

# AUSTRALIA WITH THE WOLTERS

By Patti Hudson

**THEY** drive on the opposite side of the road, their seasons are reversed, they point their solar panels north, put beetroots on their burgers and have some of the strangest wildlife and most stunning scenery on the planet. But when it comes to horse people, Australia isn't all that different from the many other places I've traveled with Joe and Jimmie Wolter. Everyone is on the same journey, searching for greater understanding, looking for ways to improve whatever it is they do with horses.

That much was obvious, starting with a two-day horsemanship clinic at the El Castillo Equestrian Centre north of Melbourne, where enthusiastic riders of all levels and disciplines welcomed us. From there we traveled to Victoria's High Country for two more clinics at sponsor Anne Timewell's training facility outside of Tawonga. Once again we were impressed by everyone's desire to learn and how that desire translated into so many breakthroughs over the course of the clinic.

After the first Tawonga clinic we were able to take a couple of days off to see the surrounding countryside. Our hosts, Heath and Rachel Fallon, valiantly loaned us a car, mapped out the best routes and trusted us to remember the mantra "white on right" as we set off on a series of left-sided road trips. Steering wheel on the right, blinkers and wipers the opposite of what we were accustomed to, we constantly reminded each other to keep that white line on the right and if you had to swerve to avoid anything, swerve left not right. Except for a few scary moments negotiating a roundabout in Wangaratta that were absolutely not the fault of the driver (myself), but that of the navigator (Joe Wolter), we did all right. Traveling the Great Alpine Road through northeastern Victoria I was struck by how similar it was to my home in northeast Oregon, except the mountains were covered in gum trees instead of pines. In particular it reminded me of the Wallowa country where the Dorrance brothers had ranched. I thought how amazing it was that what started on Crow Creek in an isolated corner of Oregon had come so far.

We managed to clock several hundred kilometers before returning for the final clinic back at Anne Timewell's facility. This one was five days and designed for professionals who in one way or another earned their living from horses. It was a shorter version of the advanced clinic Joe offers every winter at his Texas place.

The Texas clinics are usually three weeks long with riders bringing two or three colts to start and a couple more advanced horses for roping and stockmanship, or for any other specialized work. Participants often bring client horses they have in training, but they also bring their own horses used in ranch work, competition or as sale prospects. With a shorter timeframe in Australia, most riders brought only one colt and two older horses.

"In all my clinics I'm just trying to help people advance their understanding, but in these I've been doing for professional riders, I guess I'm also trying to help them advance their careers," Joe says. At the Tawonga clinic there are professional trainers and riding instructors, along with saddle-makers, breeders and even an equine body practitioner.

As the colts are brought into the round pen Joe reminds everyone how important groundwork is in preparing the horse to be ridden. "But we're not trying to desensitize them or wear them down. We're trying to expose them without



Anne Timewell and Joe Wolter

any expectations, so we can observe how they handle adverse conditions.”

Most handle it well and once all the horses are saddled and turned loose, Joe begins moving them around from horseback. “It’s not just about driving them around,” he explains. “It’s about getting their feet freed up. The most important thing they need to learn is to move out – to liven up without tightening up.”

Later when the riders get on their horses for the first time, Joe points out that everything they’ve done from the ground applies to what they will do in the saddle. “You guys are working for the horse right now. This is why it’s so important to not direct and drive at the same time. It’s too much. Get him to go, then take him where he wants to go.”

A rider asks how you know where the horse wants to go and Joe asks the rider how the horse is shaped. “To go to the right,” the rider says. Joe nods, “Then that’s where he wants to go.”

As the horses begin moving around, one gets troubled. “He was shaped to go one direction, but the rider asked him to go in the opposite direction,” Joe explains. “The horse got crooked, and crooked leads to trouble.”

“Getting that straightness and not driving and directing at the same time, that was really important for me,” says Pete Quinn, of Quinn Family Training in Myrtleford, Victoria. “I can get what I want and the horse can think he’s getting what he wants.”

Later in the day the horsemanship class also starts with groundwork and a question about warming them up versus wearing them out. Joe laughs. “It does seem a lot of times people are just trying to tire a horse out before they get on.” He explains that for him it’s more of an evaluation process – a way of accessing where the horse is at and how the horse feels about his surroundings before getting on his back. “Tom Dorrance wouldn’t do much groundwork. He liked the fresh, but a lot of people aren’t ready for fresh.”



Anne Timewell, Heath Fallon and Joe Wolter

“I really like how Joe works with each of us from where we’re at and what we can do,” says Equine Body Practitioner Leonia Stephens. “It’s not a program. It’s opening your mind to a different way of thinking and solving problems.”

When the horsemanship class shifts to cow working Joes applies many of the same lessons from earlier in the day. “We saw how horses learn from the release of pressure,” he says. “Cows are the same way. You take the pressure off when the cow thinks about going where you want him to go.”

Saddlemakers and trainers, Lucy and Richard Barrack, quickly notice they need to let go more. “We haven’t been giving our horses enough responsibility,” says Richard. “We’ve been forcing rather than letting things happen.”

“I never thought I pulled on my horses,” says Lucy. “But I know now I have to let go more and trust the horse can do it.”

By the fifth day the colts are being ridden out in the bush, crossing creeks, negotiating logs and steep terrain. The older horses have advanced considerably, but the important changes are in the people.

“It’s been great to see Joe use so many different tools and different ways of approaching problems,” says Leonia who came with a bucking horse and left with a project she felt ready to handle. “Joe thinks outside the box and that’s what I have to do to help my horse.”

“We had five days to think, to stack it up and then sort it out,” says Pete. “The only way to advance is to have that kind of time with someone like Joe.”

Lucy and Richard agree. “We had enough time we were able to go away and work on something and come back and ask questions and go work on it again. Now we’re ready to apply it to outside horses. We work for our clients, but we want to ride for the horses – for what we can offer them.”

By the end of our time in Tawonga it was hard to tell the colts from the rest of the horses, and the rest of the horses were looking pretty good.

“Looking good and having it really be good are two different things,” Joe says as he climbs in the car for our last left-sided drive to Heath and Rachel’s gracious home. “The horse that’s really right has a different sort of expression.”

A lot of things in Australia might have seemed different to us, but that expression Joe spoke of is the same wherever you go.



Anne Timewell and Joe Wolter