



Racing into Trouble

By CuChullaine O'Reilly FRGS

It's an idea guaranteed to put Genghis Khan on the warpath.

At a thousand kilometers, the largest non-sanctioned endurance race ever attempted is set to be run this summer in Mongolia. Nearly a thousand under-sized native horses have been drafted into an effort, which deliberately flaunts international endurance racing rules. And if that wasn't enough to worry Genghis, one of the world's leading charities, Mercy Corps, has agreed to accept £25,000 in exchange for helping an English travel company organize the event.

The Mongolian Steppe is dangerous to horses just trying to survive on its unforgiving landscape. Photo by Pichugin Dmitry



The Mongolian steppe can, and has, broken even the most experienced riders, hardened by years in the saddle. Photo by Pichugin Dmitry

"Bleeding kidneys, broken limbs, open sores, moon stroke and a list of dangers longer than your arm stand between you and victory," warns the official race website.

Twenty-five foreign contestants from America, England, New Zealand and other countries have paid nearly \$5,000 to obtain their chance to disregard the accepted international norms of the world's fastest growing equestrian sport.

"The Mongol Derby will see you tackle the challenge of semi-wild horses and surviving alone in the wild steppes of Mongolia. There's no carefully marked course, no catering tent and no support; this is horse racing on a whole new scale. You will change steeds every 40 km so the horses will be fresh. Bleeding kidneys, broken limbs, open sores, moon stroke and a list of dangers longer than your arm stand between you and victory," warns the official race website.

The Pied Piper of Bristol

Tom Morgan, a native of Great Britain whose company, The Adventurists, is headquartered in Bristol, is promoting the horse race. Morgan previously specialized in enticing adventure-hungry tourists into signing up to race junk cars to distant national capitals. It was an attractive lure that hit a raw nerve in modern day Britain, which has been described as a "nanny state" because of its severe social regulations. Young people who paid Morgan to set off on one his motorized events realized they were running a risk.

Mongolian horses must graze as much as they can in the summer, in order to survive the winter on the steppe. Photo by Pichugin Dmitry



"We don't make any safety arrangements. Our adventures are designed to be just that, so organizing a support crew would rather take the edge off things. People are made painfully aware that what they're entering into can be extremely dangerous," Morgan's website cautioned. Prices to compete have tripled and spots now sell out in seconds. All of which delights Morgan, who boasts that he has spawned "a community of other idiots."

While the car rallies haven't resulted in loss of life, Morgan says they've seen plenty of near misses. An ominous note on his website warned, "We can't guarantee your arrival at the finish line, or your safety."

In his search for high-profile profits, Morgan has now invaded the horse world.

Death on the Steppes

No one knows more about taking mortal risks on horseback than the Long Riders. Every major horse traveler alive today belongs to The Long Riders' Guild, the world's first international association of equestrian explorers. Long Riders have ridden on every continent except Antarctica and many have survived perilous rides across the Mongolian steppes. For example, Australian Long Rider Tim Cope recently rode 6,000 miles alone from Mongolia to Hungary.

What he found was that the world of Genghis Khan still exists out on the silent steppe, a place where there are no services - no trees - and no people, but where an unwary mounted traveler must be ready to survive wolf attacks, bubonic plague, rabies, flash floods, foul water, poisoned food, horse theft and personal assault.

Because of its expertise in equestrian travel, the Guild was contacted by Antonia Bolingbroke-Kent, events manager at The Adventurists. She was seeking the Guild's advice.

"We're launching our inaugural Mongol Derby, set to be the world's longest horse race... This is going to be all about the endurance of the rider, as opposed to the horse, she wrote."

Long Riders with Mongolian experience were asked by the Guild to study the proposed event. Their decision was unanimous.

"To consider putting foreigners with limited equestrian experience into an endurance race of this distance is asking one to deny the basic fact involved in this situation - namely that a race across this terrain, on those kind of horses, over that distance, would have taxed the original messengers of Genghis Khan, none of whom actually rode a thousand kilometers on one journey. To ask modern riders to do so is not just naive it is irresponsible. The Adventurists is preparing to embark on an ill-advised equestrian misadventure, one in which your company does not appreciate the many equestrian hardships and dangers being presented to the horses and riders," The Guild informed the tour company representative.

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A Mongol herder on the steppe.

Neither Mercy Corps' spokeswoman could confirm that the Mongolian national government, or the Mongolian National Horse Racing Association, had been informed and asked to participate in the event.

When asked if this partnership of participation meant that Mercy Corps was in the horse racing business, Adams answered, "I guess you could say that."

Altruism or Avarice

The original motorized Mongol Rally was designed to be a non-profit charitable event, until Tom Morgan realized how immensely lucrative it was. In the Autumn of 2006 he split from his original partner and created The Adventurists. But having recognized the public potential of appealing to people's goodwill, The Adventurists require their contestants to make a sizeable "donation" to Mercy Corps. It's a case of if you don't "donate," you can't ride. With more than \$130,000 expected to be raised from this year's horse race in entry fees alone, Morgan's company is not only contemplating a long-term profit-making deal, the race is also being pitched as a possible reality television program. According to public documents, Morgan controls 70% of the company, which makes every race a profitable personal enterprise.



Temuujin and Dannibek, (who is quite tall for a 14-year-old) pose with their horse at their home on the steppe. Photo courtesy Bonnie Folkins

The warning was ignored, plans for the race continued, and the Guild's request for answers as to who was supplying hundreds of horses and the logistical support system went unheeded.

What £25,000 Gets You

Where do you find 800 horses, the people needed to feed and care for them, as well as a well-oiled network of media-savvy foreigners ready to help you organize such an unprecedented equestrian event? In this case Morgan went to his friends at Mercy Corps.

Started in 1979, the famous charity raised \$223 million in 2007. It operates in more than a hundred countries, maintains an international headquarters in Portland, Oregon, keeps a major office in Edinburgh, Scotland and has run an elaborate system of programs from Ulan Bator, the Mongolian capital, for the past ten years. According to Mercy Corps' officers in Scotland and Mongolia, the charity is pleased to assist Morgan in organizing the endurance race.

Jennifer Adams, the Event Development Coordinator at Mercy Corps' European Headquarters in Edinburgh, Scotland, explained that the charity has been happily accepting money from Morgan's motor racers since 2005. That's why, "Mercy Corps are delighted to be a part of the first ever Mongol Derby," Adams said.

"We have such a strong presence in Mongolia it was sensible to support them with this new idea."

In an email Adams went on to state, "Twenty-five Mongolian families will be helping at twenty-five horse stations positioned every 40 kilometers. With twenty-five riders raising a minimum of £1000 for Mercy Corps, our fundraising target is £25,000- however we hope to exceed this."

Project Director of Mercy Corps' Civil Society in Mongolia, Ms. U. Mandal, confirmed in a telephone interview that the twenty-five herder families being used by Morgan's company were already participants with RASP, a rural agribusiness support program managed by Mercy Corps and funded by the United States Department of Agriculture.

Jennifer Adams confirmed that her charity has already received nearly £6,000 in pre-race donations from the riders but she declined to say how much the Mongolian herders would receive in payment for their services, nor how they would be reimbursed if their horses were injured or killed by the foreign riders. The Mongolians would receive "a fair amount" Adams said.

Ignorant of the Danger

Though the finances may be murky, what's crystal clear is that the riders are riding into a storm of potential trouble.

"I hope they're expert riders," warned U. Mandal at Mercy Corps' Mongolian headquarters. She has every reason to be concerned.

Morgan's website boasts, "Having thundered out over the start line, a crotch-pounding 1000 km will stand between you and glorious victory. You will have to navigate your way from one station to the next, single-handedly; there's no marked course and there will be huge stretches with no paths or tracks at all. In fact even when there are tracks there is little chance they will be going in the right direction. You will be facing the wilderness, alone..."

Despite these dire warnings, none of the 25 amateur riders have any previous endurance riding experience. In fact some are barely able to climb atop a passive pony. The few with equestrian experience participated in mild dressage, jumping and part-time polo. One rider admitted he had only ridden "ten times since the age of thirteen," and another revealed how he's rubbing his tender posterior with rubbing alcohol. "Apparently this toughens the skin," he said hopefully.

Dubious Dunwoody

In a move that may shock the English equestrian world, Morgan enlisted Great Britain's most famous steeplechase jockey to help sell this potentially lethal cocktail of dollar-driven business to the would-be endurance champs.

Though Morgan was quoted in a recent interview as admitting that he had "lied about how organized" his initial race efforts had been, Richard Dunwoody has nevertheless become an enthusiastic partner.

Dunwoody is a former Champion National Hunt jockey who rode more than 1800 winners. With his glory days behind him, England's winner became an equestrian tour guide. The Times of London reported how the celebrity rider led a group of nine wealthy female tourists across a portion of Kyrgyzstan. After having "patiently cajoled and nannied" the London city slickers "barely out of equestrian kindergarten," the former British jockey must have appeared to be the perfect candidate for Morgan's so-called endurance race. Originally employed to present a two-day lecture on how to race across the steppes, Dunwoody has announced that he now plans on racing against the rank amateurs.

With more than \$130,000 expected to be raised from this year's horse race in entry fees alone, Morgan's company is not only contemplating a long-term profit-making deal, the race is also being pitched as a possible reality television program.



A Mongolian herder heads home on the steppe. Photo courtesy Bonnie Folkins



A typical Mongolian jockey - (probably about seven years old). Photo courtesy Bonnie Folkins

Under Mounted

One fact that looms large is how small the horses are.

Unlike most Western horses, Mongolian horses are undersized and often ridden very young. That is why the famous yearly horse race, known as Nadaam, employs child jockeys less than ten years old. Adding to the controversy is the fact that the Mongolian ponies will be asked to carry heavy foreigners, that their lack of training will place the inexperienced riders at risk and that the overall welfare of the horses has yet to be adequately documented. No veterinarians have been named to oversee the horses' medical needs. When asked if V.E.T. Net, a Mercy Corps' program which trains Mongolians, would address this critical issue, the charity spokesperson did not respond. With such vital issues as equine safety yet to be publicly resolved, Morgan's race seems certain to create a tsunami of protest.

The Disaster Race

If The Adventurists, Mercy Corps, and their lawyers, have one word to fear, it's Catoosa.

The modern sport of endurance racing was formed after 1892, at which time Prussian and Austrian cavalry officers raced 46 horses to death in a vain display of national pride and personal egotism. Since that murderous event, endurance racing horses have not only been rigorously protected by a standardized set of rules, these superb equine athletes now routinely rack up ten to twenty thousand miles during the course of their careers.

But all the rules were forgotten at Catoosa, Oklahoma.

In the blazing summer of 1987, another inexperienced man decided that his strong desire to stage an endurance race overrode all of the rules. The ride was held in 94-degree heat. The contestants were young, inexperienced riders being egged on by family members basking in reflected glory. There was a \$20,000 purse but no vets. A single water trough was placed at the halfway point. After the first wave of horses arrived and drank it, there was no water for the remaining mounts. With no water behind them, the inexperienced riders who arrived late lashed their horses and rode on.



A child and horse participating in the Naadam festival in Mongolia. The horse racing portion features young jockeys traveling great distances - many horses (and sometimes riders) die during the races. This picture was taken during the 800th anniversary of Chinggis Khan's rule.

Unlike most Western horses, Mongolian horses are undersized and often ridden very young.

That's when the horses began to die.

Law enforcement officials eventually discovered seven horses had been ridden to death, though it was strongly suspected many other animals died after being transported home. What Catoosa proved was that death and destruction were the result when a race organizer with no endurance experience allowed money and glory to annul the welfare of the horses.

The Sounds of Silence

Because Morgan's race will flaunt the rules established by the international governing body of endurance racing, officials in various nations might be justified in fearing that if this race is allowed to proceed it will effectively destroy more than one hundred years of careful planning designed to protect the horses.

Plus, given the fact that Morgan is fond of saying, "You're only having fun when everything's going wrong," endurance riders worldwide might be surprised to learn that the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI), the international body assigned to protect endurance racing from exploitation, has refused to condemn the outlaw event.

Endurance is the second most important discipline within the FEI, its fastest growing event and is being seriously considered as an Olympic sport. Yet Morgan's race violates the first three primary rules of accepted race procedures, namely it exploits endurance racing horses for commercial purposes, boasts of staging the race without having a marked route and will not be able to ensure that water will be supplied at predetermined designations. If allowed to occur, the result will be that Mongolia, long famous for being the home of Genghis Khan, will become the headquarters of the largest, and most potentially harmful equestrian event ever attempted. Moreover, if the non-sanctioned event occurs it will open the door to deadly and illegal endurance racing all over the world and will turn Mongolia into the equestrian equivalent of a North Korean pariah nation.

Yet despite the gravity of the situation, FEI Endurance Director, Ian Williams, declined repeated requests to discuss the Mongol endurance event or to provide an official statement on behalf of the FEI.

Olivia Robinson, Publications Manager at FEI headquarters in Switzerland, stated, "The FEI does and will continue to support all global organizations committed to protecting the welfare of the horse." She added that the organization

would "actively ensure that our member federations apply the FEI Code of Conduct at all FEI international events and competitions." Then she confirmed that Mongolia had been suspended from the FEI because of non-payment of membership fees, thus effectively presenting Morgan and his company with an equestrian no-man's land where anything can, and will, happen.

Fire and Brimstone from the AERC

While the FEI may be running for cover in Switzerland, the leaders of the American endurance community are gearing up for battle.

Connie Caudill is the President of the American Endurance Ride Conference. As one of her nation's endurance racing protectors, Caudill believes that Morgan's Mongol race will cause permanent damage to the sport she loves.

"This will set endurance racing back 50 years," she said, and then added, "This isn't an endurance race, it's entertainment that will undermine endurance racing all over the world."



First take a look at Edayot's son with their white horse. The picture looks completely normal to our eyes. Photo courtesy Bonnie Folkins



Now - take a look at Edayot - a 40-year-old man - with the same horse. (Edayot is only about 5 ft 5 inches in height.) His horse just shrank by about 50%! Photo courtesy Bonnie Folkins



A Beautiful Mongolian horse on the steppe.
Photo by Pichugin Dmitry

"You're only having fun when something's going wrong," the company said.

The AERC is designed "To promote the sport of endurance riding and to encourage and enforce the safe use of horses." Yet in addition to harming the chances of turning endurance racing into an Olympic event, Caudill also fears that there are frightening similarities between the Catoosa Disaster Race and Morgan's non-sanctioned event.

When asked if she believed that the same conditions exist in the forthcoming Mongolian race which led to the dead horses in Catoosa, Caudill said, "The same disaster could very easily happen again."

Long Rider Warnings

With more than a million collective miles under their saddles, the equestrian explorers who belong to The Long Riders' Guild have ridden on every continent except Antarctica. These mounted Argonauts know that few places test the skill of horse and rider as severely Mongolia. For example, when Australian Long Rider Tim Cope set out to ride 6,000 miles alone from Mongolia to Hungary, his journey had barely begun when he was trapped inside his tent for days by hail, faced constant threats from wolf packs, had his horses stolen twice and was repeatedly accosted by drunken Mongolian herders.

Basha O'Reilly is a Founding Member of The Guild who has also suffered in the saddle in Mongolia. In 1995 she rode from Volgograd to London, becoming the only person in the twentieth century to ride out of Russia. After riding the infamous Outlaw Trail from Mexico to Wyoming, she was made a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in recognition of her equestrian explorations. Yet she began her exploration career as Russian interpreter for a mounted scientific expedition in the Mongolian mountains.

"There is a saying in the Long Riders' Guild: it is not the kilometres that kill a horse but the kilograms. I learned how accurate that was when I riding through the High Altai mountains. At 110 pounds my weight taxed my small Mongolian horse. Other horses were not so lucky. Being burdened by heavy foreign male

riders, it caused me great distress to see these little native horses get so desperate they would lie down under the saddle. So my heart goes out to any horse which is expected to carry a heavy (and probably inexperienced) rider for 40 kilometres across that barren land- at speed!"

New Zealand Long Rider Ian Robinson, who survived perilous solo journeys across Afghanistan, Tibet and Mongolia, was likewise skeptical about the proposed endurance event.

"In regards to this Mongol race, it sounds like a great idea on paper, but it's a disaster waiting to happen. Has this English tour company done any horse trekking trips before? Do they realize that twenty-five riders changing horses every forty kilometers for one thousand kilometers will require 625 horses? Good luck finding them. I had trouble finding one or two! But my main worry is the horses. Local herdsmen are not going to offer their fittest, healthiest, best-conditioned horses. They are going to turn up with their worst, oldest, skinniest horses and hope to hire them out for a fortune. Riding such horses in a race would be downright cruel. Plus, as this race will be run in summer, it means racing a weak horse in the steppe heat with a large westerner on board. That could result in the animal dropping dead."

Bonnie Folkins, from Canada, has visited Mongolia many times in preparation for her upcoming 1000-mile ride across that country. Because of the dangers and hardships certain

Flaunting the Rules - Forever

Dominic Graham, Mercy Corps' Director in Mongolia, was quoted on their website as saying, "Before Mercy Corps begins any new project or activity, we first engage in a careful assessment of local challenges, opportunities and possible solutions."

That critical rule seems to have been overlooked in the case of the Mongol Derby, touted by Morgan as the "biggest, baddest equine affair on the planet."

to await her, Bonnie will be riding with two hardened Mongolian nomads. Having scouted the route, ridden the horses and met the people, Bonnie expressed grave concern regarding the safety of the endurance horses and riders.

"Mongolians tend to ride much younger animals than we allow, which is a concern. Does this company not realize that these Mongolian horses never see a portion of grain? It's like asking them to run a marathon on a diet of lettuce. Yet the most obvious question must be, if the Mongolian government will not allow their prized horses to even leave the country, then why are they authorizing them to be abused in front of the entire world? Mongols are taught to never shout at the horse because it is their friend. So imagine the lesson it presents to young Mongolian children to see this sacred example ignored when foreigners ride an animal to the point of possible exhaustion or death. Either this English tour company is completely devoid of compassion, or they are determined to carry out this mission at any expense."

Having mentored more than a hundred of these expeditions in less than ten years, The Long Riders' Guild shared these grave concerns with the Adventurists tour company, which chose to ignore them.

"You're only having fun when something's going wrong," the company said.



The only known thirteenth-century portrait of Genghis Khan.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, the Mongolian National Horse Racing Association confirmed that their organization had not been informed or involved in Morgan's race. To make matters worse, this is to be a yearly event, staged every August under the blazing Mongolian sun, whose focus will be on the riders surviving the danger, not protecting the welfare of the horses.

Because of the various violations and dangers Morgan's race presents to the equestrian and endurance world, the Long Riders' Guild, and its editorial ally, the online English equestrian news service, Voices for Horses, have launched an international petition which asks Mongolian President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj to ban the race from occurring. The petition also asks Princess Haya, the current president of the FEI, to denounce the Mongol Derby because of gross infractions of international endurance racing laws.

Genghis Khan's Admonition

The mighty Genghis Khan knew how to handle upstarts that harmed his nation's horses. Within the great book of the Mongols, the Mongolyn Nuuts Tovchoo, is this famous admonition issued by the legendary warrior.

"Take care of the horses before they lose condition. For once they have lost it, you may spare them as much as you will, they will never recover it on the march. Don't overload the riding horses, and no horse on the march is to use a bit. If these orders are disobeyed commanders are authorized to behead offenders on the spot, so as to protect the welfare of the horses," the great Khan warned.

Yet this same equestrian treasure, this legacy of riding excellence, matched with compassion for the horses, is now about to be sold to English travel agents.

Is that what the immortal Mongol would have allowed? Would a man who beheaded Mongol offenders over a slight infraction condone his nation's horses being dangerously raced by novice riders from another country? Is Mongolia's equestrian culture for sale to the highest bidder, as this English company appears to believe? Will Mongolia's horses be used as a get-rich-quick scheme by a foreigner who gloats, "It's dangerous, it's unsupported and you could die"?

Will Mongolia's president stop the race – or share the shame?

Regardless of what happens out on the steppe, it is already plain to see that thousands of horse riders, equestrian explorers and endurance riders will soon band together in an unprecedented act of solidarity designed to halt Morgan's spectacle.

CuChullaine O'Reilly has spent more than thirty years studying equestrian travel techniques on four continents. After making lengthy trips by horseback across Afghanistan and Pakistan, he was thereafter made a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. One of the Founding Members of the Long Riders' Guild, CuChullaine is the publisher of the world's largest collection of equestrian travel wisdom, the director of the equestrian academic research organization IRGAF, and the author of Khyber Knights and The Horse Travel Handbook.

For more information about the race, and the parties mentioned in this article, please visit the following websites.

Long Riders' Guild Mongol Investigation & Petition
www.thelongridersguild.com/mongolia.htm

Morgan's Mongol Derby
<http://mongolderby09.theadventurists.com/index.php>

Mercy Corps Mongolia
www.mercycorps.org.mn

FEI Endurance
www.fei.org/Disciplines/Endurance/Pages/Default.aspx

American Endurance Riding Conference
www.aerc.org/Contact.asp

Will Mongolia's president stop the race - or share the shame?

Warriors in Training: A Persian view of Mongol soldiers in action.

