


'Little sister' blooms into *an elite rider*

A full-page photograph of a young woman with blonde hair, wearing a white long-sleeved top and patterned shorts, standing next to a brown horse. She is holding the horse's lead rope and smiling at the camera. The horse is standing in a grassy field with a line of trees in the background.

Sarah adopted former Gai Waterhouse and Adrian Bott-trained galloper, Grand Finalist, from Team Thoroughbred NSW. Picture by Brooklyn Gregory (BMG Photography)

YOUNG EQUESTRIENNE SARAH WILTON IS LIVING HER DREAM AS A RE-TRAINER FOR RACING NSW'S EQUINE WELFARE DIVISION, TEAM THOROUGHbred NSW WORDS: JULIEANNE HORSMAN



Giving retired racehorses experience in different environments is an important part of retraining. Picture by Julieanne Horsman

Like most little girls, Sarah Wilton wanted to be just like her big sister. She wore her clothes, asked her Mum to give them matching hairstyles and at six-years-old followed her to Dural Pony Club.

Sarah was delighted to receive her sister's hand-me-down horses and by 11 she was ready for her very first Thoroughbred.

His name was Battle Bullet, a former Brett Thompson gelding who had failed to fire on the track. He ignited her passion for the breed, which only intensified with age and experience.

Fast forward to late 2018 and Sarah, then 18, heard about a partnership between Pony Club and Racing NSW's equine welfare division Team Thoroughbred NSW, which offered senior riders the opportunity to retrain retired racehorses for an international showjumping competition.

Sarah saw it as a great chance to broaden her skills and applied straight away. When she was told she was one of just twelve equestrians chosen from more than 100 applicants, she was over the moon.

Sarah arrived at Racing NSW's equine welfare property Princes Farm (renamed Bart's Farm in honour of its previous owner, legendary racehorse trainer Bart Cummings) in the January 2019 summer holidays for the first of three training camps and was pleasantly surprised to discover she already knew most of the other riders chosen for the program.

She was in awe of the facilities and excited to be at a 'real' Thoroughbred farm.

Throughout the program, Sarah and her fellow riders

were involved in every aspect of the horses' care from helping with the feeds, grooming and mucking out stables to work in hand, poles and eventually jumping.

Every rider was assigned daily lessons with Team Thoroughbred NSW staff and expert coaches to help guide them through the process.

Most of the horses were quite green and the task of preparing them to jump at least 1m by October seemed daunting, but every participant was committed to making it happen.

The first horse Sarah worked with was Moment to Test, a former Danielle Seib galloper who had managed just one win in 29 starts as a racehorse.

She also rode Stonebrook from Gai Waterhouse and Adrian Bott's stable, as well as Beauing who was previously trained by Peter Eggleston at Newcastle.

Some horses learned quicker than others, but Sarah enjoyed working with them all.

"Even after a week you could see a clear difference in the horses," Sarah said. "The constant handling and one-on-one attention really brought them on."

"It was satisfying to see them develop before our eyes. One kept refusing at a jump but I kept trying and in the end we got there. Being on them when they jumped for the first time was such an amazing feeling."

With the end goal of having the horses ready for the Tri-Nations Showjumping Challenge at the Pony Club National Championships in October 2019, program organisers had to be ruthless when deciding which horses would make the final team.

Four elite young riders from France, China and

Australia would be taking part in the challenge, and to make it fair, all 12 would be competing on borrowed mounts.

Team Thoroughbred was determined to showcase the most talented horses so those with injuries or limited scope were swapped out for others with more potential.

When Sarah arrived for the third training camp in July, a new handsome chestnut caught her eye. Grand Finalist, who had won two races for Gai Waterhouse and Adrian Bott, had not long retired but had an athletic build and the right temperament to succeed in the program.

"I fell in love with him before I even sat on him," Sarah said. "I had my first lesson with him and he was so good the entire time.

"He was easy to do everything with and loved post-training cuddles. We started jumping and he was overjumping every time.

"He would run with me back to the barn. I decided I had to have him, put dibs on him for when the program was over and started working on convincing my Mum!"

Sarah didn't have to wait until the program was over to take Grand Finalist home though.

Organisers conceded it would be too much of a stretch to adequately prepare him for the Tri-Nations Showjumping Challenge, so Sarah officially adopted him and has been continuing his re-education ever since.

"He's been out to Pony Club and Galston Equestrian Club and didn't change character at all which was a relief," Sarah said.

"People were complimenting me on him and that made me happy. He likes to be stimulated and seems to enjoy his new life.

"I'd like to get him jumping 1.20 metres and competing in the Jump Off series would be a dream.

"The bushfires then the floods and now Coronavirus have disrupted my plans for him but I'm looking forward to competitions resuming."

Grand Finalist's adoption story isn't unique. In fact, every horse in the Tri-Nations Showjumping Challenge was rehomed either with a Pony Club rider who couldn't bear to let them go or an adult connected to the program.

Seventeen-year-old Max Robinson is already out completing clear showjumping rounds on former Joe Cleary gelding, Cliff.

Emily Andres, also 17, is teaching dressage to former Simon Casey gelding Me Auld Segotia and Mark Newnham's former sprinter Ipso Facto is excelling at eventing with 16-year-old Charlotte Wells, to name a few.

Sarah's impressive riding skills and positive attitude also helped her land her dream job as a trainer and rider with Team Thoroughbred NSW at Bart's Farm. She started out volunteering and her efforts were rewarded with a full-time job.

"My day starts around 6:30am with the feed run," Sarah said. "We drive around the property and see all the horses.



Sarah and her first Thoroughbred, Battle Bullet.

Picture supplied

"It's probably my favourite time of the day. Next, we make up the new feeds and then start riding. I finish with the hay run in the afternoon.

"Horses are my passion and I feel so lucky to be able to work with them every day. Horses are the way they are because of how they are treated, good or bad, and you can see yourself coming out in the horse.

"You do get attached to them but as sad as it is to see them leave, it's rewarding to find them quality new homes and follow their progress.

"Social media is great for that. I'm always seeing photos of our graduates pop up on Instagram.

"I'm in contact with Grand Finalist's previous owners on social media. They're grateful for the updates and it's heartening to see how much they still care about the horse long after his last race.

"I get emotional when I hear people spreading misinformation about retired racehorses having no future.

"I take a deep breath and explain to them where I work and what we do. It's all for the love of the horse."

The Tri-Nations Showjumping Challenge was declared a great success with China the overall winners and Stonebrook the best performed Team Thoroughbred NSW horse.

It will likely be held again at the next Pony Club National Championships in 2021. **RNSW**