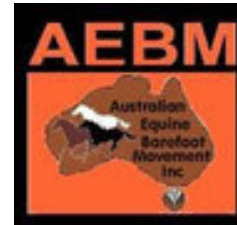
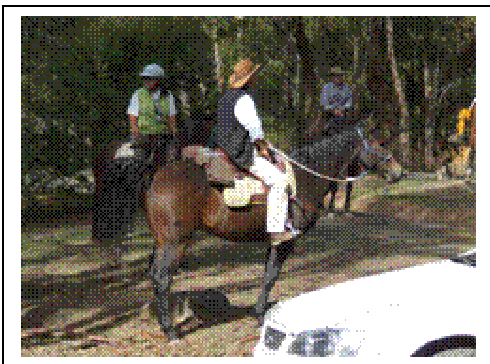


RDA VICTORIA TRAIL RIDE 2007

by Garry King, AEBM President



Once again it's that time of year when "all the tried and noted riders gather to the fray" for the RDAV (Riding for the Disabled Victoria) trail ride and yours truly was no exception. I was eager to test my trusty Stockhorse on that rough and rugged ground as we raced down the slope at break neck speed... And then I woke from the dream: it was Saturday and time to pack the float, load my horse and head to the High Country.



This year's ride was at Clonbinane, near Broadford - about 75 minutes north of Melbourne and only one hour's travel from home. Thanks Guys! I arrived at the appointed camping area, Bambara Salvation Army camp about 12:30 pm, found a suitable camping site and commenced to set up camp for the week. I unloaded my new stockhorse, Sambucca, and tied him to a tree with some hay to keep him amused while I organised myself. Yards were built, the float cleaned, internal lighting and beds set up – in short, all the creature comforts that my float and the bush will allow.

Bucca (short for Sambucca) was unperturbed by bush surroundings, as prior to owning him he was running feral for over two years untouched by human hands. Thanks to Carlos Tabernaberrí's, time and patience, I have managed to turn Bucca into a calm, willing partner.

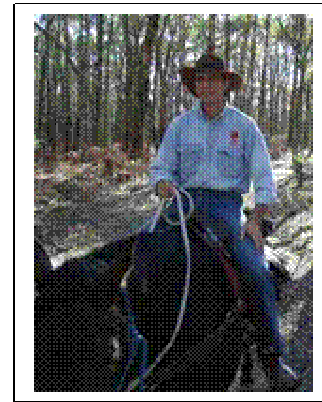
With camp set and Bucca happily munching hay in his temporary electric yard, it was time to register and catch up with friends made from previous rides. Lunch was a traditional Aussie barbie with sausages, and all the trimmings. The BBQ was ably manned by Gary Nish our resident chef for the week. After a hearty lunch and chat with friends old and new it was time to saddle up for our first taste of the countryside on the back of Mt Disappointment. This year saw me not being the sole barefooter for the ride, my influence, had at last, impacted on other riders and I was joined by three owners and their barefoot horses.

The afternoon's ride was a lead ride of some 20kms around the trails of the local state forest, past an old quarry and over a couple of picturesque hills, so our guide explained. The weather was exceptional: blue sky, no breeze and a warm 23 degrees. But the drought had taken its toll on this lovely area. The trails were dry, hard and rocky, the once shallow creek crossings were non-existent and the undergrowth was dry and brown. Even so, this ride gave us

all the opportunity to stretch our horses' legs and for the humans to get a taste of the terrain. The terrain was, to date, some of the roughest trails I had ridden, steep rocky, and very hard, but Bucca travelled across them without a problem. As the afternoon sun sank behind the tall trees, our Day One ride ended, as it started, through the gates of the Bambara camp. I unsaddled and fed Bucca, hit the shower and headed off to the mess hall. After an excellent meal prepared by our chef, and lots of friendly chit-chat, this little camper wandered off to bed and a good night's sleep.

Day Two and the dawn chorus heralded sunrise and the morning ritual of filling Bucca's water buckets from the tank on the back of the ute and preparing his morning feed. That done, it was time to head towards the smell of fresh cooked bacon and eggs, toast, juice and cereal coming from the mess hall. Breakfast over, we all saddled up once again, the catch phrase being "follow the pink ribbons".

Today's ride was approximately 30kms in total, with about 18kms, to do before lunch. This being my third RDAV ride, any snide remarks about barefoot, from fellow riders have ceased. People have realised that my barefoot horses are more than capable of tackling such terrain. One rider even said "I envy you your horse's feet, Garry".



We went past the old quarry, then headed along a new trail through an old, once logged area. The weather once again was picture postcard perfect, with blue skies, no wind and heading for a top temperature of 24 degrees. With the early morning sun streaming through the tall majestic trees along side the trail, I think I can be forgiven for day dreaming of being a famous stockman chasing brumbies through this mountain country.

Reality check! Bucca and I start down a fairly rocky mountain trail heading for the lunch stop. The cameraman perched on a mound beside the track yelled, "You're first here." "Great, all the more lunch for me." I replied.

The lunch stop was a lovely little green area next to a creek. Unfortunately there was very little water due to the drought. For the first time in RDAV ride history the lunch cart was there before any riders arrived, due in part, to our intrepid guide who set the trails, making sure they were on the right road.

With lunch finished and my horse watered in a puddle that used to be the creek, I headed off to do another 12kms on rocky mountain trails en route to base camp. Back at "home" I un-saddled and washed Bucca, checked his hooves, (no chips, or scratches) and gave him a well deserved feed and hay. Then it was off to the shower and dinner once again.

Day Three saw the same ritual as Day Two, with another 30km ride through the great Australian bush on very hard and rocky ground. Once again my barefoot horse Bucca performed flawlessly, even trotting and cantering in many sections of the rocky mountain terrain. And again Bucca finished the day's ride with not a chip or scratch on his hooves.

Day Four was a rest day for most, and some chose to go shopping in Kilmore. They missed the best ride of the week! For the handful of riders who did the 20kms to the top of the mountain, the view was nothing short of spectacular. Even in drought the view down into the surrounding valleys and across the mountains was breathtaking – drought notwithstanding.

By Day Four, the usual problems had arisen, thrown shoes, horses with sore feet and backs, lame horses, riders with sore everything. And still my barefoot and bitless horse was going strong, no soreness, not lame, and no bloody stumps from his hooves wearing out!

Day Five saw a repeat of Day Two with another 30km ride, but this time on much softer terrain, along creek beds and soft logging trails - pretty much a breeze for my Stockhorse, after the rocky terrain of the previous days.

Day Six and the ride week had finally come to an end. Time to pack up camp, say my farewells to new and old friends, load my Stockhorse on the float and head for home. Driving home gave me time to reflect on just how well Bucca had performed. He had covered 120kms of hard rocky mountain trails in five days and not a chip or scratch on his hooves to be seen.

Is this, an example of how well I condition my horse's hooves, or is it a reflection on how resilient horses are given what nature provides them with? I would like to think it's both.

In conclusion, the RDAV trail ride is a great time had by one and all. It's not only a worthy cause to raise money for, you also get to do what all horse people love to do -ride your horse. I hope anybody reading my story, will consider doing the ride next year – you will love it.

And just for those sceptics out there, a week after Bucca had done 120kms on that hard tough ground, I still had to trim his hooves!!!. Work that out!