



# WAY OF THE NOMAD

From his childhood in the state's north to competing in the world's toughest horse race in Mongolia and racing sled dogs across the Alaskan wilderness, this nomadic Queensland vet's life has been anything but ordinary

  
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Campbell 'Cozy' Costello's career as a veterinarian has taken him to (from opposite page) Alaska, Mongolia, Kazakhstan and playing kok-boru ('goat polo') in Kyrgyzstan (Picture: Igor Kovalenko).

**T**he World Nomad Games seem the most unlikely of places to meet a fellow Queenslander. It's early September and it is hot in Cholpon Ata, a resort town in the north of Kyrgyzstan, a small landlocked country in Central Asia. He is standing at the food stall outside the main stadium, wearing an oversized Akubra with a cowhide strap, a Wrangler shirt that has faded to a deep sky blue, jeans slung low around the hips and knee-high lace-up boots, which, he later explains, were standard issue to the Australian Light Horse Brigade. There's a brace around his right forearm, encasing a hand fracture that happened a few days earlier. He had been vaccinating a cow on the Kazakh ranch he is managing – she had bucked and he caught his arm between her 400kg mass and a steel fence.

He looks Australian. He sounds Australian. But we're in Kyrgyzstan, a country most Australians struggle to pinpoint on a map, let alone pronounce. So I tap him on the back and ask, just to be sure.

"Nah," he says, over his shoulder. And there it is: the elongated vowel, the elevated register, the sarcasm. He turns around to introduce himself and there's a stethoscope hanging round his neck next to an official-looking pass that reads "Referee Vet". And as it turns out, Dr Campbell "Cozy" – rhymes with Aussie" – Costello, 29, is about as Australian as they come. In fact, he's as Queenslander as they come. He grew up on a cattle properties near Charters Towers in the state's north including Fanning Downs on the banks of the Burdekin River. He is a fifth-generation grazier. And yes, a Referee Vet.

He's a long way from home but this is not an unusual adventure for this nomadic veterinarian.

**IN EARLY 2016, COSTELLO WAS CONTRACTED AS A VET AND farm manager on a cattle property in southern Kazakhstan. For six months he's been working with an unruly bunch of Kazakh cowboys, wrangling them and their cattle, in an attempt to produce A-grade Angus beef for a posh butcher shop in Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city.**

Costello has come to Kyrgyzstan ostensibly to renew his visa. He knew the World Nomad Games, which are dedicated to the ethnic sports practised in Central Asia, were being held for only the second year so he timed his trip to coincide with the event. "I emailed the organisers to say 'I'm turning up, I know you don't really have any vets, do you want a veterinarian to keep an eye on the horses?'"

He heard straight back from Manas Sultanov, the vice-president of the Kyrgyzstan Equestrian Federation. "Hello, Dr Costello," he wrote, "we would be glad if you could help with the horse run." He was given a date and start time. The rest he had to work out for himself.

Costello arrived at the Hippodrome – a stadium used for horse racing – after dark and found his way to Manas's office. They shook hands and conversed for a few minutes in broken English. Then he was given his pass and told to head to the "valley". The "valley" was Kyrchyn Gorge, home to the Games' cultural festival and the "horse run", a 60km endurance race. "There were no real markers, no arrows to tell the riders which way the track goes ... it was

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just 30 horses running around cows, random cars, police with their strobes, vets, guys that you don't know whether they're in the military or just civilians that love wearing camouflage clothing. TIK," he says, with a smile and a shrug. It means "This is Kazakhstan", though conveniently it can also mean "This is Kyrgyzstan", as it does in this case.

It soon becomes clear that a mix of initiative, hard work and luck has so far defined Costello's life, and his career. Until age 11, he was homeschooled on the family property, his mother Judi guiding him, his brother Alastair (now 27) and two sisters, Bridie, now 24, and Hannah, 22, through lessons provided by School of the Air. Later, he was sent to boarding school, first to Columba Catholic College at Charters Towers and then St Joseph's Nudgee College in Brisbane for Years 11 and 12.

When Costello finished school in 2004, aged 17, he decided to head home, where he "took a year off to earn some money and grow up a bit", and worked as a ringer on the family property – mustering cattle, checking water supplies and fixing fences.

By year's end he had narrowed his career choices down to three options: boilermaker, helicopter pilot, or vet.



Dr Costello in Afghanistan, a country he says helped him understand nomadic life. (From Instagram – @Dr\_Cozy)

**ANIMALS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN IN HIS LIFE ONE WAY OR another, so veterinary science was a pragmatic choice. It would give him options. Costello had experienced first-hand the hardships and uncertainties of life on the land – drought, flood, and the multiple small and not-so-small ways that life is complicated by isolation.**

There was a terrible drought on the property in the early 1990s, when he was five years old. "It was just gravel everywhere, there was no grass. You know it's a dry year when the local trees that are adapted to the Australian climate start to die. The water table gets that low. We put every cow we had on a truck and sent them down to Central Queensland on agistment. We wouldn't see Dad (Peter, now 60) for weeks; he was living out of a swag on the ground looking after the cattle."

Judi (now 53) was pregnant with his sister Bridie at the time. There were no mobile phones. "We had a landline, that was it," Costello recalls. "Mum was teaching me in the schoolroom at that stage. I remember it being ridiculously hot and tough. And that's probably where a lot of respect for my parents and their resilience comes from – especially Mum. She would have been 27, two kids, 100 square miles (260sq km) to look after, no parents, no friends, husband not even there, heavily pregnant.

"I wanted to be a vet to help businesses like my family's get better," he says.

It helped that James Cook University (JCU) in Townsville had announced it would offer a Bachelor of Veterinary Science for the first time. The new school was keen to encourage young people like Costello – who were from the land and likely to return – to be part of the inaugural cohort in 2006. He applied, and got in. It was an experiment of sorts, he says now. One that perhaps prepared him for the convoluted path his career would take. Classes in pharmacology were held outdoors, under a mango tree, because there weren't enough classrooms to accommodate them. He was about halfway through his degree when he learned that the course might not receive accreditation.

"Our course wasn't going to be recognised in Australia, let alone internationally," he says, "but they jumped through the right hoops and got it sorted."

So in 2010, aged 23, he was one of about 40 JCU students to graduate for the first time with a Bachelor of Veterinary Science. He took a job in a mixed practice in Cobden, Victoria, about 210km southwest of Melbourne. Two years later he broke up with his girlfriend of six years. He was 25 and had been studying for five years and working for two.

"I was like, right, it's time to get out there and have a look, see what's going on." So he signed up to ride the 2012 Mongol Derby.

**THE MONGOL DERBY IS THE WORLD'S LONGEST HORSE RACE,** an epic 1000km journey that is loosely based on Genghis Khan's long-distance postal system. Riders typically cover between 80 and 100km a day, sleeping overnight in tents or with Mongolian families in their gers (tents). Each day, they ride for up to 14 hours on local stallions that, for most of the year, roam freely on the vast Mongolian steppes. These ponies are bred for the conditions, but they are wild, ▶

untrained. Injuries are rife. In the year Costello competed in the event, 34 riders started the race but only 18 finished – Costello among them. “We had broken necks, popped lungs, fractured pelvises, broken ankles, broken shoulder-blades. Plus heat exhaustion, dehydration. It was brutal.”

Riders change horses 25 times during the race, at checkpoints spaced every 40km. The organisers take the welfare of these Mongol ponies seriously and at each checkpoint the horses are given a thorough exam by a trained vet. If the animal’s heart rate is too high or it is visibly lame, the rider is penalised. The horse must be given the all clear before the rider is given a new horse for the next stage of the race.

It took Costello 10 days to finish, and he crossed the line in 14th place. “My horse passed its health check with flying colours. We drank copious amounts of beer, got presented with our prizes and traditional Mongolian garments and danced around a massive bonfire all night with the other riders, crew and local Mongolians until just before sunrise.”

After the celebration came the inevitable comedown. “You finish this race and you’re like, well, what’s next? We call it the Derby blues.” Perhaps this experience, among the nomads of Mongolia, inspired his own nomadic phase. He returned home to Australia, to another mixed veterinary practice in Koo Wee Rup, 63km southeast of Melbourne – predominantly cattle and horses this time. Twelve months later he was offered a job vetting injured wildlife in South Africa. “It was a good job,” he says, referring to the position in Koo Wee Rup, “but I thought, stuff it, you only live once.” So in mid-2013 he packed his belongings into boxes and shipped them to the family property where they would remain, barely touched, for more than three years.

**BEFORE HEADING TO SOUTH AFRICA, COSTELLO JOINED A** month-long expedition into the remote and sparsely populated Wakhan Corridor, a sliver of land in northeast Afghanistan. “I rode my horse on the top of a ridge, had China dead ahead of me, Tajikistan to my left and Pakistan to my right. Of course, there are no highways, so everything’s camels, donkeys and horses, and you carry all your food and your belongings through the wilderness.”

He put off telling his mother about the trip – a reconnaissance to investigate tourism opportunities in the area – until two days before he left. Australian troops were still stationed in the south of the country, fighting the Taliban. “Everyone thought I was crazy,” Costello says. But he adds that the experience brought about a “small epiphany”.

The Afghans he came across during that trip were among the most welcoming people he’s ever met. “They were poor – poor as poor, they’ve got nothing – but they’d go and get a goat and slaughter it for you, give you the shirt off their back, let you into their houses. It’s the Silk Road, the nomad way – when a traveller passes through, you give them housing, food, so they can continue on their journey. It’s how that corner of the world has survived.”

In Afghanistan he had his first experience of the game the Afghans call *buzkashi* – basically “goat carcass polo”. It is a little like polo, except there are no mallets and no balls; instead, teams on horseback try to score goals with a headless, stuffed goat carcass that weighs about 40kg. In horse-loving Kyrgyzstan, the game is called *kok-boru* and it is a national sport. They play it on the *jailoos*, the high mountain pastures where shepherds still spend summers tending their flocks, sleeping each night in a yurt. *Kok-boru* is also the feature event of the World Nomad Games – the final, between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the world’s two top teams, was played in front of a packed Hippodrome.

Costello’s experience was a bit more rough and ready. It was the day before Ramadan and a few hundred men had gathered on an open field next to a smattering of yurts. He was given a horse and a brief rundown of the rules, then rode straight into the fray. “It was a free-for-all,” he says. “Once you’re in the middle you can’t get out; there’s horses kicking, biting, there’s guys whipping you in the back and throwing elbows.” It didn’t deter him. He thought to himself, it’s not every day you get to play this game in Afghanistan, I’m gonna have a crack. And he did, even scoring a goal. Afterwards he was invited to join the clansmen to chat – through a translator – over bread, tea and goat broth.

In South Africa, he was based mostly in the Highveld region in the country’s north, where he applied his vet skills to the local conservation effort. Most of the work was done



‘Everyone thought I was crazy going to Afghanistan.’ But he says it brought a ‘small epiphany’



(From top) Costello working as a Referee Vet at the World Nomad Games, Kyrgyzstan; sled dog racing in the Alaskan wilderness; and wrangling Mongolian reindeer.

by helicopter, so flying low over the grasslands – while herds of impala or rhino kicked up dust below – was all part of a normal day. As was tending to injured buffaloes and dehorning rhinos (to make them less appealing to poachers).

In 2014, Costello returned to the Mongol Rally, this time to work as a vet, which he did again the following two years. It now feels like a second home and he has families there that welcome him back like a long-lost nephew or son.

Last year, shortly before he moved to Kazakhstan, he vetted the Iditarod Sled Dog Race, a 1600km race across the Alaskan wilderness.

**HIS KAZAKHSTAN JOB WAS A HARD SLOG. THE RANCH IS IN A** remote part of the country where no one, other than his translator, speaks English. Even his translator struggles at times to adequately interpret conversations – he is versed in Russian and English, but the cowboys he works with all speak Kazakh, and the working conditions can be brutal.

“The hygiene practices and husbandry practices were pretty obnoxious, so we had a lot of problems. It’s really hard to do without fencing, infrastructure and other professionals, and it’s a very macho culture, so even though I’m the veterinary consultant, I’m younger and that’s just final. They don’t want to listen, or they’re very set in their ways.”

“When I arrived, they had a concentration camp for cattle – they hadn’t fed them properly, they hadn’t done anything. Calves were being born into a filthy environment and dying within 12 hours.”

Animal husbandry has deep cultural roots in Kyrgyzstan and is steeped in superstition. As an Australian-trained vet working in Central Asia, Costello has had to constantly manage his own expectations about what constitutes best practice vet care. He recalls one afternoon on the ranch when he was asked whether he could fix a horse that had clearly broken its leg. “I was like, ‘no, this animal is bugged. It’s finished’. So I walked into the house to get something to make it comfortable.” He returned, planning to put it down. “It had already been killed,” he says. “They cut its head off, skinned it, and we ate it that night.”

The day after I meet Costello is the final day of the World Nomad Games and I head back to the Hippodrome to watch the horse races. Most of the jockeys are barely teenagers, and they ride bareback. These kids will ride the 22km course wearing bandannas instead of helmets.

The Kyrgyz do not water or feed the horses before a race, Costello tells me later. They won’t water a horse immediately after a race, either. The custom, prevalent across Central Asia, is to wait until the animal has cooled down, or in the case of a working horse, until after the sun has set. Saddles, if worn at all, stay on because of a belief that if the sweat is exposed to sunlight it will burn the horses’ skin. Instead, the animals are doused in icy water.

At the end of the race, a black stallion with a pink ribbon in its bridle collapses on the track. Crowds gather around the animal, which is lying on its side in the sandy arena. I watch as bottle after bottle of ice-cold water is emptied over its head, neck and flank. I go searching for Costello, Referee Vet. By the time I find him, the horse is on its feet and back at the stables but is clearly agitated, rearing and bucking.

Costello checks the horse’s heart rate. He says it is elevated, but within normal range. He pinches the skin on the horse’s neck. The skin is slow to bounce back, which confirms that the animal is dehydrated. Costello attempts to explain to the trainer and jockey, using sign language, that the horse needs to drink. There’s a weariness in his tone – how many times has he offered this advice, only to be ignored? Maybe it’s the hat, or the boots, or the calm confidence in his voice, but it seems the message gets through; when I look over a minute later, the horse is drinking.

**COSTELLO TURNS 30 IN AUGUST. HE IS OPEN-MINDED AND** outward-looking, hopeful about his future. He left Kazakhstan in November but his nomadic days are not behind him. After a short stint at home in Queensland, he returned to Alaska this month to again work as a vet at the Iditarod sled dog race. He will be back to Australia in April, and he’s keen to get his pilot’s licence – because he loves flying – and to stay involved with the family farm. He wants to channel all he has learnt into a new project that will address both food security and climate change: producing carbon-neutral beef. Watch this space. ■