

Opposite: Former long-standing ringmaster Lorraine Angus
Below: Publicity image used during the 1938 Show featuring the ringmaster

Lords of the ring



Ringmaster. It's a term loaded with old world romance, but hard work, headaches and high drama have always been the reality when it comes to running one of the busiest show rings on earth. This year when Bill Picken took over from Lorraine Angus, his name was added to a list which goes back more than a hundred years.

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According to those in the know, it takes 'massive calm' to be a ringmaster. And superb organisational skills. But when a steer goes wild and jumps over the arena fence to run into the grandstand and fling itself over the counter of an oyster bar, massive calm really helps. It's probably the best response too, when your main entertainment – a giant mechanical dinosaur – gets bogged. Or when a truck in the middle of the ring runs over the box covering the water mains and the taps burst, flooding the ground and cutting off supply to hotdog booths far and wide. And although there's no one to witness it, massive calm is just the ticket when the ring has run so late that it's 2am and the campdrafters are playing to empty stands, horses' hooves beating a ghostly echo.

Sticking to a tight schedule at the Show and balancing the needs of the competitors and the

crowd has been the challenge for a long line of distinguished ringmasters. It's a challenge which sometimes spectacularly went unmet in the days of the old Moore Park Showground, but back then no one seemed to mind terribly. With increasing professionalism during recent decades big delays are a thing of the past but they've made for an anecdote packed history.

The role of ringmaster was first officially recognised in 1901 at a time when horse events were becoming more varied and mixed competitions, like sheepdog trials and bicycle races, were added to the action in the ring. Mr J.H. Sullivan was the first appointee but due to illness he was absent during the Show and duties were carried out by Mr J.A. Saunders instead.

Typically ringmasters are exceptional horsemen and have been horse committee members of long standing. Their main task

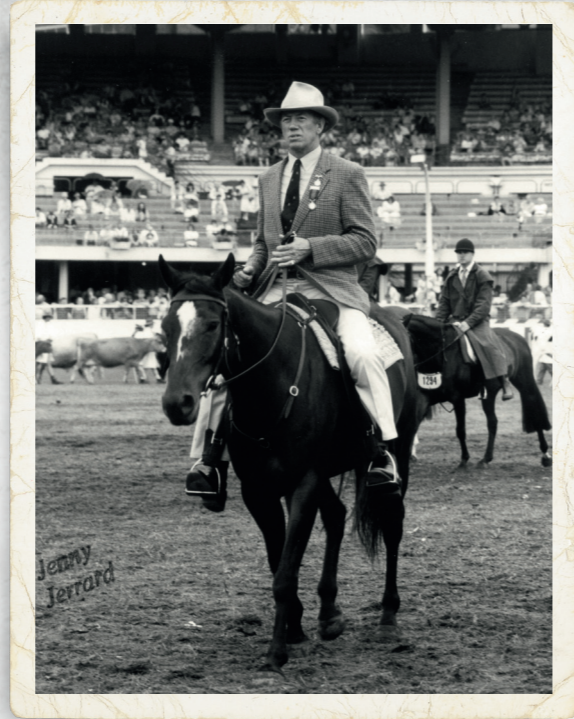
is to schedule the intricate program of horse events and the Grand Parade, but they also have oversight of the entertainment and whatever else happens in the ring. The pre-Show planning is hard enough but getting it right on the day is problematic given the unpredictable behaviour of man, beast and Mother Nature.

Despite the complexities of the job, many ringmasters have served long term. The earliest of these, A.D. Playfair, officiated for 17 years during the period 1905-1924, though sometimes he had to be cajoled. He didn't mind being ringmaster during the day, he said, but when night sessions were introduced in 1917, he found taking charge of the extra events a severe strain.

Ken Mackay, who performed the role for 30 years, and Lorraine Angus, for 17 years, have been the other long stayers in the job. Mackay's stint



Below: The Grande Parade at Moore Park Showground in 1939
Right: Ringmaster Arthur Bragg at the 1991 Show



Right: The Grand Parade – one of the greatest challenges for the ringmaster – at the 2013 Show



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was super-human but he did it with the support of his deputy, Jim Angus, who was the organising genius of the pair. Jim was Lorraine Angus' father. The combined ring experience of the family is really quite extraordinary with one or the other officiating almost every year since 1954.

Mackay, though, was legendary. A bushie born and bred, he was an outstanding horseman who played polo around the world – and he was no shrinking violet. "I like this ring to run plus or minus 30 seconds and that's what we will have," he is known to have frequently bellowed.

Running late was often the biggest problem. On occasion the program was so far behind it was touch-and-go getting the crowd home by midnight when public transport stopped.

Wise old ring stewards can avert many slowdowns, keeping an eye on judges, managing fractious animals and inexperienced competitors, but nothing much can be done when appalling weather hits. On several occasions at Moore Park the ground was completely underwater; most notably in 1927 when over 22 inches of rain fell over the Easter period. Ring events were cancelled on Good Friday and Easter Saturday, and the Council had to extend the Show by three days. At other times the centre of the field was so muddy that duckboards were put down to enable officials to reach their boxes without sinking to the ankles.

Extreme conditions caused spectacular falls and crashes. In 1951 riders who came off were seen to slide ten metres across the soft muddy surface. Miraculously no one was seriously hurt that day but the interruptions of the ambulance carting people away didn't help the schedule.

To keep his arena in action after rain, Ken Mackay once went to exceptional lengths, dragging Councillors and their wives out on the Easter Sunday rest day and putting them to work with mops and buckets to dry out the ground. Did they dare refuse?

An essential part of the ringmaster's job has always been oversight of the entertainment. In years gone by many of the acts were amateur and often went wrong. Worst of all was long patches of nothing happening. During Mackay's era that problem was solved by sending in the Kelly Brothers. They were brilliant trick riders and rodeo clowns and the two could improvise, making fun with whatever was to hand. Once, when the arena was flooded, they famously harnessed up a pony to a rowboat; another year they sent a horse up into the Members Stand to walk around the seats.

Of all the ringmaster's responsibilities, the ceremonial centrepiece of their work is the Grand Parade. After saluting the RAS President the ringmaster sets it in motion to follow serpentine patterns little altered from year-to-year. At a certain point the ringmaster

blows a whistle for all to stand still. It's a photo opportunity. The tradition goes back to the days of box Brownie cameras when moving subjects would not be in focus. The audience is always asked not to applaud for safety reasons.

Arthur Bragg, ringmaster from 1990-1995, says people underestimate the danger of a Grand Parade. With hundreds of livestock all in together the situation is potentially impossible to control if animals are spooked. The thought weighs heavily on all ringmasters and incidents do happen. Once, during Arthur's time, a led stallion in very light headgear got loose.

"Here we were with a raging stallion," he recalls, "with nothing on, nothing to catch it with, and there were kids screeching and this stallion was looking around to find a lady friend so he was bellowing and rearing and he was going to jump on anything he could possibly find. Luckily Bob Palmer, great horseman that he was, saw what happened."

Arthur called him over. Bob took off his belt. "We got him on the track, I mean this is a flat gallop, and Bob leant over with his belt and put the belt over the horse's head and caught it." Only spectacular horsemanship averted disaster.

Arthur's predecessor, Roger Wotton, didn't supervise on horseback but instead watched from the top deck of the broadcasting stand. The big man, normally jovial, was always uneasy as he watched his ring officials guide the unwieldy

pageant around. Speaking about it a few months before he passed away last year, Roger said it was always a big relief to him when the Grand Parade was over and everyone was still in one piece.

By the last decade at Moore Park a lot of the ringmasters' pre-planning work had become routine. Using Mackay's well tested protocols and with ultra-experienced stewards in the arena there were few new mistakes to be made. But the move to Homebush opened up a whole new ball game.

Cometh the hour, cometh the man. Enter Lorraine Angus.

The old arena was a very productive piece of country, big enough for two pony rings at one end, two hack rings at the other, a jump in the middle and trots going around the outside. Until recent adjustments were made to the current ring to meet Australian Football League requirements, it was significantly smaller and impossible to fit all the events into the same timeframe. For several years the Show ran longer, but with clever management, Lorraine clawed back the program from an exhausting sixteen days to twelve. His greatest achievement, however, was to get events running reliably to time. This was done by taking minute account of every single activity in the ring, including presentations, and by sprinkling the program with five and ten minute buffers.

The same level of scrutiny was brought to bear on the problem of staging the Grand Parade at the new, smaller venue. Working with a draughtsman, he tallied the number of animals participating and averaged their sizes. Plotting them onto maps of the ring and the surrounding streets where they'd be marshalled, it was dubious as to whether they'd fit. They did, but only just.

When Lorraine retired from the job last year he literally passed on the baton, presenting Bill Picken with the traditional ringmaster's cane at the 2013 Show. It's actually a replica, made by Lorraine, of an original fashioned by Ken Mackay. That cane was used on all the big occasions by Ken and then Lorraine, but it now rests in a glass case in the Heritage Centre, safe from the hard knocks of active service. Known affectionately as the 'Ringmaster's Persuader', it's a wonder Ken didn't wear it out.

Whatever challenges Bill Picken faces as the new lord of the ring, there's one thing he won't have to worry about. Start times for events can be adjusted on the electronic scoreboard in a trice, unlike way back when a sign writer was on standby at the board on the Angus and Martin Stand, waiting to paint them on.

The ring: a place of trophies and honours, skill and daring, parades and entertainments, fireworks and crowds. It's a pretty important patch of ground to inherit. ■



Above: People take cover from the rain on the Main Arena at the 1936 Show