….. One of the extraordinary synchronicities happened to Lloyd who having lived in New Zealand for some time, came across a book by my friend Nick Steele, Take a Horse to the Wilderness. Many years later while riding on the beach on the North Coast near Durban there were two women who were swimming in the sea and they came out to greet Lloyd and Isabel. It happened to be the wife and the mother-in-law of the late Nick Steele. Then later, yet another synchronistic event occurred when they were riding on the coast near East London and again met a woman because of her love of horses. They began talking and she turned out to be a great friend of Nick Steele and her husband was a former colleague of mine in the game reserves in Zululand.

I frequently joke with Lloyd and Isabel about their 581 day ride and on a recent visit from my brother Gary Player I joked that it was a miracle that in their entire journey they never had a cross word. The truth is that when they did their journey both were still single and if ever there was a testing time between two people, these 581 days were it. All the anger, irritation and frustration that grows when people are pushed together on a long and difficult journey surfaced and at the end of it they realised how deeply they loved each other and, as all romantic stories end, they got married and they have lived happily ever after! In my eyes they are heroic people, but they take little credit for themselves and instead they praise the wonderful horses that they rode upon or led during the epic journey. The love for their horses is constantly expressed and one can sense the return of the love of the horses for their riders. As any horseman or horsewoman knows, when you become involved with horses you enter into a unique relationship with an animal that is highly intelligent and intuitive and as a result of the association, you have to put the horse before yourself on all occasions. The horse must be watered and fed at the end of a day before you take care of your own needs. This is the law and the lore of mans’ association with the horse and in all expeditions from Alexander the Great to the cavalry regiments of all the wars, no horseman put himself first. The horse took priority. In Isabel and Lloyd’s story this comes through time and time again.

In their book we learn very interesting facts which vary from the amount of concentrated feed per horse per day to the oldest and the youngest horses that they rode upon, Roan and Djuma, the former 14 years old and the latter six years old. We learn about how many times during this journey they got up during the night to check the horses, mostly in remote places. Their camping sites varied from the plain open veldt to a double-decker bus, public toilet floor and a kitchen floor. One of the most astonishing facts, which is a clear indication of their deep concern for the welfare of the horses, is that there were no back, wither or girth rubs on the horses. But their horses did get illnesses; biliary and others and one can appreciate their anxiety for the horses during this period. Other interesting facts emerge, like swimming the 180 metres of the fast flowing Umtata River, indeed only one of the 31 rivers swam. They rode near and through numerous game reserves and recorded the big five tracks from horseback; lion, leopard, elephant, rhino, buffalo.
As would be expected, there were many dramatic moments and they record a walk of 45 kilometres at night searching for lost horses and then another 70 kilometre walk along the Orange River searching for run-away horses. Their observations on a variety of subjects makes for fascinating reading, for example the record number of beer bottles counted a horse length away on road verges was 14 and as they rightly say South Africa has a serious problem with litter. Their saddest comment is how they lost count on the number of mammals killed on the roads. Isabel was born in Germany and it was good fortune to be accepted for a three month working holiday with horses and as she says, when she met Lloyd at the airport for the first time she knew that there was something different about him and this led to an immediate connection. Both she and Lloyd came together at a most propitious time in their lives and as the old saying goes, it is a meeting that had been arranged in Heaven, but they still had to go through hell to really get to know each other.

Having served at the latter part of the Second World War, I have always been interested in war memorials and for me one of the most moving is the one in Port Elizabeth where a trooper in the Prince Alfred’s Guard (a regiment I served in for a year) is giving a horse water. In my own life I grew up with horses in the rural country between Johannesburg and Pretoria and it was a terrible blow when we had to leave our country home and go to live in a suburb near a gold mine. My association with horses began again in the 1950’s when I became a Game Ranger and with my colleagues Nick Steele, Hugh Dent and Gordon Bailey, we rode horses on patrol in that wonderful wild place. Horses were of critical importance during the early days of Operation Rhino because when the rhino were darted they had to be followed on horseback as this was the most efficient way, failing which Magqubu Ntombela had to painstakingly track the rhino down. Nick Steele had his favourite horse Zoom and mine was Cherokee. They carried us for long distances in the iMfolozi Game Reserve and we used to sleep out at night with the reins tied to our wrists because the horses would always detect a predator nearby and jerk the reins and wake us up.

* Dr. Ian Player