

Breeding success in equine business

By JOHN HOLTON

It's often said of people in the equine industry that they have a passion for horses in their blood. But for Vanessa Hawkins, founder of Equine Sports Breeding (ESB), the past 30 years have been a quest to breed the perfect bloodline in event horses.

Through persistence and belief she has established one of the world's leading breeding programs and equine properties, right on Bendigo's doorstep. ESB progeny regularly compete at some of the biggest events around the world including the Beijing Olympic Games.

But, like so many young girls, Vanessa's love affair with horses began at pony clubs.

"My parents are English and I was born in Cyprus," Vanessa says. "We emigrated to Australia in 1968 and horses were very much a part of our lives. My parents introduced us to ponies at an early age and I was very competitive in eventing right from the start."

This competitiveness saw Vanessa win the Pony Club State Championships in 1976 at the age of 16. She went on to compete overseas in 1984, but a constant frustration was the search to find the right horse to take her the next step.

"I remember thinking, surely it can't be that hard to find a horse with a good temperament, well put together, with a bit of movement and jump. A horse that hadn't suffered from the rigours of racing."

But it wasn't that easy. Vanessa soon realised that if she couldn't buy the horse she wanted, she would have to breed it herself.

It was the catalyst for a huge change in her life. She now had a mission: to produce world class event horses and, eventually, establish a major equestrian centre here in Australia.

"My parents were horrified," she remembers. "I left my nursing career and enrolled in horse breeding management at VCAH Glenormiston, a two-year full-time course. It was during my time at Glenormiston that I first came in contact with the Irish Draught horse. I went to see the first stallion in Australia, Bantry Bay, who was imported by a vet named Arthur Young."

It was a watershed moment for Vanessa. In 1987 she graduated as Dux of

the college and won a travel scholarship that allowed her to visit Ireland and study the Irish Draught horse first-hand.

“I spent four months travelling 10,000 miles across Ireland (in a Mini!) studying Irish Draught horses,” Vanessa says. “I uncovered previously destroyed stud records dating back to 1918.”

Equipped with this information and the anecdotal stories of the old Irish horsemen she had met along the way, Vanessa was convinced that crossing this breed with the TB (Irish Sports Horse) was the way forward. But the real key to the puzzle, she believed, in breeding an elite athlete would be to start with an Irish Draught mare rather than a stallion.

In 1989, Vanessa purchased her first two mares, Irish Anna and Irish Bea, and ESB was born. It has now become one of the largest and most consistent producers of eventing horses in Australia.

ESB bloodlines are now seen competing worldwide and include household names such as Irish Jester, a silver medal winner at the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

But the consistent results are not only due to good breeding, but an overall concept for success.

“Team ESB is a joint venture between us as the breeder, riders in the UK, USA and Australia, owners, sponsors and supporters,” Vanessa says. “It’s a united and collaborative approach to foster the development of riders, promote the sport of eventing and to achieve athletic excellence in both the horses and riders.

“We partner horses with certain riders who are then supported by other members of the team – the owners and sponsors – to get the best results. Mentoring plays a big part in our success. If the combination clicks, then everybody’s dream of competing at international level can be achieved. Obviously the pinnacle is being selected for the Olympics.”

Part two of Vanessa’s mission – to establish an equestrian centre – has also come to fruition. Over the past six years, her 300 acre property, Gold Fields, at Goornong has grown to become one of Australia’s premier equine centres. Only 15 minutes from the centre of town, ironically, few Bendigonians would be aware of its existence.

It’s a more than an impressive set up.

With capacity for 10,000 people, a main arena the equivalent of three

Olympic-size sand areas, warm up arenas, cross-country courses, sponsors areas, 17 post and rail horse yards – even accommodation – the development continues to grow.

“Having been Event Director at some major events in the past has helped me understand what people want in a venue,” Vanessa says. “In 2009 we held the Pony Club State Championships at Gold Fields, with 200 competitors and over 600 spectators.

The property is also home to the Gold Fields Equestrian Club Inc., which makes these incredible facilities available to the local community and promotes appreciation and interest in equestrian sports, rural living and horse activities. The aim is to educate, train, coach and encourage riders of all ages to enjoy the sport.

“We offer a great facility with access to the whole property, cross country course and great riding,” Vanessa says. “We hold education days on the first Tuesday of every month and clinics or events on the third weekend of every month. We attract guest speakers and instructors from all over the country, including Olympic medallist’s and even internationally later in the year.”

Vanessa describes her life as colourful and varied (no arguments there). Aside from horses, surfing and skiing have featured prominently. She has been a Director of the Australian and Victorian Horse Council, published the *A-Z Horse Industry Directory* and continues to lecture and educate other horse professionals and those just starting out in the equine industry.

“My aim at this stage of the journey is to help develop the horses and riders of tomorrow,” Vanessa says. “For me having a successful business has always been inseparable from living my dreams. You just have to trust in your own judgement and, above all, enjoy every day.”

Visit Vanessa’s blog at: www.goldfieldstheproperty.blogspot.com

