

Shear strength

UNITED BY A COMMON CAUSE, AN ALL-FEMALE SHEARING TEAM PROVES ITS POWER ON THE BOARDS AT THE FUNDRAISING EVENT DUCKS ON THE POND.

STORY + PHOTOS EMILY WEEKES

THE COMPETITIVE CREW has been warned not to race. There's a chance they'll run out of sheep. The day's not yet begun and already things are looking a little different on "Clunie", one of Victoria's oldest working woolsheds.

Eighteen months ago, shearers Bec Flynn and Sam Westcott decided to get an all-female shearing team together. "We were talking about how it would be good to work in a shed with all girls, because you might get two or three, but you never get the whole shed," Bec says. "Then we thought, 'Why not do it for charity?'" At the time, they could not have imagined how far their event, Ducks on the Pond, would go.

Once the catch-cry of men, "Ducks on the pond!" was a coded warning shouted whenever a woman approached the woolshed, a directive for blokes to smarten up their appearance and language. Plenty still remember hearing the phrase thrown about. Yet today, in Victoria's Western District, it offers a chance to poke fun at an outdated idea and celebrate the passion and pride that's brought everyone together to raise funds for the Australian Cancer Research Foundation.

Bec laughs when asked why she loves to shear. "It's very addictive!" she says. She has shorn for eight months after being a wool handler for several years. "It's a competitive industry but at the same time, we're all still friends." In the 2011 Census, 3.1 percent of shearers were female. Today, there are an estimated 100 or so women working as shearers in Australia and many more in training schools.

Another shearer, Jessica Laurence, needed a job and saw an ad in the newspaper. "I'd never done it in my life and didn't know what it was about," Jessica says, "But I went and had a trial day and did fairly well." As she sees it, "You've got to be willing to have a go". After a few years of shearing, 130 is her highest number of sheep shorn in a day, shearing crossbred lambs. "It would have been higher but we ran out of sheep at 4.30pm," Jessica says. "I was shattered because I was on such a good roll."

More than 30 women gather at the Clunie woolshed in Harrow, a small town overlooking the Glenelg River in Victoria's Wimmera region, to prepare for the day ahead. One asks, "So what do we say when a man enters the shed?" which gets a laugh. A few have travelled from as far away as Scotland, Germany and New Zealand to be part of this all-female team. Tomorrow they'll shear 1200 Merino sheep from 7am until 5pm and donate all of their wages to charity. Fourteen shearers will work alongside 20 or so rouseabouts, classers and shed-hands while the public watches on.

The moment the idea was proposed, JD McGennissen agreed to host the fundraiser on Clunie in its heritage-listed woolshed,

built in 1885. His younger brother, Jack, passed away from cancer at the age of 46 and is fondly remembered as the "custodian" of the property. Today, fourth-generation owner JD welcomes newcomers, noticeably thrilled that the event has come together. He credits the work of a tireless committee. "It's been humbling, the number of people who have been involved and are helping out today," he says.

JD presents each of the women with a bundle of practical goodies tied with a pink ribbon, including pink singlets designed especially for the 'Ducks' team.

One Kiwi shearer sports a fluorescent pink mohawk, while others wear the ribbons. Another dyes her pup's fur into a streak of pink for the occasion. The bluestone shed's sepia hue is soon outshone by a flurry of colour.

One of the main reasons the women are thrilled to be in Harrow is the presence of Joanne Kumeroa, a 43-year-old, six-time world champion wool handler known for her strength and leadership in the industry. Kiwi-born and now living in Hamilton, Vic, Joanne competed in Golden Shears – the world championships held each year in New Zealand – a week before flying back to attend Ducks.

Seven months earlier, Joanne was diagnosed with advanced cervical cancer. She'd offered to speak at Golden Shears with the hope of raising awareness but, when she arrived, found that the event was wholeheartedly behind her. "I didn't expect Golden Shears to go pink!" she says. "I just thought I'd tell my story."

Joanne skipped chemotherapy to come to Clunie and is determined to shear for the full day. "I'm very strong mentally and if I say I'm going to do something, then I will," she says. "Most of the time, it's not about me. It's about the people and our industry." When 20 of Joanne's friends and family had themselves tested, two came back positive. She realised she had an important message, particularly for a demographic which prides itself on pushing through. "They'll get the flu, hurt themselves or cut a finger, but no one will go and do anything about it," Joanne says. "So what makes you think they'd go and get tested for cancer?"

Harrow is hardly on the way to anywhere yet more than 1200 visitors flock in from all over Victoria and nearby states. Strangers stand shoulder to shoulder watching the women carve gentle grooves and gullies in the bright white fleece. Rousies gather up the wool from the boards, tossing it skyward onto the table. Children perch on railings for a better view, gazing hypnotically, quiet and still. Dogs wait patiently beneath utes for their mistresses to return.

If the work is gruelling or tiring, it's impossible to tell. Beneath the sweat, muck and grime are smiling faces. "They're on fire in the shed," JD says. "They're having the time of



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The all-female shearing team celebrates at the end of the Ducks on the Pond charity event; Merino sheep wait in the Clunie pens to be shorn; bundles of shearing-related merchandise were given to the women; Andrea Froom shears off a fleece in the Clunie woolshed.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Television personality Catriona Rowntree comperes the charity auction with Fox & Lillie's Eamon Timms; skirting the fleece; youngsters rest by a pink bale of Ducks on the Pond wool.

their lives!" No one is racing to shear a run, yet the work is unrelenting. One shearer confides that if she ever feels tired, she'll just look down the boards towards Joanne and find the energy to push on. The "smoko" provides a chance to rest and refuel with a spread of locally made fare.

In the afternoon, a singlet signed by the team is auctioned in the shed. The highest bid of \$950 comes from Joy Spence, the first woman to work at Clunie 40 years ago. With a quiet

grace, Joy presents the framed singlet to JD and suggests that he hang it in the shed to mark the day. The crowd murmurs and applauds with teary eyes and a shared sense of having witnessed something quite remarkable. As further proof, Jessica and wool classer Hilary Menzies pass around a pink cap to raise money for Joy, figuring she'd already spent enough travelling from Scotland. In 20 minutes, they raise \$200.

JD was just a boy, but he still remembers his father in a panic at the thought of Joy working in the shed. Spurred on after reading an article in a local newspaper about the first female wool classer, Joy went on to become the second top student in her year. "I was the only girl and I had to prove I wanted to be there," she says. Today Joy walks the boards as a rousie.

Some of the younger shearers are sure they will shear forever, while others are thinking more strategically. Andrea Froom has been shearing for eight years but thinks she might pull back when she turns 30. And while she loves the work, having cracked a few 300-sheep day records in New Zealand, she says, "I don't want to do it all my life and wreck my body." Thankfully new shearing techniques and lighter tools are now supporting more women in the sheds, along with schools that employ gun shearers such as Joanne and Andrea as trainers.

The event raised an estimated \$32,000 for the Australian Cancer Research Foundation. Of choosing the charity, Bec simply says, "It was an easy choice to make. Everyone's been touched by cancer in one way or another."

