, just ask. No-one expects you to know everything.

Lastly, no matter how famous or distinguished a rider you are in your

home country, in Mongolia you are a stranger. You'll be welcomed like family whoever you are, but if you want the herders' respect as a rider you will have to earn it.

Be mindful of how much effort has gone into the preparation of everything you ride, eat and drink on the steppe. Your horse was caught, that sheep was

butchered, the noodles were hand-pulled and the water was brought and boiled, all for you.

## How to make the most of your experience

Everyone I spoke to agreed that riding the Mongol Derby is very special. Chloe: "An amazing, inexplicable experience." Erik: "The most epic adventure you could ever undertake."

And as Sam neatly puts it: "Success in the Mongol Derby isn't winning: it's how well you rise to face the challenges the race throws at you."

Katy, the Derby chief, has seen 10 years of Derbyists on that lonely start line. Some come to test their horsemanship in an extreme arena. Others are on a personal quest to test their physical or mental endurance. Others come to draw a line under a dark time in their lives. A select few are romantics who come to experience the ancient nomadic culture of Mongolia, little changed since Genghis Khan's time. Then there are a group who just come to drop out of the modern world and join the animal kingdom for a couple of weeks.

The race is hard. It will test you. But take Sam's advice. If you can embrace the hardship with a savage joy and "snuff the battle with delight" like the Snowy River stockhorse, you will have the adventure and experience of a lifetime.

Morindoo [mount your horses]! ■

## FACT FILE

Applications for the 2019 Mongol Derby (4-17 August) are open now. Apply at [www.mongolderby.com](http://www.mongolderby.com)

- Entry is £10,795 (about \$NZ21,145.95), and there is no prize money.
- There is no age limit for riders.
- The weight limit for riders is 85kg. You must weigh-in fully dressed (hat, boots, coat and everything you want to carry on your person).
- An additional 5kg is allowed for gear (including a saddle bag, which is provided).
- Travel/sports insurance which will cover a medivac is compulsory; the Adventurists can recommend insurers if you win a place.
- The best route in the author's opinion from NZ to Ulaanbaatar is Auckland-Hong Kong (direct) then Hong Kong-Ulaanbaatar (direct) (Air NZ/ Miat), but this isn't the cheapest way to get there. Arrive a couple of days early.
- If you would like to ride in Mongolia, but prefer a more relaxed pace and a few more home comforts, Katy, Shatra (Derby operations director) and Unenburen (Master of Horse) also run trekking tours. For info see [www.morindoo.com](http://www.morindoo.com)