

# The quiet achiever

BRETT WELSH IS MORE THAN THE ACCOMPLISHED ASSISTANT HORSE MASTER FOR THE AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK SPECTACULAR – HE WANTS TO HELP CURE CANCER.

STORY + PHOTOS JESSICA OWERS

BENEATH Brett Welsh's stockman's hat is an innocent, austere-looking face with two brilliant blue eyes. Remarkably, he is still rather pale. The relentless sunlight of the Gold Coast hasn't given him a leathery, weather-beaten complexion yet, so he looks like porcelain, delicate in expression and rather quiet.

"I had a pretty strict timeline with this one," he says, motioning towards a bay colt tied up against the shed row behind him. "I gained his confidence and I was riding him the day after he got down here. If I'd tried to rough him up or gone about things the wrong way, he would have taken offence to me." The colt is 'Warrenbri Hope', and with a strong white blaze and kind eye, he is the product of Brett's disposition – subtle, unfussy and intelligent.

At 27, Brett is the assistant horse master at the Australian Outback Spectacular presented by R.M. Williams. He has lived in the glittering surrounds of the Gold Coast for nearly four years now and remains one of the founding cast members, auditioning back in 2005 when there was simply an idea and a construction site. His role involves not only the schooling and wellbeing of the show's horses (there are upwards of 58 involved in the entire production and 37 during each night's performance), but he is also a lead performer. "My work is probably the best job you could dream of come to life," he says. "You wake up, you come to work and you get to show off in front of 1000 people every night."

Far from the sparkle of show life, though, Brett grew up in Tabulum, in northern New South Wales, population 150. "I grew up on the land and had a family that was very big into horses," he says. "We were on the road going somewhere with them just about every weekend. That's the thing about horses. We'd do everything as a family with them, and still do." Brett attended school up to Year 12, and, faced with the prospect of earning a living away from the land due to the ongoing drought, he took up an apprenticeship in refrigeration mechanics. "Pretty much from the day I finished that, I walked right back into horses," he says.

Before the Outback Spectacular, Brett campdrafted horses for a living, worked off the land and went where good fortune called. An affinity for training trick horses turned into a

profession when he spent six weeks in Sydney with *The Saddle Club* arena show, and onwards to New Zealand for six months, working on a mini series called *Hercules*. "I'd been training this black horse just for fun," he says. "Things like running through forests and rearing up, and he went on to become the lead horse in a movie in New Zealand. I suppose that's where I got my love for training specialist horses."

Warrenbri Hope tiptoed into Brett's life on a whim and prayer. Brett had just lost an aunt to cancer when he spotted a little girl in his audience with no hair. "To see this little girl there, you'd hope that she would never go through what my auntie went through," he says. "Somebody had to do something about it, and not being able to go to your bank account and withdraw \$100,000 for charity, I had to use the next best thing around me."

Most people get ideas like the trees and their leaves – there's a period of nourishment that gradually dries up and withers away into the wind. Brett, however, was a solid exception. He envisaged the sale of a stockhorse that would beat the outstanding record of \$70,000 (set at Dalby in 2006), with all proceeds going to the Cancer Research Foundation to help find a cure for cancer.

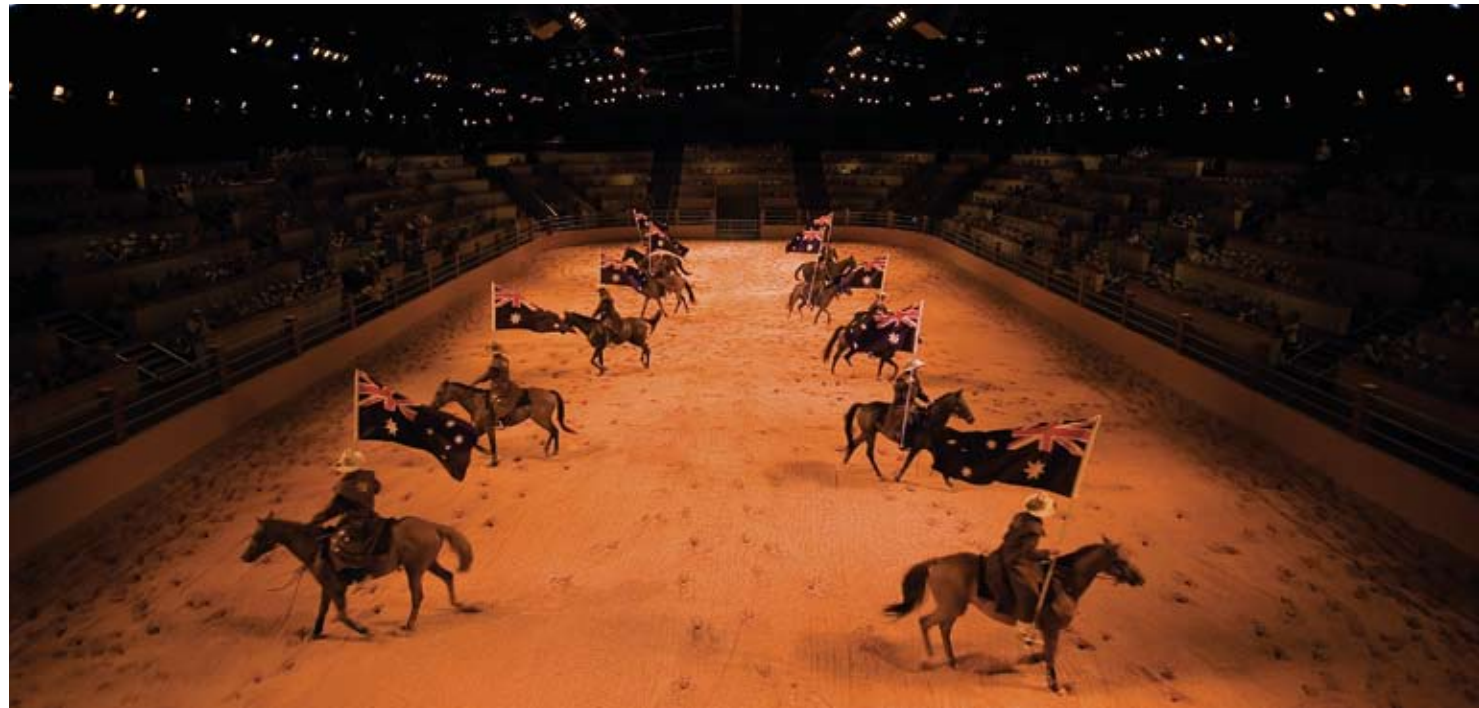
Within 24 hours, his idea had secured the sponsorship of the Australian Outback Spectacular, the Magic Millions thoroughbred-auction company, the Australian Stock Horse Society, Queensland Quality Hay and Produce and Hygain Stock Feeds. "I walked out of the office at about 11 o'clock that night and sent an email to Shane Philips, our production manager here. 'Anything you want', he said. 'If you think you can get the backers, we'll help you get there.' So the first phone call was to Simon Knight at the Warrenbri stud the next morning for a horse, and Hope was the first thing that came to his mind."

Simon's selection was, according to Brett, a sign from above. The renowned Warrenbri Stock Horse Stud, of Mitchell Downs, western Qld, produces some of the finest stockhorses in the country, but whether Brett was ready for the colt he got is another thing. "I don't think Simon or myself picked this horse," Brett says. "I think someone up in heaven picked him for us."

Simon shipped the horse to the Australian Outback Spectacular within a few weeks, where Brett began the breaking



Brett Welsh with rising two-year-old colt 'Warrenbri Hope'. He has big plans for this young stockhorse



The finale spectacle of the Australian Outback Spectacular features a patriotic, in-tandem riding drill in the specially built arena on the Gold Coast.

and training process to ready the colt for sale. In just a few months, the assistant horse master's quiet-spoken, understated disposition had brought the wily stallion into a new life of discipline, riding and theatre. Hope has since appeared before 1000 cheering fans on the Gold Coast. He lies down, allows Brett to roll him over, and works the arena with a dressage-like effort. Come January 10, though, the chips will be counted when Magic Millions sells Warrenbri Hope, auctioning a non-thoroughbred horse for the first time in its history.

"He is exceptional," Brett says, sidling beside his horse. The two have become largely inseparable. "I'll put him up there on his own. I knew that Simon had the horses, but I didn't know whether I could step up to the mark with it. But I'm very proud now of how Hope has turned out, and I'm very proud to put my name beside him."

The bond between man and horse is unmistakable. Brett's fingers flurry through Hope's forelock at every idle moment, and he breathes the horse's presence like a sweet perfume. The prized colt is his contribution to finding a cure for cancer, to making the difference

that everyone wants to make. But if it weren't for the good cause, it's hard to believe the two could ever be parted.

**For further information on the auction of Warrenbri Hope on January 10, email Meagan Miller at [meagan.miller@wvtp.com.au](mailto:meagan.miller@wvtp.com.au)**

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