

Forever young

KIDS' COMPETITIONS AT THE SHOW

Opposite: D. Scales, Champion Junior Handler, with family members and their Australian Silky Terrier, 1980



Like Christmas, the Show is for children, but showbags and rides are only half the fun – for 125 years juniors have also been part of the competition. Increasingly though, the fun has a serious side.

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Kids have always helped their parents with the preparation and presentation of exhibits at agricultural shows but who wouldn't want to take home a blue ribbon all of their own? Especially if it's at the most prestigious show in the southern hemisphere, the Sydney Royal Easter Show. Now there are almost too many junior classes to count but in 1890 when junior competition officially began there was just one. It took years for the idea to properly catch on and it's really only in this century as we grapple with the big issues of participation and succession planning, that we are finally appreciating the importance of children's competition.

In 1890 Australia was horse mad and horse reliant and tests of horsemanship were popular entertainment, a fact not lost on Banjo Patterson, who first published his poem "The Man from Snowy River" that same year. It's therefore not surprising that the Horse Section was the first to open up competition with a class for the best male rider in pony classes under 18. The time was right for the skills of talented junior horsemen to be recognised and two years later a class for young women was also added to the schedule. However, it was to be another thirty years before the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW (RAS) extended junior competition beyond the Horse Section with the introduction of judging competitions in 1920.

What prompted the change is not clear, but with a generation of men decimated in the Great War, the Society may have been conscious of the need to fast track the next generation of judges. In any case, post-war reconstruction relied on a thriving agricultural sector; new cultivation methods and advances in agricultural science meant education was a priority. Junior judging

competitions were the perfect vehicle to train and encourage promising young people to develop expertise which could be shared.

The first junior judges came from agricultural schools and colleges competing across a range of classes: horse, dairy and beef cattle, pigs, poultry, grains and vegetables. They were soon joined by youths from Junior Farmers' Clubs. This popular movement, which was set up in the 1920s to give after-school training to rural children, flourished into the 1950s, with clubs right across New South Wales. It was to produce many able competitors when classes gradually opened up across the board.

An instrumental figure in the early development of judging competitions was EA Southee. As an RAS Councillor, Vice President, and principal of the Hawkesbury Agricultural College he pushed for the regulation of judging standards. Today, great pains are taken to ensure the fairness of competition and competition judges are very carefully selected. They must be familiar with all the regulations and professional, but they also need to be good communicators and empathetic. For juniors to get the most out of their experience they must take away new knowledge and confidence.

Judging competitions have always been aimed at young adults (today's entrants are aged between 15 and 25) but the entry point for smaller children to compete at the Show has traditionally been the Arts & Crafts Section, which first opened to children in 1939. Other Sections followed suit over the next five decades.

It's now acknowledged that the sooner kids get hooked on competing at the Show the better. Experience proves that children often go on to exhibit across different Sections as they mature. Having discovered a passion, these are the people



Left: Young riders – Main Arena, 1953

who as adults become the loyal Members and hardworking officials of the show societies and affiliated organisations and representational bodies which keep the RAS and the Show going. Indeed, it's these individuals who form the backbone of the agricultural sector.

It has long been the practice of sharp-eyed RAS Councillors to pick off some of the most promising junior competitors and invite them to become stewards. From this crop, Councillors have mentored and selected many of their own replacements. But with the increasing urbanisation of Australia and the changing circumstances surrounding agriculture, renewal across the organisation and at the grassroots has become problematic.

Getting children involved via schools' competitions may prove to be the new way forward.

The Cattle Section has taken schools' competition seriously for nearly thirty years,

Right: Miss Alison Kyle, a veterinary science student from Sydney University, leads a bull through the Showground, 1947
Below: A young goat exhibitor lines up for judging, c1950.

establishing perpetual trophies in 1988 for the Champion School Steer and Champion School Parader. Now however, many Sections have expanded into this area. It makes sense. Fewer and fewer children have the opportunity to get hands-on experience, particularly with livestock, but many schools still have the space and the supervisory capacity to play host to a range of worthwhile projects. The Poultry Section has been especially innovative in getting secondary students involved with new commercial classes for meat birds and egg laying. Students are learning about the science and economics of this multibillion dollar industry, which otherwise tends to have a low public profile. In the process they are becoming aware of attractive job opportunities they never knew existed. The entire Poultry Section has been rejuvenated through these commercial competitions. In attracting the support of Steggles and the Australian Egg Corporation as sponsors, closer ties to the industry have been forged and the ongoing relevance of the Section in its role of promoting agricultural excellence is assured.

Another new schools initiative is the School Veggie Garden Competition. Run within the Flower & Garden competition it has the advantage of also involving urban children, at primary as well as secondary level. Up the scale is the Schools District Display Competition which started in 2010. These displays mimic the District Exhibits but judging is entirely focussed on presentation. The motives behind the competition are unashamedly evangelical. The stalwarts of the District Courts are ageing and new blood is needed if this cornerstone of the Show is to keep going.

New, and creative, competitions emerge every year. One, for example, involves secondary students in filmmaking and journalism projects which are put together during show time. It's all part of staying smart and relevant and getting the message out that agriculture has much to offer.

Winners are grinners they always say, but so much is learned in the process of competing: there's the preparation, the excitement, the nerves, the test on the day and the camaraderie of being part of something bigger than oneself. What's more, it's the sort of fun which just might last a lifetime.

Junior handlers, judges, pumpkin decorators, cake makers, show jumpers – the Show needs you all. ■



The boy legend

Lennie Gwyther's epic effort to get to the 1932 Show must make him the keenest-ever child competitor in the Show's history.

On Wednesday 16 March 1932 crowds of people packed into Martin Place in central Sydney. They were there to celebrate the arrival on horseback of a nine year-old boy. Escorted by two horsemen sent by the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW and greeted by the Society's secretary Colonel Somerville, little Lennie Gwyther had made his dream come true.

Setting out alone from the family farm in Leongatha, Gippsland on his pony Ginger Mick, Lennie had journeyed 600 miles to Sydney – all because he wanted to see the brand new Sydney Harbour Bridge and compete at the Sydney Royal Easter Show.

Permission for the trip was granted by Lennie's father as a reward for Lennie's courageous effort to save the family's finances. Stepping up when his father was hospitalised with a broken leg, Lennie had ploughed 24 acres, all by himself, ready for planting.

Country newspapers caught wind of Lennie's travels and the story gained notoriety as he made his way along the Princes Highway. It seized the imagination of the public and by the time he arrived at Martin Place the boy who wore the funny sou'wester hat was a celebrity.

By popular demand Lennie was included in the official celebrations for the opening of the Bridge. Proudly mounted on Ginger Mick the pair became part of a gala pageant which crossed the iconic structure amid great fanfare.

Five days later Lennie's Easter Show dream was eclipsed beyond his imagining when the RAS invited him to ride in the Grand Parade. That year the cattle were led in a pattern which spectacularly formed the shape of the Bridge and the boy's presence could not have been more fitting. According to The Sydney Morning Herald, Lennie was the envy of every

small child at the ground and was loudly cheered as he cantered around on the faithful friend that had carried him all that way "to see the Show".

Only a win in the competition ring could have bettered the experience. On the way to Sydney, Lennie had stopped off to compete at the Moss Vale Show, nabbing a second in a class for boy riders under ten, but sadly his form didn't carry through and he was unplaced in Sydney. Ginger Mick, entered in Class 67 for Novice Saddle Pony not exceeding 13 hands, suffered the same fate. But it was far from an ignominious end for the pair. They came, they saw, they competed.

With his spirit and determination, the unassuming nine year-old and his horse had inspired the country. Forever afterwards a little bit of the history of the great Bridge and the great Show would be wonderfully, inextricably linked to Lennie.