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WHAT A RIDE – WHAT AN EXPERIENCE!

On Wednesday the 20th August, the Africa Championship Endurance Race took place at Walvis Bay in Namibia. This was an opportunity for the Botswana, Namibia and South Africa to again compete in endurance riding in what the Namibians term – the Ultimate Endurance Ride. It is without doubt a special experience in a very scenic environment as well as a true test of horsemanship. The Senior and Heavy Weight teams completed 130 km while the Junior team completed 120 km. All of the competition took place under FEI rules and this is the thirteenth consecutive endurance ride at Walvis Bay. The Namibian Endurance Riding Association were the hosts for this ride and made special efforts to ensure that everyone who attended really enjoyed the event. They even arranged for several of the Botswana team members to compete on Namibian horses.

The terrain over which the ride took place, included a first leg of 31 km through an area called the Salt Pan Leg. The second of 30 km was termed the Desert Leg; the third of 29 km termed the Sea Leg; the fourth of 30 km termed the Dune 7 Leg plus a fifth - for those completing 130

km (- which was only 10 km) termed the Esplanade Leg. In the Pre-Ride Instructions, riders were especially warned about the first leg alongside a saltpan area which was expected to be particularly difficult as it would be moist early in the morning – with the first riders leaving at 04:00. As can be seen from the above descriptions, there is a variety of areas which the riders traverse e.g. alongside saltpans, through desert, alongside the sea and over one of the most scenic areas – Dune 7. However, Walvis Bay provides an ideal venue for rides of international standing. The dunes provide terrain similar to that of Arabia - where endurance riding originated, but with the particular challenge of crossing Dune 7.

Initially the Walvis Bay ride started as a two day competition over 160 km (80 km each day), but since 2000, it has been a one day ride over 130 km. Since it's inception as an international ride in 1996, Namibia's Senior Team has won the competition 5 times and South Africa's 6 times. Since 2000, Junior Teams for both countries have participated with the Namibians winning 6 of the 7 encounters against South Africa. In 2008, the Namibians

were successful with both their Senior and Heavy Weight teams while the South Africans managed to win the Junior competition. (In 2007, Namibia won all 3 competitions).

This year proved to be a kind year in terms of weather conditions in that for most of the day it was cloudy and it did not become unbearably hot. The 130 km race was won by a Namibian rider in a time of 7 hours and 40 seconds which was an average speed of 18,54 km per hour. He was nearly a minute ahead of another Namibian rider who was then followed by the first South African to complete the ride, a total of 10 minutes after the second rider. The first Heavy Weight rider was from Namibia and completed the 130 km ride in 7 hours, 39 minutes and 52 seconds which was an average speed of 16,96 km per hour. The first Junior rider to complete 120 km was a Namibian and she took 6 hours, 20 minutes and 40 seconds at an average speed of 18,9 km per hour. On Thursday evening the 21st August, a magnificent prize giving event was arranged by NERA in a magnificent tent that was erected alongside the lagoon that abuts the Walvis Bay harbour. The event was dramatically impressive

and resulted in a very enthusiastic response from the Chairman of the Namibian Sporting Association who acclaimed the Namibian Teams and explained that he fully understood why these people deserved to receive national colours. In addition, one of the sponsors for 2009 made a major commitment to the 2009 event based on his experience at this wonderful event. A small group of New Zealand riders had also participated on horses loaned to them by Namibians and they too expressed their sincere gratitude to the Namibians for their hospitality and friendship.

To those that were fortunate enough to be either part of it or view this ride, it was certainly one of the most spectacular in Africa. Furthermore, it was an endurance ride in the true sense in that both rider and horse had to experience all aspects of the terrain which includes the vastness and solitude of the Namib Desert, the refreshing but misleading exhilaration riding alongside the sea, but many, many kilometers of heavy going through sand.

