



AND THEY'RE

RACING

Horses surge down the straight during the second event on the card at the annual races at Laura, Qld.

BUSH HORSE RACING HAS A VITAL SOCIAL ROLE IN RURAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIA WHILE BOLSTERING

LOCAL ECONOMIES THROUGH TOURISM, EMPLOYMENT AND SPONSORSHIP. STORY JESSICA OWERS



PHOTOS: ALI MATTHEWS

Locals kick back in the McSporan Pavilion, named after a former club member and manager of Innamincka Station, during the district's annual picnic races. OPPOSITE: Jack Mills follows a race field.

IT'S MID-AUGUST, and 85-year-old Jack Mills is watching the weather forecast. He's worried. In a fortnight he's due at Innamincka, in the dusty north-eastern corner of South Australia, but the clouds are coming. "In that country, if there comes a big rain you don't move for a number of days," he says, and chuckles. "But I don't know if you can trust the weather bureau."

Jack is a bush-racing steward, these days based in Robe, SA, but in decades past in places such as Marree, Glendambo and Beltana – rural outposts that had, at one time or another, a race meeting that required a stipendiary steward. He started in Laura, east of Port Pirie, around 1960, and gradually moved into the backcountry. These days he stewards just Innamincka, for one weekend at the end of every August.

Innamincka is 1164 kilometres from Adelaide by sealed road, or just over 1000km via the Strzelecki Track. It services not only its resident population of about 12, plus the local cattle stations, but also the thousands that pass through it on the tourist trail. However, once a year, for a few weeks at the end of winter, the region explodes with activity as the Simpson Desert Racing Carnival gets underway. There's the Innamincka Picnic Races and, over the Queensland border, Betoota, Birdsville and Bedourie races, all within a 600km catchment. Innamincka enjoys bustling trade from these meetings, with as many as 5000 people descending on Birdsville for what have become Australia's most iconic bush races. For a good three weeks or more, the road through Innamincka is busy.

The Innamincka Picnic Races date to at least 1910 and are run, to this day, in the same spirit that founded the concept. Australia's first picnic meeting is said to have occurred in 1855 on the pastoral estate Tirranna, just outside Goulburn, NSW, but the circumstances behind that first meeting are unclear. While some accounts state that it was two young boys racing their ponies that carved out the racetrack in Tirranna's paddocks, it is more likely that the owner of the property, the esteemed pastoralist Dr Andrew Gibson, came up with the idea as a way of bringing local pastoralists together.

The idea became an enormous success in rural Australia. Bullock wagons, sulkies and stock horses ferried racegoers in those days, gradually replaced by rickety motorcars, and eventually modern vehicles and even light aircraft. It brought distant neighbours together and became an important part of Australia's early social life in the bush.

Jack has been going to Innamincka's races for well over 20 years, though he is coming to the end of his tenure. Most of the locals can't remember a meeting without him, and as chief steward he has long overseen the seven thoroughbred races on the first day of the weekend, along with the popular Innamincka Trading Post Cup for stock horses on the second day. He has doubled as handicapper, sometimes veterinary inspector, sometimes farrier, but has been joined by a raft of officials brought in to run what is, essentially, a proper amateur-racing fixture. The race caller and the clerk of the course come from over the Queensland border, as do the





SAMUEL GUBICAK

A chalkboard displays the runners and riders for the first event of the day as onlookers watch the arrival of the horses into the mounting yard at the ABC Races.

caterers, while the track vet travels up from Port Augusta. The paramedics come in an ambulance from Moomba, the Santos company town about 100km south, and the bookmakers fly in from Adelaide. The local population swells to about 400 for the weekend, including station managers, ringers and a growing number of tourists. “They stand about and get in your road, and take pictures all day and have a hell of a good time,” Jack says. “We try and show them what an age-old race meeting in the bush was like, and is like.”

As a picnic meeting, Innamincka is impressive. The track sits on a parcel of land 8km outside of town, with a small grandstand and a running rail, and a surface that Jack claims is second to none. “The track is not very far from Cooper Creek, and its surface is a consolidation of silt over a period of time,” he says.

“It is the best dirt track I think I’ve ever been on. To see a field of seven or eight horses come towards you, and you can’t hear a hoof beat. It’s like a synthetic track.”

It’s been a tough year in the border country. Innamincka is dry, dusty and windy in late August, and everyone is feeling it, but the community spirit during race weekend is buoyant.

Jayne-Marie Barns, of nearby Gidgealpa Station, is the secretary of the Innamincka Sporting Club. Along with her husband Jason, who is the club president, and treasurer Janet Brook from Cordillo Downs Station, she spends long months with dozens of others preparing for the big weekend and says the spirit of the races is unchanged after more than 100 years. “This is our only local event, so everybody looks forward to it,” she says. “It’s the one time of the year when everyone catches up with everyone. They ask about the kids, and if you’ve had any rain, and they forget all about the drought. Everyone is in the same boat, and there’s great comfort in that.”

Jayne-Marie says the club keeps enough proceeds from the meeting for the following year’s event, but the rest goes to the Royal Flying Doctor Service at Broken Hill, and that usually totals \$10,000–\$15,000.

She says the number of horses nominated for the races has remained healthy, particularly in recent years. Innamincka draws thoroughbreds from many hundreds of kilometres away, including Broken Hill, and this, Jack believes, is getting rare around the bush picnics. “Many years ago, the idea was that people would bring all their horses together,” he says. “Every station would have had a racehorse or two, and got him up to the

INDUSTRY FORM GUIDE 2012/13

- Racehorses: 30,489
- Owners: 69,770
- Syndicates: 5061
- Races: 19,646
- Registered country races: 14,977
- Total prizemoney: \$488,709,074
- Total wagering turnover: \$14.5 billion
- Stallions at stud: 748
- Foals born: 13,365



best of his ability, and be very proud if he won a race. Nowadays, motorbikes have taken over, and there aren't as many young fellows interested in the racehorses. The picnic meeting has become more of a novelty event."

Around country Australia, that novelty is part of the local tapestry. There are well over 100 picnic meetings nationwide (33 in Victoria and 30 in New South Wales, alone), ranging from the intimate Innamincka to the heavily publicised Bong Bong Races in Bowral, NSW. They are annual events, organised by locals with a spirit of community, often for charity, and while many are counted on the annual racing calendars, some, like Innamincka, fall outside the sanctions of the racing bodies in their respective states and territories. As such, there is no official figure for the number of picnic meetings around rural Australia each year.

RUNNING ON GOLD

In Kalgoorlie–Boulder, WA, the Kalgoorlie–Boulder Racing Club (KBRC) has been hosting horse races since 1896. That was only three years after the town was founded on the back of the state's first gold rush. In 1893, three wandering Irishmen were passing through the area and, thanks to their horse needing a new shoe, they stopped, only to stumble on 100 ounces of alluvial nuggets. As 30,000 people descended upon the region in a short number of years, a racetrack sprang up before piped water. It was evident that horseracing was, even in the remotest regions of Australia, a social priority of early white settlement.

Horse trainer Peter Fernie was born and bred in 'Kal'. Of about 20 trainers at the KBRC, he is the only one listed as training full-time. In inland regions such as this, where the racing season avoids the sting of summer by operating from April to September, almost all trainers are part-time, or hobby trainers, keeping a handful of thoroughbreds while holding down other jobs. While Peter also runs a cleaning supplies business after training, he has

the largest team in town – 30 horses – with a book of owners spread from Kalgoorlie–Boulder to Esperance and Perth.

Each morning he rises at 4am and heads to the track, feeds and waters, mucks out, then exercises the team. In Kal, he says, it can be very difficult to find track riders, and with about 130 horses in training at the club, Peter calls on his family to help him out. "My father had horses, and my grandfather had horses," he says. "My uncle had horses, so I'm just following in their footsteps. It's like a family business."

Yet Peter, 49, is a recent addition to the training scene, taking up stables only three years ago. Like many in town, he worked underground for a long time, in the gold mines that still bankroll much of the region's prosperity. "It was a very different career to racing horses. I used to get paid back then," he says, jokingly. "Now I have to wait to get paid."

The KBRC is an official thoroughbred-racing club, governed by the regulations of Racing and Wagering Western Australia (RWWA), with a TAB (totalisator betting) service, and the once-a-year 'Racing Round', a week-long carnival of racing that celebrates the traditions of the former three local clubs of Kalgoorlie, Boulder and Coolgardie. The club is one of 36 registered race clubs in Western Australia, and racing is a very healthy industry in the state. It turned over \$1.07 billion in wagering revenue last season, a figure that has been climbing since 2009. The KBRC hosts 25 meetings a year and, with an irrigated turf surface, it regularly attracts top trainers from different parts of Western Australia.

But racing in the goldfields has ripples that travel as far east as Sydney and Melbourne. "We buy a fair few horses at the city sales," Peter says. "There's no two-year-old racing in Kal because the ground is quite firm, so most people buy tried runners. The average age of horses I get is two to five years old, and they're usually geldings or mares."

Peter is the leading trainer in Kalgoorlie–Boulder. He won the



Trainer Peter Fernie (right) chats with jockey Lucas Camilleri (black silks) before a race at Kalgoorlie-Boulder, WA. TOP: Capacity crowds watch the field pass the judge for the first time in the 2012 Kalgoorlie Cup.

PHOTOS: LYNN WEBB

OUTBACK STORY

trainers' premiership last season and there was a race named in his honour, the 'Peter Fernie Oh What A Trainer Handicap', run in August. "I'm very fortunate with my owners, they're a good bunch," Peter says. "I've got some very wealthy ones, and then I've got the local fireman, mechanics, boilermakers. All types really." Peter also sits on the race committee at the KBRC, and says the region's racing scene, like so many things in Kalgoorlie-Boulder, hovers on the tides of the mining boom.

"We've been lucky here for a lot of years," he says, "but this year we've found it a little more difficult than usual. The gold price went down, the share market went down, and there's not much exploration going on. Everyone gets a bit scared, and that affects everything, down to sponsorships and the numbers that we get on course." But like most townships that have had a racetrack older than any living citizen, Kalgoorlie-Boulder has a loyal following across the goldfields. "I see the old fellas that go down to the track every week," Peter says. "I used to see them when I was a kid, and they're still going down. They never miss a meeting."

MEET ME AT THE STATION

Some 2500km north-east of Kalgoorlie, on a tract of dry, red dirt in the Barkly Tableland, NT, the ABC Amateur Turf Club is a relic of the oldest traditions of bush racing. It is a tiny club, with an organised collection of corrugated enclosures, a bald dirt track with a 400-metre running rail, and a racing committee comprising 34 local and extended members. Founded in 1910, it shares the same principles as picnic meetings, with nearby stations

Alexandria, Brunette Downs and Creswell Downs (now absorbed into Walhallow Station) coming together to create a social occasion for the district. Lending their names to the abbreviated ABC, the stations eventually settled their club on a parcel of land within the boundary of Brunette Downs. As time went on, the once-a-year meeting became colloquially known as the Brunette Races.

It occurs every June, in the blustery, wintry months between cattle musters. For four days, some 400 people roll into the district and pitch camp, many of them from neighbouring stations such as Lake Nash, Helen Springs, Eva Downs and Tennant Creek, while Mount Riddock makes a 2000km round trip to attend. The camps resemble small towns – roofing-tin windbreaks and fire pits, goosenecks and semi-trailers everywhere. Further away, in neat, orderly rows, the tourists park side by side, more and more of them every year.

As a horseracing event, the ABC races are unique, a completely amateur sporting occasion where the jockey ranks are comprised of station ringers and everyday men and women. Out here, there is no TAB or bookies. Betting, instead, centres on the popular and entertaining Calcutta auction for the prize pool. Two types of horses are permitted onto the race card – 'district-breds', or horses sired and foaled within the district boundaries (being the whole of the Northern Territory and a portion of Queensland stretching east), and 'southern-breds', or registered racehorses, often off-the-track thoroughbreds (OTTBs), or any horse not district-bred. Six weeks before the event, all racing horses are trucked in and put in a paddock on Brunette Downs, and with 10 days to go, they are



Track officials stage an impromptu gallop down the course at the conclusion of the ABC Races, NT: (l-r) Michael Johnson and Peter Raleigh from Brunette Downs Station, Chris Keane from Austral Downs Station, and Grant Keane from Wondoola Station.



SAMUEL GUBICAK

Presentations for the Open 1500-metre race at Brunette, with (l-r) Bevan Snow from Mount Isa, Qld, Rick Hasty from Serpentine, Vic, and jockeys Daniel Baker and Kaela Iverson from Camooweal, Qld, with racehorse Global.

hard-fed to bring them up to performing condition. The club calls this 'process paddocking', and it is a way of equalising competition, so that all entrants on the day have had the same conditioning.

As a venue, the Barkly is rough country in June, blowing everyone inside out with a stiff wind nicknamed the 'Barkly breeze', and temperatures that have most collars on end. But it's only the tourists who notice because, for the locals who come to ride and compete, it's all part of the package.

Mary Vaughan, 26, a head stockman at Brunette Downs who has lived and worked in the Barkly much of her life, says the wind is one of her earliest memories of the races. "I've been coming to this event since I was a kid, and I just love it," she says. "I grew up on Walhallow Station and my dad would bring the whole family every year. I always remember it was very windy."

Mary is known around the district as 'Brumby', and in recent years has started riding in the ABC races. "I didn't have a choice, really," she says. "I was one of the lightest." She explains that the event is the backbone of the vast community. "The races are a big deal for us, and there are families that have been coming for generations. We see people still going that were riding as kids, and now their kids are riding."

The local commitment to the event is enormous. For Brunette Downs in particular, the races carve a significant slice out of the annual work schedule. The station not only hosts the horses during the paddocking process, it also provides the cattle for the campdraft and rodeo events, and has even bought a few racehorses to keep the field sizes up. "There are families up here that have been putting so much into this event for so long with

not much return," Mary says, "but they do it because they love to. We all suffered a bit a few years back when the live-export ban knocked us around. It was quiet up here for a while, but it's picked up again. We're getting a few new faces."

Police sergeant Daniel Baker is one of them. He makes the trip to Brunette from Camooweal, 412km east over the Queensland border, and first attended the races in 2012 as an on-duty officer. But he has always been a horseman. Daniel, 33, is the son of a former Eagle Farm jockey and was, himself, a one-time aspiring hoop. Over six-feet (182 centimetres) tall, he gave up on any riding ambitions as a teenager. Instead, he kept a horse or two in tow as his police job sent him around the bush blocks of Rockhampton, Capella and Jondaryan, Qld. He arrived at Camooweal in 2012, and that was how he made it to Brunette.

"I had a little race mare called Savannah Miss who had come to me from a racing syndicate I was involved with," Daniel says. "She had a sesamoid injury that had ruled her out of professional racing, so I'd just kept her as a pet. But after going to Brunette, I thought it might be the perfect opportunity to bring her back into work, so that's what I did. She won there the following year with me riding her." Since then, Daniel has ridden in the Brunette races with more and more horses. Ezy Jack is his best animal. An OTTB, it raced at the 2014 event for three starts and three wins.

"It's a great thing that this event is still happening," Daniel says. "They're becoming less and less frequent about the place, I suppose because of insurance and the cost to host them." Daniel admits that policing in these parts of Australia is a tough gig. ▶



JESSICA OWERS

CHAMPION HORSES

Among the champion racehorses that have emerged in Australia during 200 years of organised racing, there are two that were as famous for being bush horses as they were for being winners. The first, Bernborough, emerged from the Darling Downs in February 1942 and blazed such a trail across the tracks of south Queensland that he was eventually sold to prominent Sydney identity Azzalin 'the Dazzlin' Romano. Between December 1945 and November 1946, Bernborough won 15 straight races at the highest levels in Sydney and Melbourne, a feat unequalled until Black Caviar. No bush horse in history has exceeded his record or reputation, and, alongside Phar Lap, he was one of five inaugural inductees into the Australian Racing Hall Of Fame.

The second horse, Gunsynd, enjoys an even better bush reputation around Queensland's Goondiwindi district. Owned by a syndicate of four local men – a farmer, storekeeper, publican and newsagent – the grey Gunsynd was a cheap yearling with an unfashionable pedigree that won, among other top city races, the 1972 Cox Plate. During a four-year racing career, he charmed Australia as few horses have. There is a song about him, 'The Goondiwindi Grey', and in 2004 Gunsynd was the only animal on the inaugural list of Queensland Heritage Icons.



RACING QUEENSLAND

ABOVE: Gunsynd's jockey Roy Higgins salutes the crowd at Moonee Valley, Vic, after winning the 1972 Cox Plate. TOP: Bernborough is loaded onto a float at the Prince Street, Randwick, stables of his Sydney trainer Harry Plant in 1946.



Tennant Creek Turf Club, NT, holds its main annual event, the Tennant Creek Cup, each May. OPPOSITE: This year's Red Centre Yearling Sale.

"To be honest, I don't think I would have stayed in Camooweal without getting involved in the races," he says. "Police work is hard enough in isolated communities, but if you have a good hobby like this, it's something to look forward to, so you can keep doing what you do for longer."

Roving salesman Steve Craigie, 64, has been a Brunette fixture since 2010, the year the meeting celebrated 100 years. Steve's business is the Packsaddle Leather Company, which he founded in 1988 after 20 years of working on stations from the Territory's Victoria River Downs to Jemalong Station at Forbes, NSW. Steve has been on the road with his mobile showroom for seven straight years, a circuit that sees him navigate 42 rural events from February through to November. "The events I enjoy the most are those well off the beaten track," he says. "Those like Brunette, attended by station people, some of whom travel up to 1000km to get there." Steve sets up his gooseneck store every year and makes a respectable sum at Brunette selling hand-stitched leather goods, all made at his factory at Byron Bay, NSW.

He says the races are a lot of fun, a chance for station folk to let their hair down from normal station duties. But that famous dust and wind, he says, gets into everything.

"After three days of racing, I get back on the road to the next event at Alice Springs, and that's where the clean-up from Brunette takes place," he says. But he isn't complaining. "It's a pretty good life, really."

JOURNEYING JOCKEYS

At last count, the racing industry in Australia provides 56,400 full-time jobs and, of these, the most public faces are the riders. Across the country, there are 840 registered jockeys, a quarter of these female. The state-by-state breakdown shows Queensland has the highest concentration of professional riders with 220, New South Wales (including the Australian Capital Territory) with 209, Victoria with 197, Western Australia with 133, then South Australia with 37, Tasmania with 23, and Northern Territory with 21. About 70 percent of all licensed riders across Australia are in rural and regional areas.

In 2009, the Menzies Research Institute in Tasmania published a study that concluded professional race riding was the most dangerous occupation on land, with licensed jockeys falling once every 240 rides. Of these falls, 27% resulted in injury, while the study discovered that one in 620 falls resulted in death. Recent research by the Australian Jockeys' Association (AJA) puts the number of jockey fatalities, right back to the 1840s, at 870. Paul Innes, CEO of the AJA, says, "The wider community is unaware of the dangers that our members face day in day out on all kinds of tracks and in all sorts of conditions". While there is no conclusive evidence that fatalities and injuries occur more in country areas, Paul suggests that is probably the case. "Anecdotally, I would say the risk is higher in the country, simply because the standard of tracks is generally not as good."

HORSE TRADING IN THE DESERT

In the remote centre of Australia, the Alice Springs Turf Club (ASTC) has a unique way of injecting fresh horses into the local racing industry. With no established thoroughbred breeding in the Northern Territory, in 1996 it paired with the Sydney-based bloodstock firm William Inglis & Son. At that time, club members were worried that local racing horses were getting old and tired from years on the same circuit. It approached Inglis with a \$50,000 budget to purchase a handful of young horses from one of its Melbourne sales – horses that would be on-sold by public auction in Alice Springs. The sale would be held at the town's convention centre during the Alice Springs Cup carnival, the busiest time of the year, and it would be called the Red Centre Yearling Sale.

Jonathan D'Arcy is a director and auctioneer at Inglis, and the chief buyer for the ASTC. He has been involved in the partnership since its first year, and purchases yearlings for the club at the annual Victorian Owner Breeder Incentive Scheme (VOBIS) Gold Yearling Sale in Melbourne each April. His budget is around \$65,000 these days. He follows the new horses straight to Alice after their purchase, usually acting as the sale's auctioneer.

"The association has worked very well," he says. "Every year, bar one, the ASTC has made a bit of money. We [Inglis] normally buy between 12 and 17 yearlings for them, and we look for nice, tough, sound types of horses. They have to have enough bone and substance to handle the tough racing conditions because once they go into training they won't be heading off to any nice, green paddocks for a while."

The Red Centre Yearling Sale is the only organised thoroughbred sale in Central Australia, and is a unique partnership between town and country. Victorian horse breeders enjoy its benefits, but so does Alice Springs, with the knock-on effect of having a healthy, revitalised racing industry.

Farriers, vets and feed merchants are kept in work, as are caterers and hospitality staff. As well, the association with William Inglis & Son has been profitable. The bloodstock firm does not charge the racing club any commissions on the yearlings it scouts, and it sponsors the main two-year-old race during the carnival, the Inglis Red Centre 2YO Classic. "It's a help to our sale in Melbourne to have the ASTC buying each year, so we're thrilled to be involved with their racing, to be putting something back to the bush," Jonathan says. "It's great to see a remote club be proactive in getting young horses into the Territory, and over the past 20 years or so we've seen some of its best horses come from the Red Centre sale."

One of those horses is Periduki, a dark bay gelding that Jonathan sourced at the VOBIS sale for \$4000 in 2006. Racing until 2013, Periduki became Alice Springs's greatest equine export, winning the length of Australia from Morphettville and Oakbank in South Australia to Fannie Bay in Darwin. Epitomising the racing dream, he was bought at the Red Centre Yearling Sale for \$6000, but returned his Alice owners more than \$662,000 in prizemoney.



PHOTOS: NIKKI WESTOVER



PETER MORGANTI

Victoria's leading country rider Dean Yendall on racehorse Sierra Storm after a recent win at Warracknabeal, Vic.

In rural Victoria, 40-year-old professional jockey Dean Yendall is his state's leading country rider. Based in Horsham, 300km north-west of Melbourne, he is married to fellow jockey Christine Puls. While a freelancer, Dean is a preferred rider for the Ballarat-based trainer Darren Weir. He is one of racing's most consistent and successful jockeys by numbers, and a five-time winner of the Victorian Country Jockey Premiership. But it is hard work. Dean rode in 702 races around Victoria last racing season, winning 123 times for a strike rate of almost 18%.

He is a well-known traveller, covering tens of thousands of kilometres every year to clock up that many starts. In any week, Dean might be in Warracknabeal, Warrnambool, Tatura, Geelong and Melbourne. With 71 racing clubs in Victoria, and almost 80% of meetings occurring in regional Victoria, it becomes a case of 'have saddle, will travel'. "I try to get to the races every day of the week," he says. "The driving is tiring, especially doing it every day, or most days. I average about 500km daily, and there's no other alternative really. I thought about a helicopter a few years ago, but it was complicated with landing, then getting to the racecourse. And they're ridiculously pricey."

Dean describes the jockey ranks as "cutthroat" these days, where competition for rides is fierce. On his road trips, he often has the company of Christine, who can ride at the same meeting, but while this has its advantages, it also has its disadvantages. "If she's riding in a race with me, I try to keep an eye out for her, see where she's at," Dean says. But he admits that when it comes to himself, he doesn't think too much about the safety risks in racing. "It's a job, and if you start thinking about those things, you shouldn't be riding," he says.

BUSH BREEDING

Right back to Australia's earliest days of European settlement, organised horseracing was a business, as was the breeding of the thoroughbred racehorse. One never existed without the other. The first thoroughbred stallion was landed in Australia in 1799, a dour fellow named Rockingham, and within a decade or so the country's first official race meeting had occurred in the grounds of Sydney's Hyde Park. But as pioneers pushed their way west in those early days they found few regions that were favourable to the rearing of fine-boned blood horses. Australia was hot, dusty and scrubby and to this day, there are only three areas of thoroughbred-breeding excellence in the country – the Upper Hunter Valley in New South Wales, the Nagambie district of central Victoria, and the Darling Downs in southern Queensland.

The Darling Downs lies to the west of the Great Dividing Range, 300km from Brisbane, and features a geological cocktail of sloping hillsides, flat alluvial plains and a belt of basalt uplands 30–50km wide, sloping west. Average annual rainfall is 950 millimetres, declining rapidly away from the range, and soils have good fertility and water-holding capacity, with an abundance of native bluegrasses, making them ideal for grazing thoroughbreds. In addition, heavy winter frosts have made the Darling Downs virtually tick-free, with few other parasite problems. As a result, the region has become Queensland's bloodstock capital, with Toowoomba its regional centre.

In the thick of things, Gary Turkington's Wattle Brae Stud has been operating since 1910, always on its land in Hobby, 36km south of Toowoomba, and always in Turkington ownership. It is Queensland's oldest continually family-owned



LAURA HUNT/APN

Queensland breeder Gary Turkington at home with one of his horses on Wattle Brae Stud.

WELFARE MATTERS

Racing attracts much public scrutiny, so animal welfare is high on its agenda, with certain issues in particular focus, including two-year-old racing, jumps racing, racehorse retirement and life after racing, racing in hot weather, whip use, and 'end of life' management. For unregistered rural and bush meetings, many of the respective states' departments of primary industries put out a welfare protocol, designed to complement the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979. The protocol varies between jurisdictions, but has a few common rules, including:

- veterinary presence at meetings is mandatory;
- horses will be inspected for identity;
- horses will be inspected pre- and post-racing at veterinary discretion;
- pre- and post-race drug testing may be conducted;
- gear (saddles, bits, bandages) must comply;
- no spurs, whips (this varies between meetings) or standing martingales, and
- surfaces must be safe for the purposes of racing.

thoroughbred stud, seeing out two world wars, the Depression, and all the technological advancements that have come since. Gary and his wife Phoebe, who have three children, are the fourth generation of Turkingtons on the property, which today boasts 700 hectares, four stallions, 200 broodmares (owned and agisted), about 80 yearlings each season, and a few hundred cattle. Wattle Brae also harvests its own barley, oats and lucerne.

"We've been here a long time, and it's not always easy, but when the industry is good and positive, it's good fun to be in," Gary says. "Over the years, I've met such a diverse bunch of people, and I can go into any pub in Queensland, walk in and order a beer, and tell them where I'm from. They almost always know Wattle Brae Stud. That's a good feeling. The horse business is such a strong industry, and just as an example, recently we had a letter come to us from somewhere in America, and all the envelope said was 'Wattle Brae Stud, Australia'. It got to us within seven days. It means something to be in a place for over 100 years."

In that century, the farm has touched the lives of countless locals, employing managers and stable staff, putting their children through school, paying their rents and mortgages, and grocery bills at the local supermarket. Today, with technology doing much of the work, Wattle Brae employs 10 people, with seasonal workers coming in during foaling season, but the farm's reach is still great. "We have bred hundreds and hundreds of Group winners [the highest classification of races], and thousands of winners from here, too many to count," Gary says. "When we look at the results every week, there are half a dozen



Michael Hambly, John Coveney and Steve Hambly, with heeler Rex, at the Kensington Produce warehouse, Sydney.

SUPPLYING THE CITY

In the Sydney suburb of Banksmeadow, the Kensington Produce warehouse is stuffed floor to ceiling with straw, lucerne and oaten bales, bagged grain, barley and chaff, and just about every other feedstuff a horse might require. The company is Sydney's largest feed and bedding merchant. It supplies almost all of the 90 trainers based at the metropolitan racetracks of Randwick, Rosehill and Warwick Farm, feeding more than 1000 horses every day. It keeps six people on the payroll, with five trucks on the road at any time.

In 1955, Rex Hambly opened Kensington Produce in the racing suburb of Kensington after many years as a jockey-turned-trainer. He knew what it took to supply the sport he loved.

The business is still in the family. These days it is owned by Steve and Tracey Hambly, and managed by their eldest son Michael. About 90% of their business comes from horseracing. "We deliver to individual trainers," Michael says. "We'll get a call from the stable foremen or feed guys, and we've normally got set runs for them. Some contact us on a Monday, others on a Tuesday. We deliver straw for bedding, all different types of hay and bagged grain, portable one-tonne silos that are weatherproof and filled with grain, as well as supplements and shavings." Michael says Kensington Produce is a one-stop shop for Sydney's horsemen, and business is good. "The warehouse was purpose-built 10 years ago, but it's actually getting a bit small for us these days."

The company has up to 20 farmers on its supply books, getting straw and hay from South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. "At the start of the year, I go out and pick the eye out of the best hays available on the market," Michael says. "We'll have a handshake agreement with our growers. Sometimes we pay for the hay straight up; other times we pay under normal trading terms. This year I was on the road for three weeks sourcing and I go to areas where I know they grow different types of hay. As an example, I was at an area two hours outside of Shepparton when I pulled into a convenience store and went through the classifieds of a local magazine. I found a supplier there, and drove two hours back to meet him. We ended up sourcing 3000 bales off him. It's important to get out on the road like that because it's one thing to say you're growing this or that type of hay, but we don't know what we're getting until we see it cut, cured and baled."

Kensington Produce buys direct from its farmers, but subcontracts to haulage groups to get the product to the city.

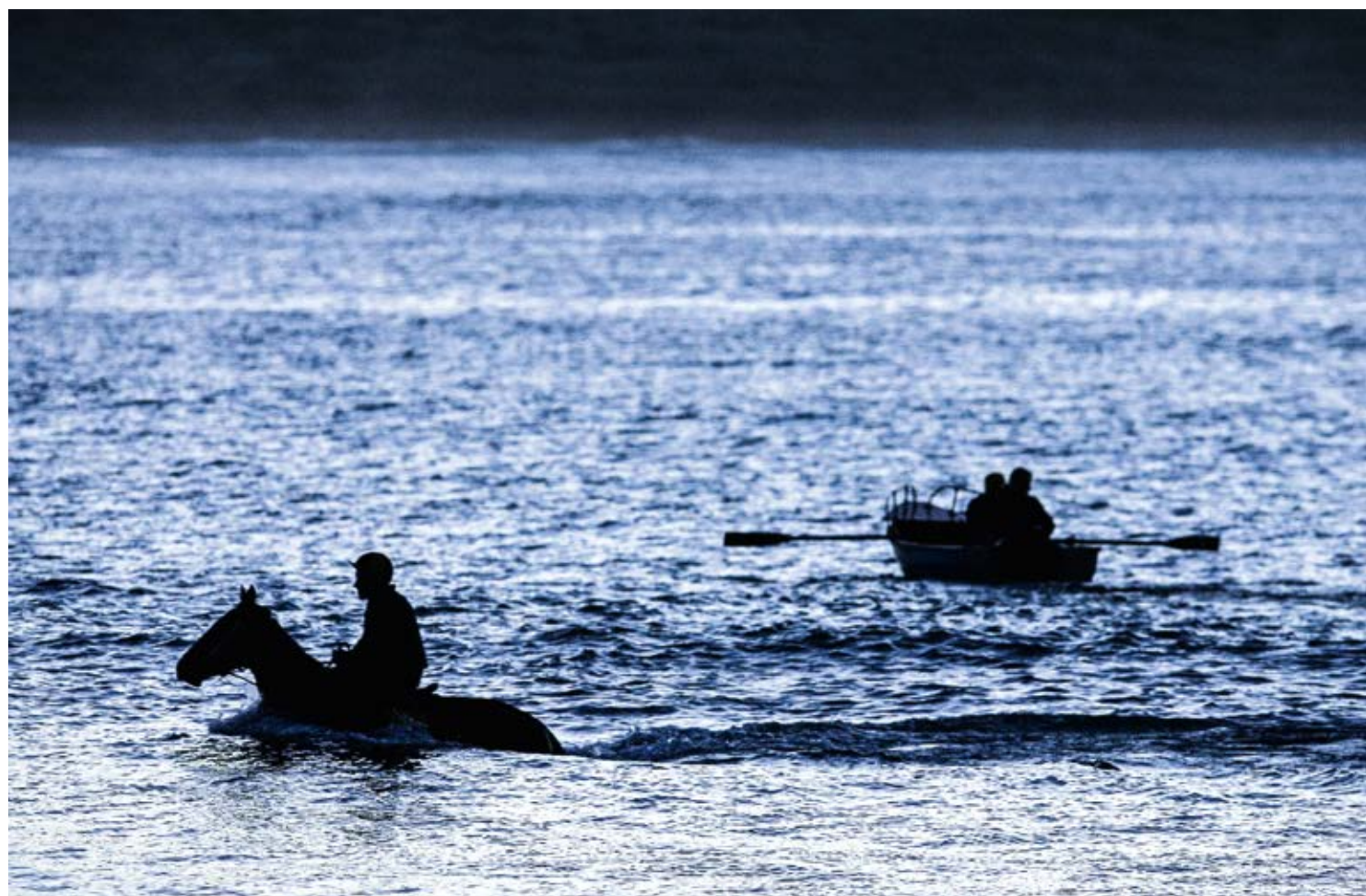
John Coveney is one such subcontractor, and has been hauling for the company for 20 years, dropping semi-trailer loads to Banksmeadow almost every second day. But when the collection is as far from Sydney as South Australia, Kensington Produce uses B-double transport, as the price of freight demands a full load. "It costs us about \$4 a bale these days to get produce to

the warehouse," Michael says. "Transport is by far our biggest expense."

At last count, there were more than 67,000 people employed around Australia in companies such as Kensington Produce – businesses that have an ancillary association with horseracing.



PHOTOS: JESSICA OWERS



NEWSPIX

Thoroughbreds regularly swim at the popular Lady Bay beach at Warrnambool, Vic, in preparation for the May Racing Carnival.

or more winners all about that we've bred, or placers or runners, something everyday. So it's a big industry, and it employs a hell of a lot of folk. We're paying 10 people, and at one stage there were 13 kids living on the farm going to the local school. Think of the value added to the area in that."

The most recent figures indicate that there are around 10,000 thoroughbred breeders in Australia, although most, unlike Wattle Brae, are part-time or hobbyists. Nearly 80% are based in rural locations, and the Australian Racing Board believes that regional areas contribute in excess of 45% of the direct spending generated by the industry. Breeders, alone, are credited with an average annual spend of \$800 million, which includes horse buying, but also paying for veterinarians, feed, horse wear and agricultural products.

As well, the bloodstock sold from thoroughbred farms is an enormous economic stimulus. For the 2013 financial year, sales of weanlings, yearlings, two year olds and broodmares totalled \$317 million. Of that, a significant chunk is sourced from Queensland. The state stands 112 of the 485 stallions registered in the Australian Stud Book for the 2013/14 season (the racing calendar runs from August 1 to July 31), and produces about 16% of all foals.

Gary says those coming from the Darling Downs are among the best in the country because of the ground. "Our grazing land here is very rich in lime and calcium, which in turn grows very strong-boned horses," he says. "Some of the vets around Australia have done x-rays on our yearlings leading up to the sales, and they've all said that the bone density of our horses is

probably the best they've ever come across in Australia."

There are few industries that bring town and country together on a regular basis like the breeding industry. The two biggest bloodstock sales of the year occur at the William Inglis & Son facility in Sydney, and the Magic Millions complex on the Gold Coast, and while both are stocked with animals bred and reared in rural locations, so, too, is a large percentage of the crowd. During sale time, many studs will operate on skeleton crews as almost all staff head to the city to take care of the horses, oversee selling and buying, or liaise with clients. They bring an enormous spike in trade to city businesses. For example, in Sydney's racing suburb of Randwick, where the Inglis yearling sales occur every Easter, local restaurants, pubs, clubs and accommodation are full for more than two weeks, while city-based feed and bedding merchants, stocked by country farmers, are run off their feet keeping 1000 or so horses fed and stabled.

At the peak of its global reach, Australian racing goes out to 700 million people worldwide during the televised Melbourne Cup each November. The industry is also exporting thoroughbreds to about 31 countries.

Australian horseracing is an economic giant. It began in this country as a sport to entertain early settlers, quickly becoming a part of the national culture. Today it is a major industry. But in many of the communities of rural Australia, it is worth so much more than dollars. It's the excuse to come together, to catch up with neighbours, have a chat and forget the drought. In many instances, it's the same sport that has been bringing them together for well over 100 years.