

Retired racehorses helping troubled teens

TEAM THOROUGHBRED NSW HAS JOINED WITH OTHERS TO DELIVER AN INSPIRING NEW PROGRAM BENEFITING TROUBLED TEENS

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Racing NSW's equine welfare division Team Thoroughbred NSW has partnered with Ballyoch Horses and youth outreach charity BackTrack to deliver an inspiring new program benefiting troubled teens, retired racehorses and the rural community of Deepwater in Northern NSW.

Imagine this. You're 13 years old. Your mum is dead.

You live in a country town with your Dad who tries his best but is an alcoholic and doesn't know how to handle you.

You've lost count of how many times you've been suspended from school. You don't like it anyway.

You're on a first name basis with the local Police. You're angry. You don't deserve this.

You lash out. You're one mistake away from being locked up.

Everyone has given up on you, except a group of streetwise youth workers with unorthodox methods who are determined to keep you alive, keep you out of jail and help you chase your dreams.

BackTrack Youth Works has been helping vulnerable young people in the New England region with counselling, education, life skills and support since 2006.

It was founded by Bernie Shakeshaft to provide an alternative for children who were slipping through the cracks of the government system.

He started out by teaching them to train feral dogs for farm work and watched their confidence and self-control grow with each obeyed command.

Patrick Herde from Ballyoch Horses at Deepwater heard about the life-changing work of BackTrack from his friend's mum and instantly wanted to get involved.



BackTrack's Marcus Watson and Bernie Shakeshaft; Darcy; Tom; Brendan; program coordinator Paul Dawson, and Sarah, celebrate a job well done

He volunteered with the charity and became a fan of its alternative strategies and methods.

A horseman from way back, Patrick had seen first-hand the emotional and psychological benefits of working with horses and came up with an ambitious plan to adapt BackTrack's dog program to retrain thoroughbreds for life after racing.

"At BackTrack, we've done bits and pieces with horses but never in a formal capacity so when Patrick came to us with a pitch, we jumped at the chance," Bernie said.

"It's a great opportunity for our teens to learn horsemanship and farm skills which not only boosts their confidence but also provides a pathway to employment."

Patrick, Bernie and BackTrack coordinator Paul Dawson made several trips to Sydney to meet Racing NSW executives and it wasn't long before Team Thoroughbred NSW was onboard to provide the horses and financial support.

In late February, 10 thoroughbreds were delivered to Patrick's property and the pilot program was underway.

"Firstly, we made sure the horses were safe and once we were confident of that we started teaching the boys and girls the basics like feeding, cleaning, leading and work in hand," Patrick said.

"It wasn't long before we had bums in saddles and could ride up into the hills for a picnic and campfire lunch.

"I was blown away by how far the kids came in the first month alone.

"The horse mirrors what you are feeling so you have to control your emotions.

"The kids became very aware of the energy they were putting out.

"You would see them get angry or frustrated then realise it was affecting their horse and change their attitude."

On 1st June, the first group of thoroughbreds to complete the three-month retraining program were auctioned at Ballyoch Horses with 100% of the sale price donated to

BackTrack.

The participants spent hours washing, brushing and preparing the horses for the sale.

Inspections began early, and they were on hand to answer any questions from prospective buyers who were looking for their next equestrian, polo, cattle or pleasure horse.

By the time the parade started, close to 200 people were there.

"I was rapt with the turn out but even more happy with the kids," Patrick said.

"They understood it was a pilot program with a lot riding on it and approached it with a great sense of responsibility.

"They put everything into it and I couldn't have asked for any more. The horses were great too.

"We asked a lot of them with the cars and the wind and everything else going on and they handled it."

John and Kathy Hickey travelled more than three hours to the sale from Manilla after hearing about it on the radio.

They were looking for a new horse for their 12-year-old grandson to learn to ride on and picked out seven-year-old mare Sweet Dynasty.

"We heard Patrick talking on ABC radio and liked the concept of the program, so we decided to check it out for ourselves," John said.



Tom with Sweet Dynasty, one of the thoroughbreds he helped retrain for life after racing

"When we arrived, we were shown Sweet Dynasty and she seemed like a nice natured horse.

"We were impressed by all the things young rider Tom could do on her back without even flinching.

"I will continue her education at home first to make sure she doesn't buck or bolt, but we think she was certainly worth taking a chance on."

It's not just the BackTrack participants and retired racehorses who are benefiting for the program.

The local community is too.

Patrick has sourced all his building materials and feed from the region and uses local service providers including vets and farriers.

They've also formed a polo club and are fundraising to build a field in the middle of Deepwater Racecourse.

"We're really happy with how the program has gone so far and it's going to get better with time and experience," Patrick said. "The kids' riding is improving every day and that will in turn improve the horses."

Some of the boys have shown such a great aptitude for horsemanship, Patrick has employed them to work at his farm.

The older ones stay there during the week and go back to Armidale for TAFE. Several others are considering a career in the racing industry.

"I'm confident we can make some really good horse people," Patrick said. "My vision is for Ballyoch to be a centre of learning where people can come to be taught how to break in and train horses.

"If you show a bit of enthusiasm like the BackTrack participants we will move mountains to make it work."

Head to www.teamthoroughbred.com.au to learn more about Racing NSW's equine welfare division and its community programs **RNSW**



Patrick, Paul, Tom and Perry taking in the scenery on a training ride at Deepwater