



# Go Placidly

Steve and Jan Johnson enjoy a busy life but at an easy pace preferred by their beloved Clydesdales.

With the simple command of “walk on”, the 10 big Clydesdales, recognised for their beauty, strength and stamina, move gently forward as one. There is a paddock to plough and Steve Johnson, with his hat pulled down, is just the man to do it.

The sun has barely risen and Lake Cargelligo’s “horse whisperer” is at it again, keeping an age-old tradition of man and beast alive. Already the grey nomads from the lake are watching from the sidelines, cameras poised and memories stretching back to their own childhood when the Clydesdale was king.

There is no shouting or cursing, and certainly no loud engine

noises, just the sound of the jingling chains and birds that seem to follow the plough.

Despite the dust and discomfort, Steve finds it surprisingly peaceful. The strong, obliging horses are doing what they’ve been bred for, deftly following commands that Steve barks out from his old cast-iron seat, like “come over” (to move right) or “come off” (move left).

When Steve yells out “Whooo”, the team, made up of seven mares and three geldings, most of them about 17 hands and weighing up to a ton each, come to a grinding halt. >





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They all respond to their own names and are known by their distinctive personalities. There's Molly, Steve's main leader, and her daughters Gypsy and Jedda in the front row, followed by Belle, Maggy, Blossom and Bow and the geldings Barny, Baldy and Darcy.

“You can't push these big horses around. You have to teach them to understand your commands by repetition and loads of patience,” explains Steve, a quintessential salt-of-the-earth bushman.

“To have a team work together like this can only happen through regular training. They are a team, much like a team of footballers. It's not about individual performance but all about teamwork.”

Clydesdales are big, powerful animals and Steve, at one stage, thought there wasn't one he couldn't train, an opinion quickly revised after the first of several hospital visits. Even wife Jan has been flung 10 feet in the air by one well-aimed kick of the hind leg.

“Temperament is everything with these animals. We don't keep any horses with a bad nature, it's simply not worth it, not while there are so many good ones around,” says Steve, a natural and gifted horseman who appreciates their role in the early days of agriculture.

The breed dates back to early European settlement and by 1850 were very much part of Australian pioneer life. The gentle giants were extensively utilised in the country's early development – ploughing, sowing, hauling loads of timber and wool, and, of course, clearing the land and developing dams and irrigation channels.

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## Starting out

It took a few years and a variety of jobs before Steve found his calling in life. By the age of 14 he'd left school at Lake Cargelligo to help out with his father, a shearing contractor, and two brothers, in local shearing sheds. He later worked in the mines before scoring a job with the wool stores in Botany.

“I had some mates at Bondi and they reckoned there was more fun to be had on the beach,” says Steve, with a wry grin. “A job came up to help fit out bathrooms and I spent a few years doing that but felt like a fish out of water.”

One weekend Steve was roped into a working trip around Australia in an old Zephyr, moving from town to town whenever there was enough fuel money in the tin.

Eventually he made his way back to Sydney where he met Jan, his soul mate, in a downstairs unit from where he was boarding. Jan worked at the Dally Street telephone exchange, where all the country and interstate calls came through. They were married within 11 months and are still inseparable 45 years later.

In 1971 Steve brought his new bride to Lake Cargelligo where they snapped up six acres on the lake for a bargain \$2500.

“It was a rocky scrap heap back then and no one wanted to live there. The block was empty – no trees, nothing,” says Jan, over a cuppa in the cosy homestead with sweeping views over the glistening water.

Over the years the couple raised their two children, Melissa and Kane, (who both live in town and have inherited their parents' love of horses), while building their country retreat, complete with sheds, yards, gardens and a lush green lawn. >







### *The arrival of the Clydesdale*

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, thousands of Clydesdales were exported from Scotland to all corners of the globe, including the new colony.

It was only a matter of time before the Johnsons purchased their first horse. Then another. By the early 1980s Steve was pulling an old scarifier behind a pair of horses, working the front paddock bordering the lake.

From these early experiences, Steve and Jan slowly set about building up their plant and horse numbers. Over time they were able to recreate a farming scene more reminiscent of the early 1900s.

“The bloke who invented the reaper and binder was a bloody genius,” says Steve, who has a great understanding of old farm machinery.

Seeing Steve work his horses is for many a once-in-a-lifetime experience. He’s loath to admit it, but many call him the “horse whisperer” for his special affinity with his 14 Clydesdales, which are not just farm animals but his “special mates”.

He’s been working with Molly in the paddock for more than 20 years now and has formed an enduring friendship based on love and respect.

Having so much harness gear means Steve has had to acquire a new set of skills with, of all things, a sewing machine.

“You can’t go to the corner shop and just buy it. I have to make or mend everything and it’s important to keep the gear well oiled and maintained,” he says.

“I was fortunate that Jan’s father was a boot maker and during the seven years he lived with us, passed on a lot of valuable knowledge regarding leatherwork and machines.”

In recent years the tourism side of the business has picked up. The Johnsons are finding many of the grey nomads are dropping in to witness first-hand what they do with their Clydesdale team.

As part of the package they’re also able to inspect sheds chock-a-block full of locally sourced carriages, furniture vans, a street wagonette, spring carts and sulkies.

The pair have displayed their skills at many shows over the years but a definite highlight of their long association with Clydesdales was being asked to participate in the Bryce Courtenay novel *Jessica*, which became a two-part television mini-series in 2004.

Filmed around Lucknow, near Orange, it involved six weeks of street scenes, driving carriages and “making wheels fall off”.

“We set off here with five old horse-drawn vehicles and 11 sets of harness,” Steve says. “I loved every minute of it. Working with stars like Sam Neill, Lisa Harrow and John Howard was an amazing experience.”

In the near future, Steve and Jan are hoping that “big mobs” of both senior citizens and young school children will soon be able to experience how farm work was performed last century.

Leave plenty of time. These guys don’t like to rush things, particularly when it comes to their beloved Clydesdales. The breed that helped build Australia is now putting Lake Cargelligo on the map for all the right reasons and the Johnsons couldn’t be happier. **CWL**

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**For group enquiries contact Steve and Jan  
Phone: (02) 6898 1384 Mobile: 0429 981 384**

