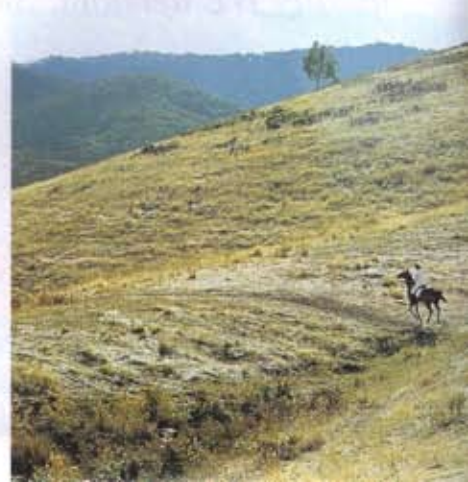




Meg Wade at home in picturesque north-east Victoria. More often than not she is overseas, competing for big prizemoney and enjoying celebrity status.





Meg Wade's enduring passion

Story **Kellie Penfold**
Photos **Trisha Dixon**

When Meg Wade's neighbors near Corryong in north-eastern Victoria see her driving out the gate towing a horse float at weekends, most give her a casual, friendly wave, without fully realising that right there is a champion athlete of international stature ... one of the best endurance riders on the planet. This is probably because Meg's sport receives little recognition in Australia, although worldwide it attracts huge prizemoney, especially in the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, where Meg enjoys celebrity status.

Endurance riding is considered one of the toughest of the "tough" sports. It has taken her from Corryong, where she and her husband, Chris Gates, run a 1000ha cattle and sheep property and the Castlebar Arab horse stud and training facility, to riding across the desert with Arabian crown princes and sheiks and pushing her horse up American mountain peaks with some of the best riders in the world.

In 1998 she was the Australian Rider of the Year, after being most consistently successful on the endurance circuit. She competed in 28 events, won 14 and was named best rider at the world championships. Meg has also been a member of the bronze medal winning teams at the World Equestrian Championships on two occasions. Last year she travelled to events in Jordan, Ireland, the UAE and the United States, as well as to most states of Australia. This year, she spent most of March in the UAE at the World's Most Preferred Endurance Ride, where \$60,000 first prize was on offer. The sport is held in such regard there that all Meg's expenses are met. This includes paying the \$10,000 one-way flight for her horse, just to see Meg compete.

Around 2000 Australians participate in endurance riding every year - the highest per capita rate in the world.

In the United States, 10,000 compete regularly. Events take many forms, with 80km being a short course, 160km a long ride and 500km events staged over five days. Locations vary from the mountains to flat country and, often overseas, include deserts and beaches.

"A total of 41 countries sent teams to the world equestrian championships, which is more than go to the Olympics for equestrian events," says Chris Gates, who manages Castlebar horses at the events and helps Meg with her preparations. "We are hoping endurance riding will become an Olympic event, maybe in time for Athens in 2004, which would really lift the profile of this sport."

Meg's favorite event is the 160km race, which starts at midnight to avoid the heat of the day and, depending on the terrain, usually takes about 12 hours to complete. "At the end of the ride you are exhausted, but when you have a good horse that wants to pick up the pace and finish with plenty of energy, it makes everything worthwhile," Meg says. "The other thrill is seeing some beautiful country or riding in amazing terrain. Once in the US the course climbed 25,000 feet and it took me 17 hours to go 100 miles, which was a long hot day."

Endurance riding is a relatively young sport, developed in the 1960s in the US through a series of cavalry-style tests. Known for its own breed of riders, who didn't mind long hours in the saddle, Australia quickly developed its own style of competition. R.M. (Reg) Williams and legendary Kimberley stockman, Tom Quilty, joined forces to organise the first 100 mile endurance race in Australia in 1966. It was staged in the foothills of Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, and Tom Quilty put up the \$20,000 Quilty Cup, a trophy which contained more gold than the Melbourne Cup.

The Tom Quilty Gold Cup continues today and each year is held in a different state (this year in Tasmania in June). Meg has competed every year since her first year endurance riding in 1988 and has a swag

