

Living a life with horses

BY DANNY POWER



There is not much that Mike Lawrence doesn't know about the equine athlete after 50 years of working with horses of all types.

Although Lawrence, now in his 60s, has travelled the world and worked with some of the best minds to learn more about equine physiology, he has found his "happy place" on a small piece of dirt at Anakie, near Geelong.

Lawrence and his wife Leila have developed a boutique breaking-in, pre-training and rehabilitation business they call Equus Nexus.

"Horses have been part of life on both sides of my family," Lawrence said.

"I grew up on a cattle property in the Yarra Valley, where horses were an essential part of livestock management. The local hunt club worked with farmers to build jump panels in fences. The polo field attracted royalty and farmers, who arrived on game day with horses standing on an open tray truck. Our neighbour was a racehorse trainer whom I rode for on the side of the hill known as the 'neck break' and I rode 12 miles and swam the river to get to Pony Club.

"It was paradise for a boy."

That "horse trainer" that lived across the road was legendary Yarra Glen trainer

Arch McClements, who took a teenage Lawrence under his wing and introduced him to the majesty and athleticism of the thoroughbred.

Although height and weight eliminated Lawrence from being a jockey, he had hopes to be a veterinarian. However, he deferred his university vet science course to work on other things with horses, including alongside legendary veterinary surgeon and teacher Alastair Maclean, who remains a close friend.

After working alongside Maclean for two years, Lawrence spent time in Washington, USA, with Australian Warwick Bailey, a professor of exercise physiology, often tagging

along with Bailey to the many veterinary conferences that further piqued Lawrence's interest in the science of what made the equine athlete tick.

As a top-ranked marathon runner in his younger days, he also had a personal interest in exercise physiology.

He put that knowledge into practice during 10 years of breaking-in and pre-training horses in Queensland, before Lawrence settled back in Victoria for a quieter life. That was until he got a call from trainer Michelle Payne, who rekindled Lawrence's passion to work with thoroughbreds.

"Michelle asked me to break in a Frankel colt for her at



THE BOND: For Mike Lawrence creating a better connection between man and horse is a key factor of his breaking-in and rehabilitation business Equus Nexus.

RIDING THE HILLS: Mike Lawrence, second from left, using the 50kms of tracks and trails in the You Yangs, near Anakie, is perfect for education and rehabilitation of horses under his care.

Ballarat. In the end I worked with Michelle for two years, until I found travelling back and forth an hour a day was getting too much, especially as I had no own horses at Anakie.

"I focused more on what we are doing at Anakie, and we spent the past couple of years improving the facilities. We do breaking-in and pre-training routinely, but as the business develops, we are moving more into rehabilitation work, because we are in a good position to do that type of work.

"We are very close to the You Yangs (You Yang Regional Park) which has 50kms of tracks and trails that we use frequently, from deep sand to pretty firm ground. It's type of work we really like to do with lower leg tendon injuries.

"Once horses have got over the acute stage of a tendon injury, it's ideal to start working them into long, slow work and we have the perfect environment for that.

"We find that horses also relax working together on the mountain tracks, which is much less stressful than trying to do the same thing on a treadmill, even though it is more labour intensive. We are sure we can get better results doing it our way.

"We also have the use of Elcho Park, an equestrian park at Lara, to help horses to relax and get used to be around other horses in a different environment. This is part of the rehab of the horse. It's no use getting them relaxed here at Anakie and working on the bush tracks, only for them to be overawed by a day at the racetrack."

The Lawrences have no intention of taking their business outside of "boutique" because they are hands-on people. "It's a family business and we are enjoying a life researching and providing actionable methods and processes that move us to the next level.

"Creativity is my way back to loving life and the daily routine of working with 10 or 12 horses never fails."

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