



By Max Agnew¹

Three breeders enter history books

Told for the first time, this is the story of three breeders who each came to produce champion pacers. Their unplanned connection came at Bendigo on November 17, 1954 when this Central Victorian city staged its first registered harness meeting for 30 years on a new track.

The first of the trio had triggered off a major bunfight in the industry. The second constructed this new trotting track; while the third won the first race on the new track. He never bet, but his mare that night landed a betting plunge organised by two of the smartest names then in Australian harness racing.

Following the outstanding success of night trotting after opening at the Melbourne Showgrounds in 1947, new clubs soon came into being, each wanting lighting installed around their local showgrounds; happy to pay rent to the show society for whatever the cost.

After new clubs at Mildura, Ararat and Warragul were granted approval to race at their local showgrounds; one man representing country clubs on the Victorian Trotting Control Board went public, claiming this was not the way it should be done; predicting small tracks would retard the growth of trotting.

Ack Lord was prepared to travel to various public meetings around the country in declaring war on ideas that would enable show societies to make good money by renting out their small tracks to trotting, especially those whose rental was a percentage of the gate takings. He also made the point how finance invested by trotting in amenities would surely become assets owned by each show society.

Lord was a most interesting speaker and breeder. He had become President of the Metropolitan & Country

Trotting Association before appointed to the Victorian TCB to represent country clubs.

Born in Hobart in 1901 when the 10th of 13 children, he began studying accountancy as a teenager, taking up training his first standardbreds in 1918. He drove and rode his horses at meetings.

Lord moved to Victoria soon after the Great Depression.

At a time when money was not readily available, he was greatly taken by how cheap land was just to the north of Melbourne, going to much trouble investing in several hundred acres on the way to Bulla.

Essendon Airport, then closer to the city, serviced the needs of Melbourne. It was obvious how no one then had an inkling how Lord's farmland would later become Tullamarine Airport. But even when Ack did sell his property, he came out of the deal quite wealthy, allowing him the finance to purchase the property 'Glenarla' up the road at Bulla, 29 kilometres north-west of Melbourne.

This was the very property developed years earlier by Alister Clark, a noted name in thoroughbred racing, then one of the best known rose growers in Australia.

A. G. Hunter, one time owner of the great Globe Derby, was still the chairman of the Victorian TCB in the early 1950's when Lord first began speaking on the topic he made so controversial.

Pictured: First day of work on the new Lords Raceway track by A.L. & B.G. Pearce



With trotting having its Melbourne home at the showgrounds, Ack Lord's ideas of country clubs having sounder futures if they raced on larger tracks on their own land, did not go down too well with several of his fellow Board members, and the issue became a hot topic for many.

The new club formed at Bendigo in 1951 was still considering the best way it should go some 18 months on when it invited Lord to speak at a public meeting to hear what he had to say about his ideas.

At first there were a few grumbles out in the audience that night when a tall breeder from Mooroopna got to his feet to support Lord. This was Chris Howe, a man many would come to know well and realise how Chris actually enjoyed becoming involved in a good fight.

Howe would later breed an Inter Dominion winner on the way to becoming an icon in harness racing. To ensure the club at Shepparton would consider moving away from the local showgrounds, this committeeman took it upon himself to personally purchase considerable land at Kialla for a new and large track to be built just south of Shepparton. Luckily club president Don Ducat and the committee later agreed and did reimburse him with the cost. Howe would be club president when it later moved to the site of their new track.

The new club at Bendigo did not let the M&CTA leader down. It obtained land on Mclvor Highway, building the State's very first half-mile track. When it came to giving it a name – it was agreed it should be – Lord's Raceway. It still proudly carries that name today.

The Melbourne newspaper to cover the opening of a new track at Bendigo before and after the opening in 1954 was the Melbourne *Argus*, the first in Victoria to introduce colour prior to being sold in 1956 to the *Herald & Weekly Times*. Writing trotting reports in this daily was a teenage cadet from Adelaide named Bruce Skeggs.

Then, and in his long years in the trotting media, Skeggs never wrote about bunfights in the sport, which is one of the reasons why it is difficult to find much coverage of Ack Lord's crusade against show societies taking the cream off any financial success by trotting clubs.

A year prior to the club at Bendigo opening, TCB Chairman Alex Hunter had died in office. State Government replaced him with another leader from the Royal Agricultural Society – Judge Mitchell.

This man was no A. G. Hunter. When it came to making decisions between the TCB and the showgrounds, the Judge usually gave his support to the show society and not the sport he then led.

Mitchell became a very controversial chairman during the 1950's, especially when harness racing provided a great deal of money to build a large grandstand which the RAS was quick to name the 'Mitchell Stand'. On completion it became their property.

Ack Lord bred some very smart pacers, winning numerous races in three States as an owner, though the best he ever bred he sold to 'Skipper' Taylor, a later president of the club at Kilmore. This was the 1954 colt Dusty Miller (Floridoro-Bundaranj), five times a winner of Inter Dominion heats.

When Lord ended his time on the TCB he was replaced by a young enthusiast of the sport in Graeme Cochran, another breeder and who years on would become the sport's chairman, both at State and national level.

Breeder of Popular Alm

Born in Gippsland in 1913, Arthur Pearce developed the construction company A. L. & B. G. Pearce. In its early years much of their work was in building dams using large work-horses. The company later became keenly involved with road construction.

Arthur would long be proud of constructing the highway linking Maryborough with Bendigo, believing the success of this project had played no small part in his firm winning the contract to construct the new track at Lord's Raceway.

Even before its construction was completed, Pearce became a successful owner of pacers with his first trainer being the wily J. P. Moore at Maryborough. Among their winners was Atomic Chief, which created a new Australian record for two-year-olds.

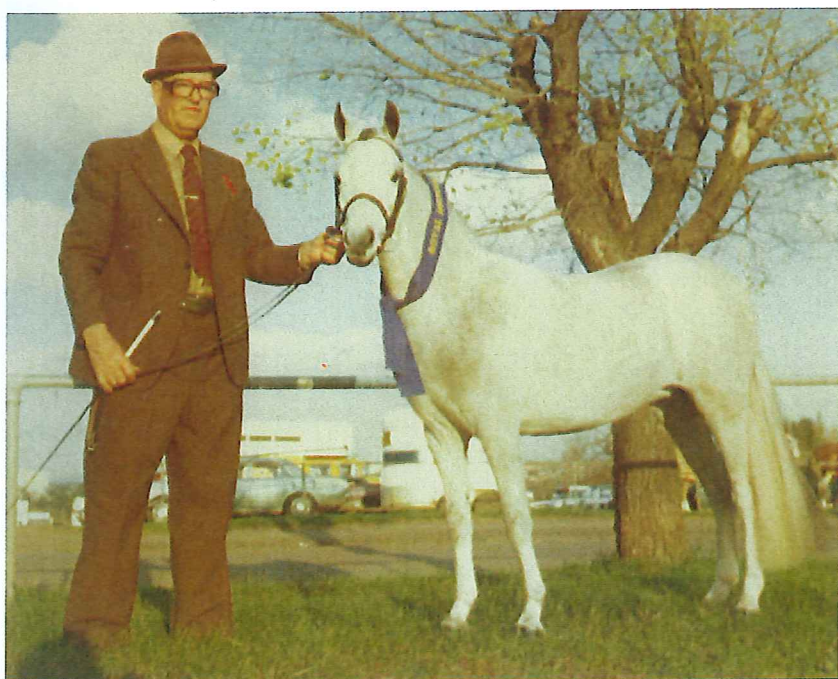
With an architect having the task of designing the State's first half-mile circuit, Pearce followed the drawings that included some cambering around both turns, though nothing like what tracks have these days in making racing even safer and faster.

On opening night, November 17, 1954, a crowd of 14,000 paid to enter the course before the club made the decision to close the gates because the place seemed to be bursting at the seams. An unknown number of people were turned away at the gates that night.

Pearce was enjoying the sport so much that he soon provided several pacers to trainer-driver Ken Pocock, whose stables were across the road from Lord's Raceway. The extremely talented Field Spring won a heap of races for the Pocock-Pearce combination.

When his doctor told Arthur he had a serious heart condition, the advice was to give up working. So concerned was his wife Gwen over the matter that she urged him to sell up and take early retirement.

By now Arthur and Gwen, and their only child Jeanette, were living in a handsome home built on two large blocks just up the road from the trotting track. Jeanette had taken an interest in horses from her earliest days and grew up riding and performing successfully in the show ring, as her mother (Gwen Smith) had touched on years before.



Pictured: Arthur Pearce with one of his daughter's ponies Illangi Duchess at the Melbourne Show



Pictured: Gwen Pearce winning with pacer First Voyage in 1932 at the Bendigo Show

How Arthur got the support of his wife to agree to constructing stables at the back of their home remains a mystery. But this was the first real step to Pearce taking out a licence to train pacers for himself, and with Jeanette and her husband John Mamouny opening a stud farm near Marong, there was never any shortage of horses to try.

In 1975 Arthur used their own stallion Sovereign Adios over Gwen's race-winning mare Direct Design (Truant Hanover), a love match that produced a stunning looking colt that won both its starts as a two-year-old when driven by Arthur's son-in-law John – not bad for one who had grown up in the family furniture business.

At the time Popular Alm was brought into work for his three-year-old campaign, this writer was given a box at the Pearce stables for a horse, just two stalls away from this silky-coated colt that Arthur constantly claimed would one day be a champion.

Still concerned over her husband's suspect heart, it was Gwen Pearce who made the decision for Popular Alm to be sold. "That horse has to go," she repeated to her husband several times after it got away from him one morning when picking some grass, leaving Arthur on the ground and Gwen believing he was having a heart attack.

Brian Gath took an option of \$40,000 on the young pacer, but having not long returned from a 10-week stay in the US, he was unable to find the money.

When Vin Knight fast-worked the colt at Lord's Raceway, he was delighted to shake hands on the deal after a phone call to Jack and Pat Taggart at their motel over in Warracknabeal confirmed the money was right. This left only a modest amount to reach the \$40,000, with this partly coming from John Green and his father who then had the Commercial Hotel at Hamilton, with the Knights taking a small share.

The record of this great champion is well known. What is not known is how the main owners in the horse – Jack and Pat Taggart – were not always given much credit by the stable for their role in the ownership. For example:

When Popular Alm was invited to a special night at Brisbane's Albion Park, a concerned Mrs Taggart

phoned this writer during the week seeking advice. She explained how she and her husband, the major owners of the champ, had asked the Queensland club could they have a couple of tickets to the track that night.

She was told how not only were tickets for them already posted to Bob Knight to pass on, but also included in the mail were tickets for them to fly to Brisbane to be the club's guests. She added when asking Bob about this, he had told her there was nothing for the Taggart's, as he was giving whatever he had been sent by the club for him and a couple of friends to use.

As Popular Alm went on its winning way creating numerous records, accountant Peter Jess, who had put together several successful syndicates for this stable, explained to Bob and Vin how it was possible to increase the value of the young stallion, perhaps making it worth upwards of half-a-million dollars.

By taking the share of the pacer owned by the Knights, the cost could be greatly inflated when bringing in further owners – Don Carrazza, owner of the Mildura Grand Hotel; Ken Grivec, Morris Kasses and Greg Pardo, with the Taggart's remaining owners of the largest share, though one would not know this when reading any race book.

Goodness knows how Bob Knight worked out the splitting up of the stakemoney!

Even a broken leg could not stop Popular Alm going on to win a total of 49 races.

Meanwhile, Arthur Pearce, the man who constructed Lord's Raceway, showed how he was really one tough old breeder after all, outliving most of his relatives and friends in his age group, despite having a leg amputated when moving into his 80's.

The first winner lands a plunge

There were 212 bookmakers at the Melbourne Showgrounds for its first night meeting in 1947. Soon after the number started reducing when some found it hard going working on the Melbourne gallops in the afternoon and the trots at night.

There were five betting rings then, with those working the 'rails' at the showgrounds all well known bookies.

What Bill Waterhouse was to Sydney bookmakers, Jack Corry had become the big name to trotting in Melbourne, having a large staff and a few trainers and drivers who also got well looked after by him in return for the right information.

It was claimed in the published work City Of Yarra History that when a young SP operator using a barber shop as a front, Corry once provided 'Squizzy' Taylor with an alibi over a shooting charge.

Years later after a cloak of respectability had overtaken the now legal bookmaker, Corry and big-race trainer-driver 'Darkie' Wilson became involved with numerous pacers, with these not always racing in Corry's name.

It was in 1954 when the bookie told his horseman to go ahead and buy a promising young mare in northern Victoria for him that Wilson had heard about.

“ It was in 1954 when the bookie told his horseman to go ahead and buy a promising young mare in northern Victoria for him that Wilson had heard about ”

“ ‘Darkie’ Wilson had won races on some of the biggest names in Australian harness racing. ”

But not even Corry's money could sway owner-breeder Jack O'Bree at Piangil to sell.

"He's more interested in keeping the mare to breed from later than selling her," Wilson told his friend.

Corry then had 'Darkie' go back to O'Bree and offer him an attractive lease arrangement. This would allow Corry to race the mare, returning her then to O'Bree for breeding. The wheat-farmer and breeder from Piangil agreed to this.

New Boreen did have an impressive pedigree. Not only was she a daughter of New Derby (by the great Globe Derby), but her dam (Boreen's Last) was a daughter of the outstanding Lulu Boy. Jack O'Bree certainly knew his bloodlines.

New Boreen was set for Bendigo on its opening night of the new track, though the race of 75 pounds (\$150) being the first was purely a coincidence.

A couple of nights before the race, Corry phoned O'Bree and told him his mare was a 'good thing' at Bendigo, advising the wheat farmer how he would put some money on for him.

Again O'Bree took the wealthy bookmaker by surprise when explaining not to worry about it. "I never bet," the breeder stated emphatically.

This time Jack Corry would not be put off. "No," he said, just as emphatically. "I intend putting five hundred pounds on the mare for you."

When O'Bree put the phone down, returning to his family in the lounge room, he was muttering how for 500 pounds (\$1,000) you could buy a house in the country for that!

'Darkie' Wilson had won races on some of the biggest names in Australian harness racing. That night he made certain that New Boreen wrote her name in the history books when landing the money in the opening race at Bendigo.

Later in the breeding barn New Boreen produced several handy winners, with New Kiwi then coming up with pacers like Aerogram, Miss Lulureen and Yank Talk. Miss Lulureen in turn produced Look On (\$72,210), Celtic Bronze (\$35,436) and Amazing Lulu (\$21,434).

Jack O'Bree had numerous other fine broodmares, with Natya producing the outstanding Natty Kiwi. Another good filly he bred was Sarnia Rose (by Plebe) which Jack sold to America after she had won many races.

When this writer covered Mildura meetings for *Sunraysia Daily* from 1958 for eight years (usually attended by the largest crowds in country Victoria), Natty Kiwi was 'Queen', with no better pacing mare then racing on country tracks.

O'Bree's horses were driven by his sons Bernie and Graeme. It was always a pleasure to interview any of the O'Bree family.

'Gentleman Jack' taught this writer how important it was to become a successful breeder you needed to put plenty of thought in the broodmares you had.