

## BAREFOOT & BITLESS AT THE RDA TRAIL RIDE

*By Garry King*



Easter finally arrived, and that meant the RDA (Riding for the Disabled) trail ride—this year at Licola (in Australia), for the first time. This being my first time camping with my horse, Bourbon, it was with a mixture of excitement and apprehension that I packed and loaded the truck. I checked my list of things to take, making sure not to leave anything behind: feed for Bourbon, saddles, bitless bridle, reins, camping gear, swag, and the list went on. Finally, everything was packed. Time to load my boy, and how would he take to the four-hour trip in the sweatbox?

Thursday morning arrived, and we were off! The trip down the freeway was uneventful, and Bourbon munched happily on his hay net. We head for Heyfield, a sleepy little town at the foot of the Great Dividing Range. The sign says 60 kms to Licola, and up into the mountains we head. This part of the trip was slow along a winding road, but very scenic. Finally arriving at Licola, a little dot on the map consisting of a general store and the Lions Park village, where our base camp was located.

After registering, I found a nice spot on the oval, near some trees, to set-up camp. Bourbon was more than a little anxious to vacate the float, after some four hours of solitary confinement. There were a variety of pens and hot-wired yards for our use. Finding a suitable hot-wired yard, I put Bourbon there, and proceeded to unpack and set up camp. While being an experienced camper for many years, this was the first time on my own with a horse. I rolled out the swag, and the float became a mobile tack and feed room. Time to see to the boy—water buckets and feed in hand, I strolled down to Bourbon's yard, where I was greeted with a kicking hind leg, and a rather disgruntled look on his face. It seems the journey and choice of accommodation was not to Bourbon's liking! Get over it, says I.

Thursday afternoon, about 3:30 pm, a wee ride in the countryside was organized. We tacked up and were ready to go for a short two hour ride, just to loosen up. It seemed that Bourbon was the only barefoot horse on the ride. I guess that puts us in the minority, when some 60 riders and their horses were involved—all shod with those nasty steel shoes. At the gathering point, I milled around, waiting for the ride leader. I heard a comment from the rear, "your horse is missing a shoe." I replied, "actually he is missing four of them." A look of bewilderment came to the face of the questioner. My "Bitless Bridle" also attracted its fair share of comments from the riding fraternity. With questions answered, and bewildered minds putting this barefoot and bitless thing down to eccentricity on the part of the rider, we hit the trail. We rode across typical hilly countryside, along gravel tracks, and up and down a couple of hills—without Bourbon missing a step. The masses were still wondering why this barefoot horse managed the hard terrain with no stumbling or tripping, and no shoes.

Friday was the first full-day ride. My main concern was Bourbon's fitness, and not whether his hooves would stand up to the conditions. Friday's ride covered around 30 km, on some varied terrain. The ride headed out around 9:30 am, after a very hearty breakfast in the camp kitchen. Bourbon felt a little fired up, as we all headed out the back gate and along the McCallister River. About 45 minutes into the ride, with a few horses bunched up going through a narrow section of trail, a rider "copped both barrels" from the horse in front, and was badly kicked. She headed back to camp with a very bruised and swollen leg from knee to foot—those steel shoes certainly can do some damage. We rode across the hillside grazing, dodging wombat holes, crossing dry creek beds, and jumping fallen logs. I was

glad for riding barefoot, as Bourbon easily scrambled up steep embankments without losing footing, whilst many other shod horses struggled. A little further on, and into sight came the cattle yards—and lunch.

After lunch, we were back on our steeds. We gravel track, a result of the recent bush fires that swept the area. What a view of the valley from on high, as wedge tail eagles soared at eye level, then came the steep descent to the valley floor and home.

At the end of the day, I provided food and water for Bourbon, and did a quick check of his hooves. A few small scuff marks to the hoof wall was the sum total of damage the day's ride had caused. With Bourbon bedded down and happily tucking into his dinner, it was time to head for the shower and a well-earned dinner. After dinner and some lively discussion on the day's ride, my swag and pillow were calling, and I slept until the dawn chorus woke me for the next day's ride.

Saturday was a similar full day's ride of about 30 km, along the river flats, with many river crossings to be negotiated. Sunday was a rest day for both horse and riders. Monday, again, was another full day's ride of about 30 km.

In conclusion, Bourbon covered approximately 100 km over the four rides within 5 days, through river crossings, river stones, pasture, hard rocky ground, and hillside clay—all without so much as a chip from any hoof. So, if my ex-racehorse can do that, surely there are many other horses out there that are capable of the same things. You have to trust in your horse's natural abilities.

P.S. It has become clear to me that there is one good reason to shoe your horse—so the red-belly black snakes can hear you coming!