

Ross Birkitt's Experiences after winning the Award in 2014

As a child I was always told the old folk tale that everyone in Australia walked on the roof and, in general, did everything upside-down. Although this is of course a complete fallacy, having worked in the country, my thinking has certainly been turned on its head.

With thanks to the Alex Scott Memorial Scholarship, I was lucky enough to be awarded a grant to enable me to travel to any yard of my choice across the world. Keen to get as far away from the British winter as possible, I chose to head to Australia and the stables of legendary trainer Gai Waterhouse.



Based at Randwick racecourse, five minutes outside of Sydney, Gai has an expansive operation with at least 170 horses in training at any one time, stabled in five different yards around the track. I was assigned to the 'Main Yard' which houses 70 of Gai's finest steeds.

There are no airs and graces with anyone – Gai has a huge team of staff of multiple nationalities and there is very much a 'chip in' attitude towards the work – everyone does their bit and anyone slacking is soon found out. Not that I blame some people for taking a breather as the 3am daily starts certainly test you out!

One of the most important things I have learnt is the art of delegation – Gai employs a hell of a lot of people and each has their own individual role from the secretaries who operate the marketing in the office to the clockers timing the gallops in the dark mornings.

Among Gai's team of yard staff, there is a 50-50 split between those who stay in the yard mucking out and those who head to the track and exercise the horses. All the horses are taken to the tie-ups where they get saddled prior to exercise. It is remarkable how patient the horses are in this situation as they are placed in stalls and tied by rope either side of their headcollar. Here they can wait up to a couple of hours before getting ridden but they seem happy enough to pass the time, waiting for their turn.

Once saddled, the horses head to the 'Bird's Nest' in the centre of the track where Gai is waiting ready to issues instructions. Mrs Waterhouse is a remarkable woman – she holds an air of royalty but is extremely knowledgeable about her staff and horses and knows everyone's name pretty much straight after meeting them. She is a national icon and transcends the sport – as demonstrated by her taking part in a photo shoot for *Marie Claire* magazine whilst I was there. It is not surprising though as she has an aura around her which just drags you in and it is no wonder that people are queuing up to own horses with her.



Once orders are given, the horses go about their exercise on either one of the course's grass, sand or dirt tracks. Routine canter is left to the riders' own devices whilst the faster work is clocked by those in the 'Bird's Nest' and reported back to Gai.



There is a noticeable difference between the physiques of Australian horses compared to their European counterparts. Put simply, they are twice as big! The average weight of an Irish-bred flat horse would rarely be above 500kg whereas there where very few horses in Gai's yard below that figure – I even came across a huge two-year old colt who tipped the scales at 660kg! Many put this down to the quality of grazing that Australian-bred horses are exposed to as youngsters and the glorious climate probably doesn't do them much harm either.

Furthermore, they carry themselves during exercise in a very different way. From an early stage the horses are taught to tuck their heads right in and use the muscles in their back ends to propel them forward, a method which you can feel working when riding them as you feel a lot of power coming from behind. In the UK, if a horse put its head between its legs during a canter you would be worried it was just about to dump you on the floor!

Whilst a lot was done differently at Gai's compared to home, it was reassuring to see some of the more basic, and equally important things, done in the same way. For instance, the horses were fed a very similar diet to what we feed in Newmarket – plenty of clean oats, chaff, bran and some nutritional supplements. As well as this, most of the horses were bedded on good quality straw, as we do at home, whilst it was a bit of an eye opener to see some deep sand stables that the horses seemed to enjoy spending the night in to have a good roll.

Outside of the daily routine, the horses, of course, head to the races. This is done in a very similar way to at home so it probably doesn't warrant spending too much time talking about it. The horses get to the track three hours before they run, race with varying success, and then set off for home an hour later.

However, one major difference between Australian and UK racing is the importance of trials. These are like mini races performed in the mornings on the racecourse proper. Usually the horses will trial at their local track but Gai did send a few to Rosehill on the other side of Sydney to trial if it suited their training schedules. These trials are televised with jockeys wearing the horse's colours and are taken very seriously by pundits as they look to find unexposed good things. Not only do the



trials serve as an education for unraced youngsters, they also help the older horses get back into shape after a lay-off.

On a raceday, it was embarrassing, as an Englishman, to contrast the prizemoney in Australia compared to back home. I never saw a race worth less than £10,000 to the winner and this is mainly thanks to the TAB betting system. Rather like our Tote was, the TAB is a pool betting service owned by the government and most of the profits are ploughed back into the sport to help fund it. There are a handful of bookmakers at the track but the high streets are filled with only TAB betting shops and many bars have a little TAB machine in the corner, should you get the urge for a flutter. It is sickening to think that British racing let an opportunity to own their own Tote slip through their fingers when it was sold to Betfred a few years ago. Just imagine how much better our prizemoney would be if we had a huge chunk of betting money being put back into the sport.

I have been talking in rather general terms so far so, to finish, I'll be a bit more specific and tell you about my time at Gai's. I was lucky enough to lead-up (or as they call it 'strap') a few horses at the races and, on my third time, led-up a winner at Kemblar Grange. The horse in question, Excess Knowledge, might be familiar to you as he was formerly trained by John Gosden and in fact ran in the St Leger. With this in mind, imagine my surprise when he was in a 1300m race...and won it! Australians have a much more open-minded view on what distances horses can run over and the fact that this horse is considered a Melbourne Cup type just goes to emphasise how flexible a horse's campaign can be.

The whole experience of working in one of the world's most successful stables has been an invaluable experience to me and it is one I feel confident will help shape me into a better trainer when the day finally comes. In truth, there is no 'right way' to train horses – you have to adapt your regime to suit the facilities you have but a few things are strikingly important: you must have happy horses, keen and enthusiastic staff as well as owners who love to have horses with you. Add all these ingredients together and you pretty much have a sure-fire success story, one which Gai Waterhouse has mastered herself.

I spent a lot of time with Excess Knowledge and was lucky enough to ride him quite a bit in the mornings too. It would be brilliant if he could make it to Flemington for the Cup in November and Mrs Waterhouse has been kind enough to invite me over to work for her at that time should commitments here allow it. It would be a dream come true to be involved at such an iconic meeting so, you never know, my Australian adventure might not be over yet.