

Right: A tree felling contest at the 1938 Show

*Everybody loves a story about the old days when competitions were still evolving and regulations were rough and ready. Some of the best of those tales can be found in the history of the Woodchop Section.*

# Blood, fists and flying woodchips

HOW THE SHOW'S FAVOURITE SPORT WAS TAMED

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It's not very often that the origin of a sport can be pinned down to a particular time and place but when it comes to woodchop the facts are clear. There was a pub and there was a bet. What could be more Australian? Given the competitive nature of blokes, head-to-head tests between axemen have probably been going on since the tool was invented, but the first recorded competition took place in the backyard of the Sprent Hotel in Ulverstone, Tasmania, in 1870. Twenty odd years before, timber-getters had gone to the area to fell mountain ash to feed the demand for split timber on the booming Victorian gold fields. In those quiet, Tasmanian hardwood forests, axes rang out – and the boasting must have been equally loud.

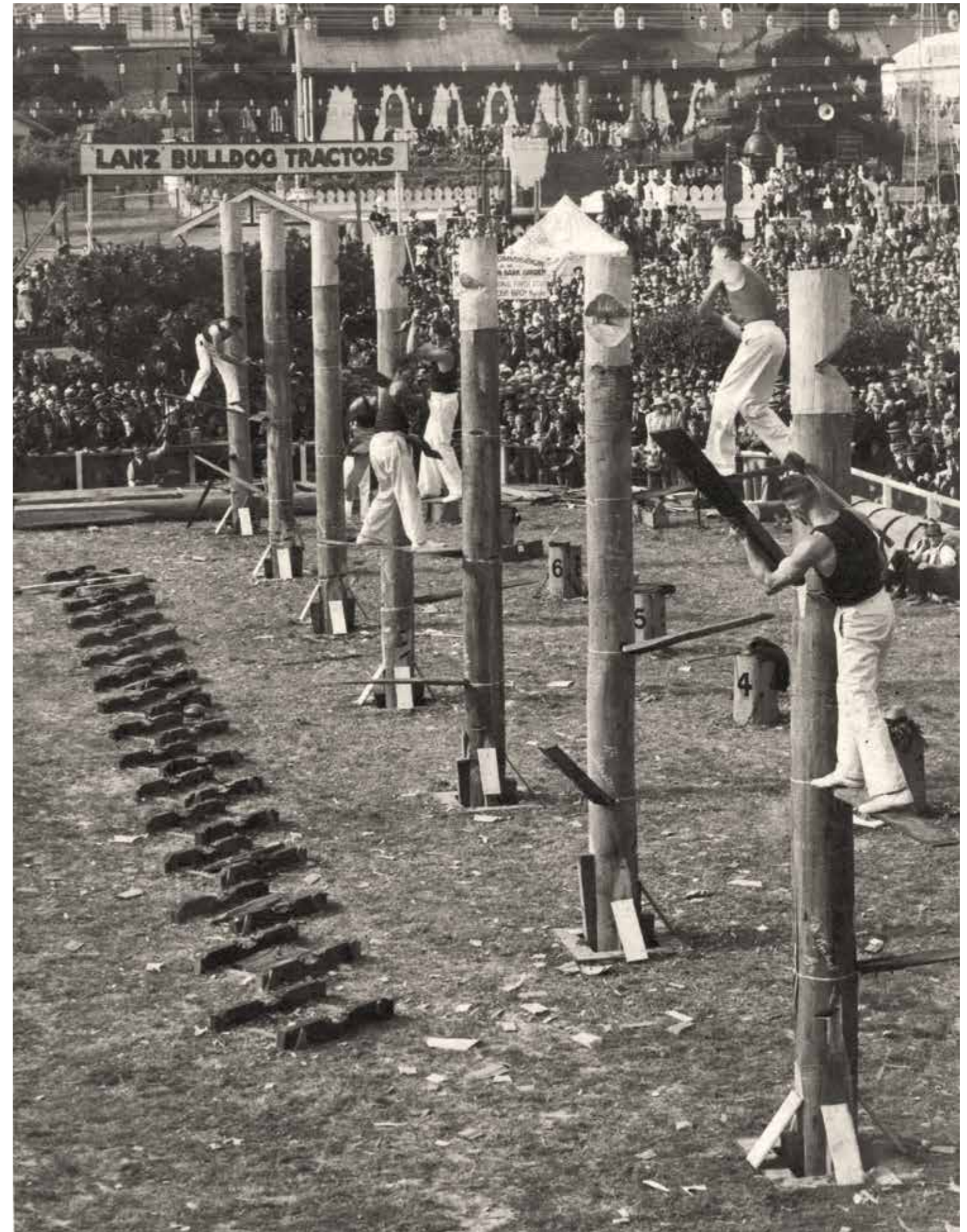
The Ulverstone wager of £25 was between Joseph Smith, a local vet, and Jack Biggs, from Warragul, Victoria. No doubt inter-colonial rivalry added heat to the competition. They

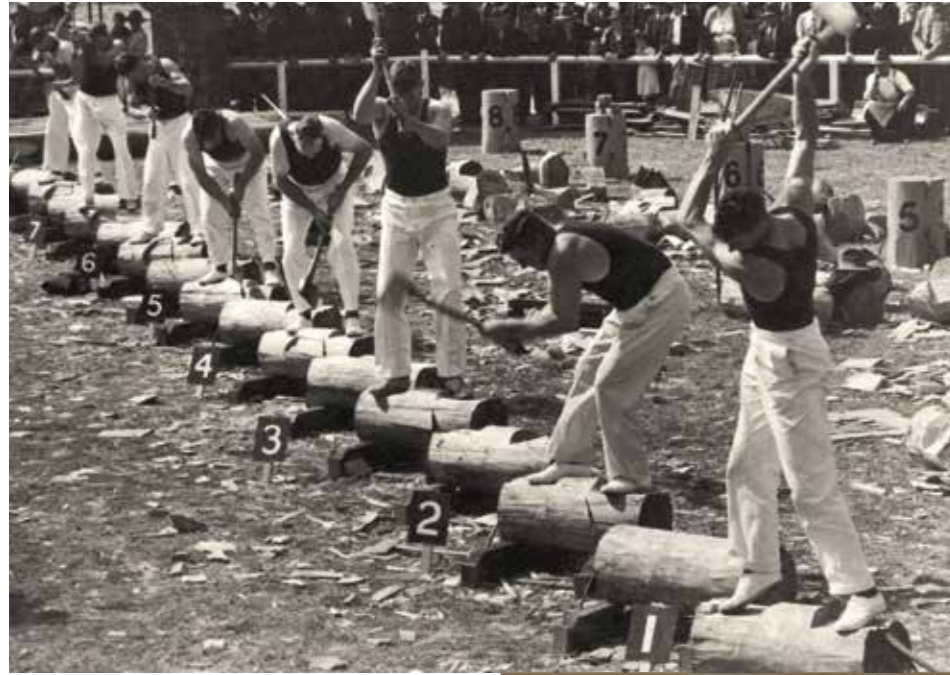
chopped three-foot standing blocks and Smith supposedly won, but there was a dispute and the whole thing ended in a free-for-all brawl. This method of 'lodging a protest' was to be common at woodchop competitions around the country until the late 1930s and beyond – even at the 'Wimbledon of Woodchop', the Sydney Royal Easter Show. It was a tough sport, one of the few born out of hard daily yakka, and though it was quickly popular, it took time to formalise and break in, not least because big money was often involved.

The first competition at the Show took place in 1899 in a paddock which doubled as a cattle ring. It was held on the last day to boost attendance and was an instant hit, with a crowd of eight thousand turning out to watch. Twenty six competitors vied for prizes which ranged from £5–£20. Four of the eight Heckenberg boys from Green Valley, near Liverpool, were hot

favourites, but the day was won by a Victorian named MacKinoly who had won championships in three colonies. Despite that disappointment, the Heckenbergs were to do well and finished their careers with eleven championships between them. The Sydney suburb of Heckenberg is named after the family.

Rules for the fledgling sport were first drawn up in Tasmania at a meeting of axemen eight years earlier. This was in response to a contest which had attracted over sixty competitors, all starting from scratch. Declaring winners under those circumstances was difficult and even dangerous with £1000 in prize money up for grabs. Heats were introduced, with all logs to be from the same tree. Handicapping was brought in too, but systems varied between timing and log girth. Timing became the norm and is used today





but, remarkably, the details of the system are still not standardised across Australia. With starting marks based on last performance, the old pros, who made a living travelling around the shows, tried every trick in the book to beat the handicapper. Foxing over skill levels, using a not-so-sharp axe or pretending to carry an injury were favourite ploys.

Perhaps for lack of suitable space, woodchopping was dropped from the Show after two years. It was reinstated in 1906 and the event went on to become an enduring favourite with showgoers from all walks of life. Facilities were upgraded several times. A deluxe stadium with the mod-cons of dressing rooms, bathrooms and headquarters for officials was constructed in 1938. To raise the tone of competition to match the smart new venue, the Woodchop Committee introduced dress rules. Shorts were banned in the arena. Axemen had to wear long cream or white trousers and blue singlets. The new regulations weren't too popular – many were used to performing bare legged and bare chested, just as they worked and trained. Through the loud speaker system axemen were threatened with disqualification if they failed to comply.

Officials had to stay vigilant. In 1951 a New Zealander, Joe Julian, turned up to cut in bare feet. Eventually he did as demanded and put on shoes, but to make them more comfy he cut out the soles.

With tough blokes wielding razor-sharp axes, the sport was a spectacle and dangerous enough, but in the days when beer was the sports drink of choice, afternoon sessions could be particularly interesting. Some axemen, it is said, were so drunk

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they couldn't stand on their logs. The judges, too, were often below par after lunch and many a punch-up ensued. Remembering those days, a cleaner at the Show, speaking in the 1990s, recalled fights in the dressing room, blood all over the place, and fellows staggering around the ring or forgetting their heats entirely. The squeaky clean professionals of the modern era were a wonder to him.

Despite all this, bad accidents at the Show rarely happened. One young fellow in a tree felling event had a lucky escape when the plank he was standing on at the top of his 'tree' dislodged. Women screamed as he fell twenty feet, blade in hand. Miraculously unharmed, he sprang up before anyone could get to him and went on with the job. When he finished he was greeted by warm applause. The extent of his good fortune would have been fully appreciated by those in the audience who could recall the shocking accident that occurred at a widely reported event on the north coast in the 1920s. There, an eighteen-year-old competitor in the standing log caught his trouser leg on a splitter as he turned and swung; the blow, already in motion and unstoppable, severed his leg.

Woodchopping, above almost all other sports, has been dominated by families of champions across multiple generations, with many family members continuing to compete well into their fifties and sixties and beyond. So it's not surprising that behaviour could sometimes be clannish. In the early 1950s the famous champion Jack O'Toole was resting on a bench in the dressing room. A young lad of six or seven from a competing Victorian family of choppers thought he'd give his father a bit of an advantage. He came along and gave Jack an almighty punch in the eye as he lay there. History doesn't say if Jack caught the boy, but he still won the championship.

Administration of the sport needed improvement and the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW (RAS) stepped in to help, bringing different groups together to form the RAS Axemen's Association of NSW, a body which lasted from 1949–1960.

One innovation was the introduction of an 'electronic judge' to stop arguments over close finishes. The device, which involved wiring up logs, was invented and operated by New Zealander, SJ Samuels. Confidence in the instrument was severely tested one day at the 1953 Show after a freakish run of tight encounters. The huge crowd (turnstiles into the woodchop stadium had to be shut several times and queues stretched back 50 yards), disagreed with declared results. According to newspapers the mood got downright angry: Mr Samuels was lucky not to be run out of town.

Eventually the electronic system was abandoned; weather conditions were found to affect accuracy, and falling logs sometimes broke circuits. Video equipment was to prove the best peacemaker. Officials embraced it. When blokes came up to them saying, 'My mate said I came before this other man,' they played them the tape so they could see for themselves. The evidence was there – literally – in black and white. With harmony restored, Committee members could duck down to the Chip Inn, a tiny bar under the old stadium, to entertain sponsors in a relaxed frame of mind. But dead heats still happened; then as now it's just a fact that sometimes the difference between contestants is impossible to call.

Today, over 70 regulations govern the RAS competition which has developed to include world championship events, and events for teams, women and juniors. While the raw and rustic days of the sport might be long gone there's no need to be nostalgic. Champions are still decided in the woodchop stadium; and though they don't use their fists, men, boys, women and girls still fight to win for the sake of family pride. Old rivals meet; young guns vie; and as always, it takes economy of effort, stamina and speed and enormous precision to take off a prize. The unique Aussie sport that came out of the bush is still loved by the crowd, and it may be that the more urban we become, the more we admire its skills. In the voice of the axe and the bite of the saw there is something primitive to which we respond. Perhaps, at its deepest level, it's something to do with human competency; but whatever it is, it will always be. ■



Above: Vic Summers of Queensland wins tree felling at the 1940 Show  
Left: A competitor celebrates his win at the 1982 Show

Opposite page  
Above: Woodchopping at the 1938 Show  
Below: American woodchopper David Geer at the 1961 Show