



FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME



WITH BERNIE PRAMBERG

THE trots are back at the Ekka.

After an absence of more than 10 years one of the most thrilling spectacles at the Royal Queensland Show will return next month.

A field of pacers at full tilt around the tight quarter-mile track is one of the most exciting sights at the Show.

Harness racing used to be a staple on the show circuit around Queensland until it disappeared in 2002 under the weight of over-regulation.

The fun police do not like thrills and an occasional spill.

Kerry Ebert, who had his first drive at Gympie show more than 45 years ago, will have a team of horses competing at the Ekka next month.

"I'm really looking forward to it. A lot of people, especially the youngsters, will have an opportunity to witness harness racing for the first time. Racing at the Showgrounds is always colourful and exciting.

"The fact it is back is great for our industry."

For decades Ebert, now 65, took a truckload of pacers around Queensland competing on the show circuit, which culminated each year at the

Ekka.

"It was wonderful to be involved and the experience of a lifetime.

"We'd start on the Darling Downs in March, usually at the Allora show, then to Toowoomba, Dalby, across to Kingaroy and then to Gympie where everyone seemed to gather.

"We got to know all the sideshow people, the show-jumping people, cattlemen and others.

"Then we'd head north to Cairns before coming back down the coast for the lead-up to the Ekka."

There are characters on every showground and the trotting fraternity had more than its share.

Trainer-drivers during the glory years of the show circuit included the likes of "Chicka" Charlwood, "Unc" Stallman, Merv Reinke, Cliff Mewes, Ralphie Phillips, Ray Cross, Des Weeks and "Kanga"

Smith, who once transported his stable star Harleray across the Nullarbor on the back of a tray-truck to race in Perth.

Another was Irishman Pat Sharry, who raced in emerald green colours and usually took a strong drink before a race.

"As a young fellow I thought I could drive a bit, but those blokes taught me plenty," Ebert said.

"On the tight show tracks I spent most of my early time near the outside fence sharing the kids' fairy floss.

"They were hard men and you lived on your wits.

"But if anything went wrong, like a flat tyre on your truck between shows, everyone would stop and help."

This year the harness racers

will be in action every day, with heats around lunchtime and a final every night.

"It was an incredible experience to drive at the Ekka any time, but more so at night just before the fireworks," Ebert said.

"There would be 30,000 people around the arena and the noise was fantastic.

"Kids would be hanging over the fence, trying to touch the horses. It was an experience you never forget..."

Although many pacers are not suited by the tight Ekka track, some of Queensland's greatest horses have competed there.

"Lucky Creed and Stormy Water raced at the Ekka and they were the best of their

eras," Ebert said. "Prior to the opening of Albion Park it was very prestigious to win the biggest race each year at the RNA show.

"Although it is a tight track the reward is there if you have the right horse. It's marvellous what you could earn over the 10-day period of the show if you had the right horse."

I've always remembered a tough trotter, probably from the 1960s, winning a stack of races at the Ekka. His name was Donny's Dream and spectators loved him because he could either lead or come from behind under the reinsmanship of Cliff Mewes in his blue and red jacket.

They were the days before precision driving teams, mo-

torcycle stunts and high-wire acts ... but were just as exciting.

Well-known race broadcaster David Fowler, who will call the 2014 Ekka trots on a number of days, welcomes the



return.

"I can remember when you used to go to the Ekka for the trots," he said.

"It is a simple and effective way to promote the sport to a ready-made audience."

There will also be a historic TAB grass track harness meeting at Deagon on Sunday, August 3, featuring seven races.

Admission is \$5 for adults with children admitted free.

"We recognise the importance of introducing trotting to a new generation of supporters," Ebert said.

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KERRY EBERT



HAPPINESS UNHARNESSED: Former driver Kerry Ebert, 65, is happy that harness racing is returning to the Ekka and the Showgrounds. Picture: Jono Searle