

OUTBACK STORY

# SHOWTIME

*Whirling carousels of tradition and new ideas, agricultural shows are thriving community showcases and an important nexus between the city and the bush.*

STORY + PHOTOS MANDY McKEESICK

*The 2017 Grand Parade at Sydney Royal Easter Show.*





Hollie Hawkes is running on adrenaline. It is late afternoon on the second day of her first show as secretary/treasurer of the Barcoo Pastoral Society and right now she needs to be in five different places. There is a buzz in Blackall this year – a near palpable excitement. An agricultural show established in 1874 is being revitalised, and this small town, on the banks of the Barcoo in central Queensland, is rallying behind it.

“We’ve got a really young committee this year and have inherited a really good culture from those before us,” Hollie, 24, says. “They didn’t drop us in it and leave. They are still here. It’s a really good story, our show, and something I’m very proud of – and it’s lots of fun.”

Youth and enthusiasm are welding with wisdom and experience at Blackall. The old guard provides quiet direction. The young have been given a tight budget and a loose rein. The gate has been thrown open, offering free entry to visitors, and a feral goat kid plays pied piper to a tribe of school kids. “Why spend \$4000 on a balloon man?” Hollie quips. “Just get a goat.”

This has become the ethos of the Blackall Show.

Expensive entertainment has given way to inclusive amusements where children as young as seven crack whips, locals jump their working dogs over two metres into the back of a ute, and a saddle strapped to a 44-gallon-drum on wheels is guaranteed to provide a good time.

“We often have the chat about whether shows are still relevant to the bush,” Hollie says. “So, we’ve gone to the community and asked, ‘What do you want to see?’, ‘What are you interested in?’, ‘What do you travel away for?’, ‘What are you competing in now?’ Because it’s their hometown show and it’s their chance to invite all those people they see all year to their town to compete in their show. Having pride in where you



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: Blackall Show snapshots: Barcoo Pastoral Society secretary/treasurer Hollie Hawkes; fleece judging in the Wool Court; John Jones with his champion White Wyandotte bantam; Margie Elliot from Longreach competes in the dressage on Magpie.





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*Clowns, 'Indians', girls and spruikers and an elephant at the Sydney Royal Easter Show in 1935.*

come from is really important. And you know, it's like people have been waiting for that point and now they want to come and help."

As a result, showjumping has been dumped in favour of barrel racing and the crowd fanatically applauds local rugby league team, the Blackall Magpies as they compete against their rivals, the Barcaldine Sand Goannas. The long-neglected cattle arena has a green lawn, a bar flogged from a local wedding, and a new steward determined to reinstate the cattle section in memory of his late father.

Flock ewes line up to be inspected, fine fleece is weighed and judged, a volunteer rues her second place in the fruit-cake competition and a White Wyandotte bantam from Charleville is awarded Grand Champion Bird of Show for the third consecutive year. But here in outback Queensland the horse is king.

"Horse events have been the backbone of the Blackall Show for a long time," Hollie says. "Cattle and sheep come and go, but horse sports just work here. There's a pony and hack ring, our stockman's challenge is on horseback and, because we are Blackall, you're allowed to do dressage in a stock saddle, which has a pretty good ring to it. I like it. If you can get a horse to do quality dressage in a stock saddle, well that takes a lot of skill and it's nice to give people the chance to show it off."

## SHOWCASING AGRICULTURE

Australia's agricultural show movement started with a bang in the 1820s, when show societies were established to promote agriculture, showcase livestock and educate farmers. The first show was held in 1822 in Hobart. Sydney was quick to follow with its inaugural show, held in 1823.

The show movement withered in the 1840s in the face of the country's first depression. Drought and a slump in wool and wheat prices meant the Agricultural Societies of NSW folded and didn't reform for 24 years. Melbourne's first show, in 1842, was a complete failure and it did not kick off again until 1848, when ploughing demonstrations were held at Moonee Ponds.

Once the show movement revitalised, it spread from the cities to the interior, following and charting the progress of agricultural expansion, encouraging competition, showcasing new strains and breeds, and bringing cutting-edge technologies to farmers.

Today there are 586 shows across Australia. New South Wales has one-third of the societies, with 194, followed by Queensland (129), Victoria (115), Western Australia (69), South Australia (50), Tasmania (23) and the Northern Territory (6). "The number of show societies has been fairly

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constant over the past 15 years, but attendance rates come in waves,” Agricultural Shows Australia board member David Peters says. “Shows are still the main representatives of agriculture in modern society and they are important in providing that rural-city link. Not just cities, but some of the bigger towns are quite insular and kids have never had exposure to agriculture. The shows introduce them to animals and provide a connection with what we eat. The very big shows, such as the royals, and the very small shows, especially, are also important for bringing people together.”

Shows have survived wars, and stubbornly resisted both internal and external pressures to close. “Ground availability is one of the big issues as showgrounds come under pressure from development,” David says. “Other shows are faced with a \$50,000 land rental bill before they even commence, and many shows conduct extra events, such as vintage machinery days, to help cover expenses.”

In addition, the modern show faces competition from other forms of entertainment and must continually strike a balance between tradition, the need to stay relevant and the need to evolve.

ROCK ON

In Western Australia, the rock drillers – mining’s equivalent of axemen – pit machine against rock face at the annual Kalgoorlie–Boulder Community Fair. Airleg mining used to be big business in the goldfields, but as larger machinery took over the job of extracting ore from the mines, the practice diminished, and with it went the once popular competition of rock drilling.

After a hiatus of nearly two decades, rock drilling has returned to the local show. “Paul Maher won the last competition back in 1996, so it’s a running joke on our committee that he held the title for 18 years,” treasurer of the WA Rockdrill Club, Nick Fardell, says.

Rock drilling may seem a strange form of entertainment. More than 60 entrants from interstate and overseas fit a ‘steel’ to an air-powered machine and race to drill through a cylindrical concrete block. “A good driller must have strength in his body and legs, be precise in his actions, and understand the combination of strength, precision and balance,” Nick says.

The event has a \$15,000 prize pool and the crowds – both strangers to the sport and those intimately familiar



CLAIRE WEIR PHOTOGRAPHY

*Father and son Lloyd and Paul Maher compete at the No Pusher Event in the Victorian Rock Drill Championships at the 2016 Bendigo Community Fair.*





*Rick Stanfield, Greta Stanfield, Emily the Clydesdale and Terry Goodear from R.M. Williams prepare for the Grand Parade at Sydney Royal Easter Show.*

— come in droves. “You see the old guys from years gone by, long retired and at a loose end,” Nick muses. “They act as if they don’t care, but they watch, and they cheer in the final for their favourites and then act as if they did not care again. But you can see in their eyes how they miss their mates and the proud days of providing for the family by working bloody hard in a hole in the earth.”

The Pambula Show on the New South Wales South Coast has developed a very different way to reflect its own community: shucking oysters. For nearly 130 years the event was a traditional agricultural show with livestock and woodchopping its main drawcards, but over those years traditional farms in the area gave way to smaller acreages. “We’re more about gardens and five-acre blocks rather than cows and sheep,” secretary Robyn Bain says. “There’s no point putting a giant tractor at the Pambula Show, because people here don’t buy them. They like lawnmowers and whipper snippers and new rakes and hoses. We’ve made a concerted effort to have all of that gardening and small farm stuff here because that reflects who we are as a community.”

During its transitional period, the show struggled. Committee members were scarce, volunteers even scarcer, and the motion was moved at more than one meeting to disband the show entirely. But with some constructive criticism and objective analysis, the show has moved forward and attendances are rising.

Held in early January, the Pambula Show coincides

with peak tourist season, when urban Victorian holidaymakers arrive en masse. Robyn says they attract these holidaymakers with food. “The oyster industry down here is going gangbusters and we have a local smokehouse so we have plenty of seafood,” she says. “We’ve got oyster shucking and judging and cooking shows. Anything food-based is strong.”

A focus on families with children has seen the introduction of a range of free activities, such as the Pambula Pooch Pet Parade, which encourages youngsters to bring their pet along and gives them educational sessions on animal care.

“Life is busy and we don’t take enough time to stop and celebrate, particularly in the bush,” Robyn says. “That’s what the Pambula Show can give us. It allows us to kick back and say, ‘Wow’. We are a mixture and a complex group of people who belong to a community and for any show the celebration of the community is the greatest reward.”

### SHEAR CELEBRATION

They say if you want something done, ask a busy person. Julie Hockings found this to be true when she went in search of a shearer for her alpacas. Julie is a member of Alpaca Artisans, a group of breeders from the Granite Belt of south-eastern Queensland. “We have a good product [alpaca fleece], but it was not being harvested properly — the fleeces were being ruined at shearing and we were not getting the quality,” Julie says. “We wanted to



*CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Tenterfield Show moments: Sue Skinner shearing; 16-year-old shearer Byron Campbell and 12-year-old apprentice judge Annie-May Newman; Sue Skinner with alpaca breeder Julie Hockings; the coveted red, white and blue champion fleece show ribbon.*





*Laughing clowns are seen on nearly every sideshow alley, including the Sydney Royal Easter Show.*

find local shearers who we could train, so we went to the local shows, peddled our story and watched the shearers in action. We were looking for people whose technique we liked and also for someone who seemed to care about the animal.” Sue Skinner was their number one selection.

“How good was that?” Sue asks as she runs the sheep-shearing section of the Tenterfield Show, in northern New South Wales, coordinating shearers, cleaning the board and barking instructions under a corrugated iron shed on a 45-degree Celsius day. “Julie came along and watched me shear and now I’ve got another job. I shored 250 alpacas last year and even though they wee and pee and spit and squeal, I love it.”

Each year at Tenterfield, Sue takes a break from her seven-day-a-week fruit and vegetable business to organise and compete in show shearing. “I took the job on a couple of years ago when we lost a good mate in Trevor Hollitt,” she says. “He used to run this and he used to judge as well. He was always encouraging and loved his shearing, and he’s one reason I keep this going. Shearing and shows are just part of our heritage.”

Like all country shows, Tenterfield not only runs on the strength of its community volunteers, but gives back to the same community. It promotes a positive image of agriculture, fosters competitiveness among professional shearers, and teaches and mentors the young. And if Sue knows you, it’s a pretty safe bet she will have a job lined up for you at the show. She has roped in family and friends, badgered the high school to bring along student

shearers, found a junior judge in 12-year-old Annie-May Newman, and encouraged an up-and-coming professional shearer, 16-year-old Byron Campbell, to compete against his elders in the intermediate division.

At the Alice Springs Show, the R.M. Williams Longhorn Express is also contributing to community. “I could call it a jazzy hawker’s truck,” laughs Terry Goodear, head of heritage and heartland marketing with R.M. Williams. “But it’s more than that. A lot of the country shows over the past few years have been hurting with the drought and I’m really pleased to say we’ve kept the truck going out. We have people coming on saying, ‘It’s great to see you’. They’re not spending as much, because things are tight, but they appreciate the fact you still go out there, even when times are tough. And that’s important to us to keep the connection to the heartland, because that’s our DNA. That’s where the old fella came from. RM was real.”

Sponsorship is integral to the success of any show, bringing an influx of funds to the show society and allowing for the presentation of new products to an eager audience. While the Longhorn Express and the company’s Clydesdales may be the most visual proof of R.M. Williams’ involvement in the show movement, the company – like many organisations who support the bush – has also financially backed campdraft events, the Australian Stockhorse Society, the Australian Whipcracking and Plaiting Association, the Young Auctioneers and traditions such as the Showgirl Competition.

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COURTESY HANNAH BARBER

*NSW NextGen president and former Parkes Showgirl Hannah Barber.*

## RETAINING TRADITION

The modern agricultural show has foundations firmly cemented in tradition. Apart from the coveted championship ribbon and the indulgences of fairy floss and dagwood dogs, there are the chaotic delights of sideshow alley and axes ringing against wood.

The first woodchopping competition in Australia, and possibly the world, was in Tasmania in 1870, after two men in a pub in Ulverstone made a wager as to who could fell a tree the fastest. It ended in a brawl. Since those early days, Tasmanian woodchoppers have made the sport their own. The Youds, Sherriffs, Fosters and Lovells are family dynasties of woodchop royalty. The greatest axeman of them all, David Foster, holds 186 world titles.

“Woodchopping is part of our history,” David says, a twinkle never far from his eyes. “When Captain Cook came to Australia I reckon the first thing he did was to get one of his guys to go and cut a sapling for a flagpole. Heating, cooking and clearing the land was all done with an axe and a crosscut saw.”

David was the first person in sporting history to win 1000 championships, has captained the Australian Woodchopping Team on 21 occasions, been Australian Axeman of the Year nine times, and in 1990 was named Axeman of the Decade.

David combined with his father George to win the World 600m Double Handed Sawing Championship 11 years in a row. He then competed with his brother Peter in the same event and together they went on to win it another 10 times. He has represented Australia alongside his son Stephen, and has won the Jack and Jill event at the Sydney

Royal Easter Show with his daughter Janelle. And he’s not finished yet. “I have made the Australian team again as a single-handed sawyer,” he says. “I’ll be 60 years of age and I’m quite proud of the fact I first represented my country when I was 22 and I’m still representing my country.”

David says he’s seen the sport change greatly since he started competing at age 16. “I’ve got a personal trainer and I told him what I eat before the world titles – 15 beers and 2 steaks – and he just looked at me and said, ‘There’s no way known’,” David says. “Now axemen have got all these different foods to eat to get the best out of their bodies. They don’t drink alcohol. What a poor way to be. I’ve cut back to about 10 beers ... One thing I worked out a long, long time ago was that you’ve got to enjoy the journey. If you enjoy the journey you are going to be successful – plain and simple.”

The captain of the current Australian Women’s Woodchopping Team is Amanda Beams, who hails from Winkleigh on the west Tamar, Tas. “My dad and uncles on both sides were axemen and 31 years ago I met Dale [her husband] and he asked me to compete in the Jack and Jill event,” she says. “I’ve been competing ever since.” Amanda and Dale now compete alongside their sons Zack, 23, and Daniel, 21, hold multiple Australian and world titles, and have travelled to the United States to contest the World Lumberjack Championships.

“Ag shows are very, very important to woodchopping,” Amanda says. “If there’s no show, there’s no woodchop. We do the show circuit through Tasmania and go to the royals at Melbourne, Adelaide >



MARILYN TEBBUTT

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: World Champion Axeman David Foster representing Tasmania in the single saw at the Sydney Royal Easter Show; Jorja Durkin with a show heifer from her family's Mountain Valley Poll Hereford and Angus Stud at the Warialda Show; 13-month-old Evie Smyth from Harrington Park at the Farmyard Nursery in Sydney; showgirls attend a presentation in the sheep pavilion at the Sydney Royal Easter Show.



and Brisbane, but Sydney’s the pinnacle. Sydney, and the world titles, is what we train for.”

Sideshow alley also has an interdependent relationship with show societies. The leaping horses of the carousel and the brightly coloured clown heads are all tended by the showmen who follow the circuit each year. Peter Gill, of Gill Bros, is part of a dynasty that has been providing entertainment to shows, rodeos and other bush events for four generations. At Blackall, the tradition continues, with his wife, son, daughter and grandchildren by his side. As though to confirm his right to be here, he presents a worn belt buckle: winner of the 1963 Blackall Open Buckjump.

“I’ve been travelling through this country for as long as I can remember,” Peter says. “We travel from Tamworth to Darwin and all through Queensland, but it’s peaceful here at these small shows. An agricultural show should have all aspects of agriculture – the cattle, the chooks, the pavilion, the vegies. But not all shows do now and it’s important for us to keep supporting those that do.”

While loud, bejewelled rides filled with screaming teenagers may be the norm for the bigger shows, Peter travels with sideshow stoppers that have stood the test of time. “Fairy floss is as popular today as it was 100 years ago,” he

says. “Dodgem cars are as popular now as they were 100 years ago. The family rides are the best ones to bring to shows.”

Tradition is also kept alive in the showgirl competition. Abandoned in all states but New South Wales and Queensland, it is more than the perceived pearls, pantihose and preening. “It’s definitely not a beauty pageant,” David Peters says. “It is recognised as giving the entrants huge benefits. It takes them out of their comfort zone, extends them, and gives them personal development and life skills.”

In most bush shows, showgirl entrants must have a thorough knowledge of rural issues, be involved in their community and be prepared, albeit temporarily, to swap jeans and boots for dresses and heels.

Hannah Barber, 26, was a Parkes Showgirl and twice made it to the finals at the Sydney Royal Easter Show. “I can say without reservation that entering the Showgirl Competition reshaped my life and my career,” she says. “I was happily poking along, and then my networks opened up and I saw what people were doing in their communities. I got a new appreciation for the role agricultural shows, both local and royal, play in connecting urban residents to agriculture and local produce, and it has definitely influenced my decision to become a teacher.” >



*Showman Peter Gill with his dodgem cars at the Blackall Show.*





ELISE ALTMANN

OUTBACK STORY

Hannah is now undertaking a PhD exploring food and fibre literacy in urban schools, and remains committed to teaching in her home town of Parkes. “As a teacher, I adore the show,” she says. “Apart from allowing students to be exposed to agriculture, shows give each and every student an opportunity to shine. Horseriding, photography, flowers, textiles, beef showing, chook breeding, showgirl – seriously the opportunities are endless.”

NEXT GENERATION

Hannah is part of Next Generation, a movement within state bodies throughout the country designed to address the lack of young people at the executive level of shows. “NextGen is by young people for young people,” she says. “We provide the skills needed to run an agricultural show, for example how to run a Young Farmers Challenge or how to organise a showgirl event, and it’s about encouraging the local people to be involved in their own show.”

Next Generation offers workshops, conferences and scholarships to those who will fill the committee positions of show societies well into the future. Within Next Generation’s ranks are farmers, policy developers, veterinarians, students and agronomists. All have a fierce passion for agriculture and the role of the show in promoting a positive image of the industry.

Sitting alongside Next Generation are the Rural Ambassador awards, which recognise 20–30 year olds across the country who have a strong connection to agriculture, community and shows. Current National Rural Ambassador Jeremy Schutz comes from the small town of Pinnaroo, deep in the Mallee of South Australia. Aged just 19, Jeremy was elected president of the Pinnaroo Show Society. “There is a massive bridge that needs to be built between the city and the country,” he says. “We need to become as one with the city and show we are not hillbillies.”

Jeremy is a boilermaker by trade but took over management of his family’s 8000-hectare sheep station two years ago. As National Rural Ambassador, he promotes country shows around Australia and encourages youth to get involved in the shows and the community, a role where he leads by example. Jeremy joined the Pinnaroo Country Fire Service when he was 13, and has been a member of the football, basketball, tennis and cricket clubs. “You can’t do 24/7, 365 days a year on the farm, so the community work gives you a break,” he says. “Everyone in this area is awesome, and when you are passionate about your community, you are willing to put in the extra miles to keep the town alive. I was born and bred here and I love it. Ours is only a little one-day show, but we attract about 4000 people. It is amazing and we are lucky to have the camaraderie in this good little country town.”

Jeremy has toured country and city shows across the nation, stewarding in the sheep pavilions and speaking at functions about his experiences. “There are plenty of keen youth out there and they just need a helping hand to get started,” he says. “Once they have got over their initial fears, they are the best people to have involved in your community. They have great ideas and they want to be heard by the older generation.”

In Warialda, NSW, in May last year, Ian Durkin was busy preparing animals to exhibit at his local show when he was suddenly admitted to hospital. His nine-year-old daughter Jorja stepped into the void. She paraded the family’s Herefords and won Grand Champion Pair of Heifers in the stud cattle section, beating her Uncle Paul in the process. A 550-kilogram animal can quite easily push around a small child, but Jorja is pragmatic: “Sometimes the heifer plays up and steps on me; but that’s my fault because I don’t move my feet.”

Jorja also won the Junior Judging. “There are four heifers in the ring and you have to judge them on things like



FROM TOP: The Southern Districts exhibit, with the theme of linking city and country, at the Sydney Royal Easter Show; National Rural Ambassador Jeremy Schutz at his farm near Pinnaroo, SA.





PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE RNA



## THE EKK

Brisbane’s Royal Show, run by the Royal National Agricultural and Industrial Association of Queensland (RNA), is lovingly known as The Ekka. Officially it’s titled the Royal Queensland Show, but the abbreviated nickname of The Ekka stuck after it was briefly called the Brisbane Exhibition. “We did some market research on whether we should go back to calling it the full name, but the response was, ‘You can call it whatever you want, but we’re still going to call it ‘The Ekka’,” RNA chief executive Brendan Christou says. “People have a real attachment to the show and that is part of the reason it has been so successful; it really is the people’s show.”

With attendance rates remaining a constant 400,000 each year, there has been a major overhaul of facilities since 2011 as part of the \$2.9 billion RNA Showgrounds Regeneration Project. “Brisbane has traditionally been known as a big country town and The Ekka has always been part of that,” Brendan says. “I think those roots are still very much part of Brisbane and its culture. Every August 10,000 animals come into the centre of what is a growing city.”

Many of those animals are beef cattle, which make up one of the most popular sections at the show, with entries often exceeding places available. With the cattle come the cattlemen and women and the legendary Stockman’s Bar. “The city people love it when the country people come to town and they can have that once-a-year authentic experience of having a beer with a bushie,” Brendan says of the bar that has been responsible for more than one romance over the years. For country people, it is also an important social occasion. “It’s often tough out in the bush, but when they come to the show they can leave their worries behind for a week or so.”

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feminine head, wide hip pins (so she doesn’t have trouble calving), a soft coat, a square udder, natural balance, good structure and long topline,” Jorja says. “You then get compared to the main judge, but you can’t get it right or wrong because it is your opinion.”

Outside of the cattle arena, Jorja also enjoys success in the pavilion, winning prizes for arts and crafts, but like so many who attend agricultural shows she finds the big drawcard is the socialising. “I get to play games and make friends,” she says.

## CONNECTING RURAL AND URBAN

James Burford is mustering, but there’s neither a sheep nor a cow in sight. Instead he is mustering 70 boys from Ashfield Boys’ High School, in inner-western Sydney. “Meet back at the giant pumpkin,” he says to his charges.

James and the boys are at the Sydney Royal Easter Show trialling a new Year 9 geography syllabus on biomes and food production. “The school has a wide ethnic spread, with 80 percent of students from non-English speaking backgrounds, and this is the only opportunity these kids get to see agriculture,” James says. “It is imperative they know where their food comes from.”

Students stand before the district produce exhibits, gazing in wonder at the intricate displays created through hundreds of hours of dedicated labour. “I’m surprised at the variety,” one student says, running his fingers through silky canola seed and tufts of raw cotton. The boys sample cheeses and fruits, and some tackle the chillies, which leaves them with red and burning lips. “You idiots,” James says good-naturedly, before joining with four other teachers to herd their mob towards the sheep pavilion, where they are tasked with learning the difference between a meat and wool sheep.

The Sydney Royal Easter Show exemplifies what is done all over the country at agricultural shows –

creating a conversation between the city and the bush. While the media may scream about an insurmountable divide between the two, this is the bush’s chance to show off, and it seems its city cousins are happy to participate. This year 922,827 visitors attended the Sydney Royal Easter Show – the largest crowd in more than a decade. “The show exists to help the wider community understand and value sustainable Australian agriculture and award-quality produce,” Royal Agricultural Society of NSW president Robert Ryan says. “While the show obviously has to have activities and displays that appeal to a wide and diverse demographic, we never lose sight of the need to continually promote agricultural excellence. The premium agriculture on display here has also been a tour stop for international delegations, with representatives from China, USA, New Zealand, Indonesia and Brunei visiting the show to connect with the Australian beef and dairy industries, goat and horse breeders, and food and wine traders.”

Sharna Holman grew up in western Sydney with no exposure to agriculture until she chose it as an elective at high school. From there, she volunteered at the Sydney Royal Easter Show. It proved a defining moment. Sharna now works as a cotton extension officer in Emerald, Qld. “Everyone I talked to at the show had a story to tell, and they were all so different and interesting,” she says. “What resonated for me was everyone loved what they did and they were living a life that made a real difference. As a city girl, I can see the Sydney Royal Easter Show gives everyone an opportunity to be proud of the work they have done over the past year, and proud of everyone in all parts of the agricultural industry.”

Perhaps the next generation of agriculturists can be found at the farmyard nursery, a perennial favourite at all shows. At Sydney, an entire pavilion is given over to the

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FROM TOP: Grand Parade at The Ekka; Nevaeh Butterley in the RACQ Animal Nursery.





SALLY CRIPPS, QUEENSLAND COUNTRY LIFE

*Blackall's Johnny MacNamara leads the field over the panels in the Barcoo Challenge, a fun team event at the Blackall Show.*

mayhem. Kids, both young and old, have their photos taken with baby lambs, cradle day-old chickens, admire pink piglets and squeal in delight as free-ranging goats come looking for a feed. Some, such as 13-month-old Evie Smyth and her mother Julie, play for hours. Others, such as 10-year-old Aaron Gusscott, return every day of the show to feed and pat and laugh with the animals, and in doing so make a connection to agriculture.

The Sydney Royal Easter Show is a master at providing educational and interactive exhibits for urban residents. At the cattle pavilion, steak lovers come face to face with a living, breathing – and somewhat cuddly looking – Charolais heifer. Once the awkwardness of the situation fades, the questions come thick and fast: What is marbling? What is the difference between a rump and a rib steak? That their questions are eloquently answered by 30-year-old meat scientist Dr Stephanie Fowler, from the NSW Department of Primary Industries' Centre of Red Meat and Sheep Development at Cowra, only adds to their interest.

Next door, a queue has formed for Luke Micallef's Milking Barn – and the previous show has not even finished. Luke – a dairy farmer from Camden Park, south-west of Sydney – is part salesman and part comedian, and his two patient Jersey cows seem unconcerned at being milked by hundreds of eager, if not efficient, hands.

Meanwhile, in the stables, Terry Goodear is bunkered down with Emily, an eight-year-old Clydesdale. Under Terry's attentive hands, and with help from Rick and Greta Stanfield, Emily's mane and tail are plaited and her coat gleams, and she is

harnessed to a polished lorry for the grand parade.

In any show, the grand parade is where agriculture and community comes together. The best in class of all livestock are present, resplendent in the red, white and blue championship ribbons. Visiting woodchoppers from the United States join the Sydney procession. Military bands strike up a tune. Showgirls wave to family in the stands and in return the crowd claps and cheers, swinging hats and smiling, happy to be part of the spectacle.

After the parade, Terry, Greta and Rick unwind, sipping traditional rum and water from stirrup cups made of horn, and relax into the end of another show day.

While the show winds down in Sydney, Blackall winds up. In a testament to mateship, teamwork and a strong sense of humour, the Barcoo Challenge is in full swing. The 44-gallon drum has been saddled as 'barrel racing' takes on a different twist. Big blokes ride tiny motorcycles and another fella dressed in a bull onesie is chased around the arena by a team in cardboard bull buggies.

After the fruit cake has been judged, the fairy floss eaten, the stuffed toys won on sideshow alley; after the competitions have been run and the winners sashed; when the axes are silent and the obligatory fireworks have spooked half the horses and most of the dogs, it is time to party. From tin sheds to corporate boxes, agriculture lets down its hair.

The show committee takes to the dance floor, the show patron and the showman settle down over a beer to reminisce, and a city boy chats up a country girl. She smiles because his too-new Akubra is on backwards. He smiles because she has missed a smudge of dirt on her forehead. None of which matters. It's showtime. 🐄