

Wanganui Jockey Club plans for 175 years celebration — a look back

By Trevor Mackay

When the Wanganui Jockey Club celebrates 175 years of racing on December 2, its recognition of a significant milestone which will also include use of the Eulogy Lounge. The room is a popular part of the club's Function Centre and one of the biggest in Whanganui capable of hosting larger events. It fittingly carries the name of a mare, Eulogy, who has had a profound influence not only on thoroughbred bloodstock in Whanganui but in New Zealand generally. Eulogy was an exceptional mare on the racetrack but had even more impact as a broodmare and was entered into the New Zealand Racing Hall of Fame. Racegoers in the Eulogy Lounge on December 2 might pause to reflect on Eulogy's contribution to the rich history of racing in the Whanganui District and beyond.

Buyers through the years, local and international, have looked for Eulogy bloodlines before making purchases at New Zealand's prestigious yearling sales.

Notably successful in her racing career, Eulogy was imported to New Zealand from Britain by George Currie to join his Koatanui Lodge stallions Limond and Absurd.

She produced 14 foals, 13 of them winners and her legacy has been a multitude of stakes or classic winners. Her status in racing circles remains lofty because more classic winners descended from her than from any other mare in the world in the same space of time. Her line produced top class gallopers such as Showgate, Il Tempo and Bonecrusher.

Horses sired at Koatanui won 40 classics, making it one of the Whanganui District's most renowned stud farms. Such studs have been part of the fabric of Whanganui racing through the years.

Frank Moore, of Bushy Park fame, bred and raced horses and his stud obtained a mare, Lady Helen, who was an ancestress of the great sprinter Mainbrace.

John Donald's Westmere stud included the sire Beau Pere, who was sold because of Mr Donald's ill health. Beau Pere's stock won more than \$700,000 in the United States.

JG Alexander was another giant of the racing industry from the Whanganui Region. One of his outstanding broodmares at his Cranleigh Stud, Celebrity, emulated Eulogy in having a room at the club's grandstand complex named after her along with both the Cranleigh and Koatanui rooms.

Cranleigh enjoyed notable success with the stallion Coronach and other quality stallions followed.

Celebrity was a half sister to a great sire of stayers, Balloch, and one of her sons, Davey Jones, stood at Cranleigh.

JG raced one of the biggest strings in the country, most of them bred at Cranleigh. He had two terms as president of the club and was a life member of the New Zealand Thoroughbred Breeders' Association.

In recent years the Corcoran's stud at Waitotara, Grangewilliam, has won international interest through the deeds of its stallion Zed, who descends from the mighty Sir Tristram. Close to the city of Whanganui is Letham, where the studmaster Nigel Auret, is enjoying success with his stallion Unusual Suspect. Nigel has sons strongly involved in racing and the Auret family is one of many linked to racing in the wider Whanganui area.

Other families who have made significant contributions to Whanganui racing include the Rayners, the Bristols, the Macnabs, the O'Learys and the Dykes.

Racehorses, of course, require training and the Rayners have made a monumental contribution to racing in the region as trainers. The family has provided four generations of mentors, Walter, Bubs, Evan and JJ.

Kevin Myers, at Turakina, has established himself as New Zealand's leading trainer of jumpers, a field in which he has been dominant. The Wanganui Steeplechase is one of the oldest races of its type in the country, dating back to 1875.

Grand jumpers prepared in this area include Beyond, Ballycastle and Hypnotize, who won three Great Northern Steeplechases.

A jockey from the district with special ability was Brent Thomson. He had a rapid rise in New Zealand as a young rider and quickly made impact in Australia after linking up with leading trainer Colin Hayes.

In New Zealand Lisa Allpress and Johnathan Parkes have joined a select band of riders who have ridden 1,000 winners.

Michael Dee has been in demand as a jockey in Australia after being an apprentice of real promise in Whanganui.

Apart from Lisa Allpress, women who have made impact in racing here include Rita Jackson, a trail blazer among women trainers, and Janice Webster, the daughter of a prominent trainer, Kohe, who has had a variety of roles over many years in the industry and still works for the club today.

The Wanganui club has had some innovative projects and Janice was part of a successful scheme to get more young people working in the industry. To that end she assisted young riders such as Dee. Skills taught to her by Kohe included horse dentistry.

Another stand-out woman in Whanganui racing was the jumps jockey Rochelle Lockett, who was successful internationally.

The hooves of some great horses have bounded on the Whanganui track, from Gloaming to the likes of Japan Cup winner Horlicks and the memorable Cox Plate winner, Boncrusher.

Among Whanganui's best gallopers was the Turner's Veandercross. He raced at the top level in New Zealand and Australia, and his ability was recognised across the Tasman when he was named Australia's Horse of the Year. Veandercross had eight Group One wins, five in Australia and three in New Zealand, and won more than \$3.5 million.

Gallopers associated with the Whanganui District have won Australasia's greatest race, the Melbourne Cup, with the long priced Wotan in the 1930s, with Kiwi after a last to first performance in the 1980s, and with Verry Elleegant among the latest winners and by the local sire Zed. Doreimus, who won in the 1990s, was foaled at Grangewilliam. Veandercross was second in his Melbourne Cup attempt in 1992, while Who Shot Thebarman was third in 2014. Who Shot Thebarman was a tough stayer whose whole-hearted efforts made him popular with racegoers on both sides of the Tasman.

Racing in Whanganui used to be publicised daily and journalists who carried out that function included knowledgeable and dedicated men such as Brian Bergen, Jack Glengarry, Paul Vettise, Robin Bloor and Iain Hyndman. Mike O'Sullivan was a talented broadcaster, ideal as a front man for television's 'Trackside' or for live commentaries of races. Mike was involved in marketing for the Wanganui club and, more lately, has acted as a judge for it.

Whanganui has had some challenging racing years and the club had a grandstand reduced to a gutted shell by a major fire in May, 1997. It said much for the resilience of racing folk here that the winter meeting was held less than two weeks later. A major rebuild was undertaken, with the club having an eye on the 150th celebrations for the following year. On the one hand the club gained a modernised and improved grandstand complex, but in a time of change it lost staff including a capable and long-serving secretary in Ian Boyland.

The rebuild meant that the club could cater even better indoors not only on race days but for major functions such as conventions, conferences and weddings. Outside, events such as the A and P Shows were held. The community-minded club has raised money for Hospice amongst others in the course of supporting charitable courses.

Whanganui's sand-based and immaculate course and surrounds have long been the envy of other clubs. Facilities in the Function Centre complex have hosted funeral services for large gatherings, amongst many types of events, while the track was used for a circuit by a hearse which carried popular trainer Ken Cropp. The hearse was accompanied by Cropp's weight-carrying star, Bulginbaah, who was ridden by his usual pilot, Catherine Wilson. Similar arrangements were carried out for popular ex-Track manager and long serving staff member Mark Buckley in 2020 for whom the Island bar was renamed as the Buckley bar in his honour.

Horses, trainers and jockeys will take centre stage again at the Wanganui club's special meeting on December 2 in celebrating being part of one of the oldest sporting clubs in the country and the oldest racing club in New Zealand still racing on the same track.

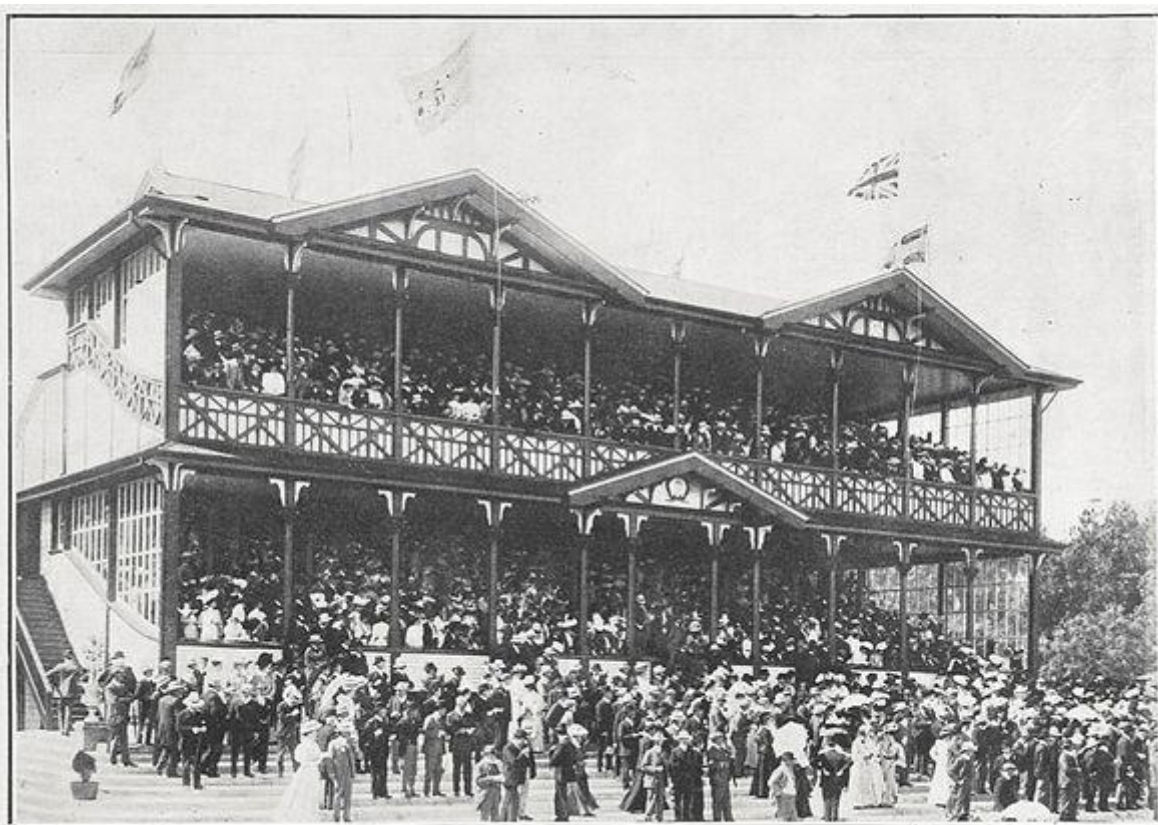
Sources: Material for this article is largely taken from Laraine Sole's detailed histories of the Wanganui Jockey Club.

Our thanks to Laraine, who has, herself, a special affinity with horses. The prolific Waverley-based author has written more than 30 books.





WANGANUI JOCKEY CLUB'S SPRING MEETING: A PICTURESQUE SCENE IN THE GROUNDS, SEPTEMBER 30, 1904. C. F. Newham, Photo.



WANGANUI JOCKEY CLUB'S AUTUMN MEETING: THE NEW GRANDSTAND ON CUP DAY, MARCH 1, 1906. C. F. Newham, Photo.



