

# New program Spurs on veterans

**RACING NSW'S NEW EQUINE THERAPY PROGRAM, SPUR – RUN IN PARTNERSHIP WITH RSL LIFECARE – IS GIVING VETERANS AND RETIRED RACEHORSES A NEW LEASE ON LIFE** WORDS & PICTURES: JULIEANNE HORSMAN



*Spur participants saw some incredible scenery on their graduation trail ride through Kosciuszko National Park*

**W**hen Max Streeter floated the idea of teaching veterans how to ride, train and care for off the track Thoroughbreds in just eight months, many people said it couldn't be done ... some laughed.

The more polite ones smiled gently and wished him luck.

Undeterred, Max approached Racing NSW and RSL LifeCare with his pitch, and the executives decided to give it a chance, and now the first round of participants in the Spur equine therapy program are celebrating their graduation.

Racing NSW has long been involved in providing horse handling courses for veterans and first responders with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues.

The benefits of equine therapy are well documented and Max himself can attest to its effectiveness.

As a former soldier and Federal Police Officer, he had participated in several short courses but felt there was something missing.

"I spoke to my fellow veterans who had also done introductory horse handling courses and most wanted to learn to ride," Max said.

"They didn't aspire to be great horseman, just competent and safe, and they wanted to trail ride through an iconic landscape.

"I thought the Snowy Mountains was the perfect place and setting a goal of riding through Kosciuszko National Park at the end of the course would be a great motivator for veterans."

When expressions of interest for the inaugural Spur equine therapy course opened, Max was flooded with applications from people wanting to be part of it.

He spent weeks considering every hopeful and eventually settled on a group of eight men and women ranging from 21 to 60 who had given 147 years of service between them.

In March, 10 retired racehorses from Racing NSW's equine welfare department, Team Thoroughbred NSW, arrived at RSL LifeCare's 300-acre facility at Picton.

Former Petty Officer, Leanne Hinton, recalled the day: "We were told to go out into the wide-open paddock and bring back a horse," she said.

"I thought it was a joke and we

didn't have a chance, but we did eventually manage to catch a few. It certainly brought the group together quickly."

Over the eight months that followed the group was given expert tuition, led by renowned stunt man and former Army Sergeant Andy Clark.

They learned the basics of horse care including feeding, grooming, picking hooves and rugging.

They learned to tack up a horse which was an achievement in itself because most of the course participants didn't even know how to put on a head collar when they arrived.

They learned to lead, lunge and join up, then they spent three months perfecting their ground work before they were allowed to even think about throwing a leg over their horse, which was frustrating at times, but essential to ensure the safety of both horses and humans.

"I'll never forget the first time I stepped up on the block and climbed onto Sahara Strike's back," Leanne said, grinning from ear to ear.

"It was equal parts thrilling and terrifying. Here I was sitting on this giant retired racehorse trusting him to do what I ask and him trusting me to lead the way.

"When I think about it, it was the first time I had really pushed myself since my discharge. I was previously very confident but that had slipped away."

Officially, the Spur ran two days per week but most of the participants were so eager to spend time with the horses they volunteered daily.

With the impending Kosciuszko trail ride front of mind, they rode whenever they could and by August they were cruising out of the round yards and around the property.

"It's truly been amazing to watch the changes in the veterans as the course progressed," Max said.

"Some of them were very withdrawn when they started and you see them today and they are excited, they're pumped and they're confident."

"It was rewarding to see the horses increasingly do what we asked of them," Leanne said.

"Some were only a matter of months off the track. Like us, they



ABOVE Leanne Hinton has formed a close bond with her retired racehorse, Sahara Strike

BELOW: Veterans had to overcome a range of obstacles and challenges on the ride including water crossings



## EQUINE REHOMING

have good and bad days, but we learn off each other."

By the end of October, the Spur participants were ready to put everything they had learned into practice in one final test of courage, initiative and teamwork.

Before the sun rose, two horse trucks and a float were loaded up and took off down the Hume Highway towards Wares Yards Campground near Adaminaby.

The participants were responsible for almost everything including designing and constructing pens to keep the horses in, providing feed and collecting water for them and of course cleaning up.

They couldn't wait get out on the trails and Max was surprised by their stamina.

"On the first day I was doubtful the veterans or the horses would be able to do more than a few hours of trekking, but I was overjoyed to see them out for the full day," he said.

"They came back tired and sore but happy and ready to go the next day.

"It just goes to show veterans with a purpose can focus and achieve.

"A lot of good horse people said it was a big ask and doubted whether the Thoroughbreds would be ready in time, let alone veterans with no horse experience, but it was the greatest pleasure to prove them all wrong."

Leanne said: "It was a bucket list experience. I loved moving through the different terrain and couldn't believe how quickly it would change from marshy plains to dense White Gums to wild scrub.

"I enjoyed the chats around the campfire at night and came home with renewed faith in my own ability to handle life's challenges."

While the inaugural Spur program is finished for now and the new intake of participants won't arrive until next year, the graduates are still actively caring for the retired racehorses they've be working with.

"I will continue to volunteer with Spur and will soon officially be adopting Sahara Strike," Leanne said. "He brings me so much joy."

Find out more about Racing NSW's equine welfare department and its programs at - [www.teamthoroughbred.com.au](http://www.teamthoroughbred.com.au) **RNSW**



*Course manager, Max Streeter, checking on the horses before a Remembrance Day Service*



*Hundreds of hours were spent practicing drill to ensure safety on the trail ride*