

From Ngāhiwi to THE WORLD

RÓISÍN MAGEE delves into the rich history of Gisborne's legendary stationbred horses, and meets Bruce Holden, the man behind Ngāhiwi station

IMAGES: FRANCIS CARMINE AND SUPPLIED

The East Coast of New Zealand is steeped in history. Captain Cook landed here in 1769. Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Tūruki was born here and fought one of the last of the New Zealand wars around Gisborne, between 1865 and 1869. The region is remote, steep, but with a beautiful climate and with some of the most fertile soil in the country, it is also the breeding ground of some of our most well-known and successful horses, now known as Ngāhiwi stationbreds.

The beginnings of a breeding programme

Bruce Holden's passion for these East Coast bloodlines is legend. He rode as a child, when there were always horses on the family farm, and says: "Anything to do with a horse, I'm interested."

One of Bruce's uncles had done some breeding and there was still some of the old blood for Bruce to build up when he started to get serious about it, in the 1970s.

Bruce's foundation stallion, Pānikau (named after one of Edward Murphy's stations), arrived at his Ngāhiwi Station in 1980. He was by a stallion called Atomic, owned by Edward's grandson Peter Murphy, and out of a stationbred mare – both sire and dam carried the blood of Maestoso and Kingston.

Show jumping was a hugely popular sport in New Zealand at the time, and eventing was beginning to gain a lot of fans too, thanks in part to the exploits of Mark Todd and the rest of New Zealand's first international team, who competed at the World Champs in 1978.

So Bruce started to focus his efforts on breeding jumpers, and ran a broodmare herd of between 50 and 60 – a significant investment for a sheep and cattle farmer.

The Holden approach

Bruce's approach to breeding has always been simple. He looks for a good eye and a good brain. Otherwise, ideal conformation is determined by purpose.

"Conformation has to be spot-on for show jumping. Riders used to prefer short-coupled horses, but now, longer-backed horses are more popular because it allows them to leave their legs out behind and to twist. Longer-backed horses are more flexible," he explains.

Bruce trusts his first instincts. As he says: "They're usually correct. Presence is the most important thing."

From the start he had great faith in the East Coast bloodlines, but more than anything he



LEFT Bruce Holden, who at 78 is still out mustering, hunting and trekking ABOVE RIGHT Mare by Ngāhiwi One Eye with her foal by Ngāhiwi Cardento (by VDL Cardento) RIGHT Mare by VDL Indoctro with her foal (in front) by VDL Zirocco Blue BELOW LEFT A mare by Ngāhiwi Cupid out of Blue (Pānikau) with her colt by VDL Cardento



believes in survival of the fittest. His horses are not pampered – far from it. They are left on the rugged hills, largely untouched, until they are sold as two- or three-year-olds. “They either make it, or they don’t. You don’t take these horses for granted. Once you get them going, they give you everything.”

About 20 years ago, Bruce started to look further afield for bloodlines. Most of the stallions available at that time here had no proven offspring, which made it difficult to know whether any particular cross would work. Artificial insemination was still in its infancy, and when vet Dr Lee Morris returned to New Zealand after working overseas for AI pioneer Professor Twink Allen, Bruce was intrigued by the new possibilities.

“If something comes up that’s different or exciting, I’ll have a crack,” he says.

With Lee’s help, Bruce found some stallions he liked at VDL stud in Holland, owned by Wiepke van de Lageweg. While the success rate with frozen semen at the time was only around 35%, in Bruce’s first season doing AI with Lee, all nine mares came in-foal, an incredible result.

Lee herself says that Bruce has always been a man with a vision for his horses, and how successful they would be.

“His horses are really good – with breeding it takes a long time to see the fruits of your labour. You have to have passion and vision, but you also have to stick it out, and Bruce has done that.

“I believe that in time they will be recognised as an iconic breed of New Zealand.”

While the Ngāhiwi breeding operation is somewhat smaller today, Bruce at age 78 is still out hunting and trekking on horseback. As Lee says: “Bruce is a very good horseman in his own right. A lot of people think the Gisborne horses are wild but as Bruce sees it, they just want to get on and do the job.”

On our visit to Ngāhiwi Station, Bruce mustered a small herd of two- and three-year-olds for us to have a look at, and the next day we drove to the other

side of the farm to see this season’s seven foals. I knew to expect quality, but the thrill of watching foals of this calibre cantering across the steep Gisborne hillside will stay with me.

Bruce is happy with the balance he has found, using frozen European semen over his Ngāhiwi mares, and intends to continue with his current 50/50 mix.

“I get very positive feedback from buyers, so I don’t think I will increase the percentage of European blood. The downside of European horses is that they are very managed. They are kept in a human environment. The hills here in Gisborne are good for ligaments and for brains; my horses are easy to ride out once they have been broken in, because they know where to put their feet and they are not scared of water or bogs.”

While a question mark hovers over international competition in the short term thanks to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ngāhiwi horses continue to leave their mark at home here in New Zealand. The recent introduction of Hunter (whose great-grand sire is Ngāhiwi Sasquatch), bred by Poppy Gamble of Whakatāne, to the St James Station is a historic combination of the bloodlines of two great stations. Hunter’s foals will be mustered for the 2025 St James sale.

A tale of two horses

Though the accomplishments of Ngāhiwi horses are myriad, from the grassroots level up, there are a couple of international achievers who stand out.

The first is Johnny Appleseed, who went all the way to compete at Badminton with Virginia Loisel.

He was bred by Bruce, by Pānikau out of a stationbred mare, and purchased by Virginia’s sister Emma from a man who’d been using him for pig hunting.

Virginia says: “He wasn’t easy as a youngster, very cold-backed initially and it was tricky to get his bridle on. He was also just about impossible to catch single-handed. He was really not my type of horse; at 16.3hh he was big for me and a vet in England said to me once: “He really couldn’t be less of an eventing type,” but once you were on him he was incredible, so gentle, honest and giving.

“In 1998, he had reached Advanced and I took him to the UK. We found it difficult to find the speed at top level (especially after steeplechase and roads and tracks in the old days) but completing Badminton in 2000 was a highlight in my career. We were named to go to the World Champs in 2002, but sadly we were unable to compete due to a leg injury.

“He was definitely a one of a kind; quirky but he gave you everything he had. Most importantly he made me feel safe and I was able to love every event we did in New Zealand, the UK and Europe.



LEFT Sasquatch, who was fourth in the Olympic Cup then sold overseas BELOW Johnny Appleseed on his way around Badminton

The experience and confidence he gave me cross-country over the years allowed me to produce many other horses, too.”

The second is Sasquatch, who was started as a hunter but went on to be sold as an international show jumper.

Gordon McKay rang Bruce in 1996 looking for a new hunter, Bruce suggested a colt by Pānikau out of one of his Clydesdale mares. The colt had covered a handful of mares before being gelded; Gordon liked the look of him and paid \$2500 to take him home to Taranaki, where his daughter named him Sasquatch for his big feet.

Everywhere he went, Sasquatch met admiring glances and comments. Though Gordon had grown up riding on the family farm with no formal instruction, he eventually caved to popular suggestion and took Sasquatch out show jumping, under the guidance of Taranaki Hunt Master, Harvey Wilson.

The pair made a promising start, coming second in the five-year-old class at Horse of the Year in 1998 but Harvey’s advice was clear: this horse is special. Don’t push him too hard.

Gordon says he was valued by that stage at around \$15,000. A hoof injury



meant the next year off, and then at the age of just seven, Sasquatch came fourth in the Olympic Cup at the 2000 HOY. The phone started ringing, and he was sold to an Irish agent, for \$450,000 (the equivalent of around \$700,000 today).

Sasquatch ended up in the stable of Greek shipping heiress and international show jumper Athina Onassis, but Gordon lost touch with him after that.

What was he like to ride? Gordon recalls: “Very powerful. You could feel the power in his movement and the slap of the ground just before he took off. He was so clever with his front feet – he never touched anything and although some horses release their back legs, he tucked them tight. He had the most beautiful nature. The less you did, the better he went. He was one in a million.” ■

A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY



Edward Murphy owned and leased several hill country stations around Gisborne at the turn of the 19th century and was a lifelong horseman; according to his obituary in the *Poverly Bay Herald* of June 1919, he was a “great enthusiast in sporting matters, not only as a breeder and owner, but in athletic circles generally”. His quest for a horse with swift paces and excellent stamina led him to import two stallions. The first (top left), who came from Kentucky in 1902, was a five-gaited 15.2hh American Saddle Horse called Kingston. Ten years later, Edward imported a 15hh Lipizzaner from Austria (bottom left), bred by the Austrian Emperor Francis Joseph I, from the Maestoso line (one of the six original stallion lines of the Lipizzaner breed, still in evidence today).

Edward’s horses enjoyed immediate popularity. As Pamela Redmayne wrote in the February 1962 issue of *NZ Horse & Pony*: “While so many of the Kingston and Maestoso horses were station hacks that never had a chance of gaining fame before the public, one only needs to listen to shepherds who rode them, to realise what champions they really were.”

(Saturday) evening. She will be tendered with only one launch, at 6 o'clock. A pedigree pony stallion, aged three years, bred by the Emperor of Austria, arrived at Wellington on the New Zealand Shipping Company's steamer Rotorua, from London, on Tuesday, consigned to Mr Murphy, of Gisborne. In connection with the laying of the foundation stone of Holy Trinity Church