

Gordon McKinlay

Gordon McKinlay is a legend in the Aussie bush. His horsemanship and horse safety clinics are so effective they prevent injuries to horse and rider, save lives, and save the big pastoral companies tens of thousands of dollars in workplace accident claims each year.

By MaryAnne Leighton



By the age of seven, Gordon was helping his father on the family property in Queensland.

Gordon has trained 12,000 horsemen and women over the past 30 years. However, his career as a horseman and clinician didn't start in a promising way. He began riding when he was four but says, 'I wasn't much good and I wasn't much help to my father either.' Gordon's father, himself an excellent horseman and cattleman, managed 5,000 head of cattle on 40,000 acres at Rolleston in Queensland's Central Highlands. Gordon eventually mastered riding well enough to help with stock work and mustering. His father was a hard taskmaster, the days were long and the work was back-breaking. At 15, under instruction from his father, Gordon began breaking horses to saddle.

He married his soul mate, Enid, in 1963 but it didn't

occur to Gordon to take up a career in horses until they were forced to leave the bush to be closer to medical services for their two daughters, Jeannie and Fiona, who both suffered severe epilepsy. The family moved to Alton Downs, west of Rockhampton, when the girls were one and six years old. Their nearest neighbour was an absentee owner, Carl Morawitz, who lived in America and whose property was suffering from neglect in his absence. When Gordon wrote to Carl that his property was in need of attention, Carl asked if Gordon would be available to do the work required. Thus was born a partnership that lasted for 17 years. Within twelve months, Carl decided he wanted some of these Quarter Horses that were becoming so popular. The two men travelled to Clover Leaf Stud in NSW, purchased two stallions and 20 broodmares, picked up more broodmares from dispersal sales





at T-Bar and Glen Elgin Studs on the way home and in 1976 Valle de Verde Quarter Horse Stud was born, with Gordon as manager. Carl's first instruction to Gordon was, 'Now you have to make it pay.'

Within a few years, Valle de Verde was a household name in show circles and in the Rockhampton Quarter Horse Sale ring. The facilities were exceptional and many shows were held there during the late 70s and 80s, including the first Queensland Quarter Horse Association Championship show in 1979. Gordon bred, raised, broke and trained all Valle de Verde show and sale horses. His philosophy has always been not to sell foals but to raise, break and sell the stud's offspring as three- and four-year-olds, offering the client a finished horse that is well worked, soft and safe. This meant that, by the time the stud had 40 broodmares, they had a total of 160 horses

on the place. As well as the mares there were 40 weanlings, 40 yearlings, and 40 two-year-olds. Working with so many young horses, Gordon's horsemanship skills improved quickly and dramatically. Through trial and error and by learning from other horsemen, he developed the system he teaches to his students to this day.

Frequently during the late 70s and early 80s, the Valle de Verde horses broken and trained by Gordon vied for top price honours at Rocky Sale. He was one of three or four trainers whose well-schooled horses consistently topped the various sections of the sale, but an interesting thing began to happen. Buyers contacted him, wanting to know how his horses were so well trained at such a young age. The idea began to form in his mind that he should conduct clinics for riders. However, as the manager of a large stud, he wasn't free to travel, so



The first Queensland Quarter Horse Championships were held at Valle de Verde Stud in 1979. Left to right are: - Carl Morawitz, Enid and Gordon McKinlay, judges Graeme Amos and Max McTaggart, Graham Ward and Roxanne Edgar.

AQHA HALL *of* FAME

~1997~

- Vaquero Q-1
- Gregory Lougher
- King Ranch Australia Pty Ltd

~ 1998 ~

- Ian Francis
- Max McTaggart
- Quarter Elgrando R1-167
- Jet Boom Q-467
- Beggar Bingo Q-315

~1999~

- Peter Baillieu
- Dell Mingo Q-118
- Jubal R1-6213
- Kay Hill King (Imp) Q-330
- Garry McPhee
- Radoo R1-5699
- Morn Deck Q-2160
- Hamish MacCallum
- Docs Spinifex Q-5015

~ 2000 ~

- Chilla Seeney
- Hugh Sawrey
- Lionel & Heather Richardson
- Docs Freckles Oak Q-14053
- Linden Super Star R2-1528

~ 2001 ~

- Jack Reilly
- Robert Baldwin

~ 2003 ~

- Chickeramic Q-337

~ 2004 ~

- Jack Cooper
- Martin Lemann

~ 2005 ~

- Winderadeen Peppycose Q-17365

~ 2006 ~

- Yulgilbar Quick Silver Q-10032

~ 2007 ~

- Commander's Focus Q-2508
- Sava Jet R1-14648
- Winderadeen Corporation
- Yulgilbar Quarter Horse Stud



Gordon on Pacific Lady R1-3255 at Rocky Sale 1970s



Gordon riding Macks Carney Q-37779 at Rocky Sale



Gordon and Clover Pinaroo Q-951 in the 1970s



Gordon and Clover Pinaroo Q-951 in winning form at a show in the 1970s

he decided to resign and go it alone. With Enid's blessing and with a farewell gift from Carl Morawitz of the stallion, Clover Pinaroo Q-591, Gordon left his secure job of 17 years. He and Enid bought a property at Dululu, 80 kilometres south-west of Rocky and started breeding their own horses; Gordon began conducting clinics and broke in for other people. Many of the horses he started in those early days were rank, to say the least. Some had never seen a man before they were mustered from back blocks and trucked to Dululu. The clients' attitude was, 'Gordon will fix them,' and he did. His skills were in great demand and from the moment he set himself up as a clinician, he has travelled the country for eight months of every year conducting colt starting, general horsemanship, cattle starting and general safety clinics, and selling his horses through his clinics and the annual Rockhampton Quarter Horse Sale.

Talented clients and students from his clinics are invited to help prepare his horses for Rocky Sale, spending two months with Gordon and Enid. He is one of the few trainers who began putting horses through Rocky almost from the sale's inception and who continues topping the sale to this day. In 2006 his own crossbred colt was equal-top-ridden colt and sold for \$17,500.

Gordon has travelled extensively throughout Queensland, the Northern Territory and South Australia where he conducts horsemanship and colt-starting clinics for all the major pastoral companies and where his Horse Safety Skills Programme [Progressive Steps to Building You and Your Horse's Future] has proved extremely successful in the training of stockmen and ringers. He has conducted numerous courses at Hopevale Mission and Cape York Peninsula, training not only indigenous men as stockmen, but also teaching trainees with the Rural

Photo: Peta-Anne Tenney, courtesy of Flashback Images

Industry Training Extensions (RITE). Gordon also conducts open clinics for clubs, associations and individual riders from Cape York to Tasmania and Adelaide to Darwin, and he frequently receives accolades such as, 'You have given me the confidence to be able to work and train a horse that will be soft and safe,' and 'Thank you, Gordon. Firstly for making things easier and happier for our horses and secondly for the knowledge you have shared with us.'

To those critics who say he doesn't show his horses, he replies that he shows them at every clinic he conducts. He recalls conducting a memorable colt-starting clinic with the Gulf Ringers Training Club, held at Strathmore Station in northern Queensland, where they broke in 35 horses in four days. He says, 'I'm claiming it as a record. I'd never do it again but I'm glad I achieved it.' Gordon believes you don't have to show horses to be a good horseman, saying, 'There seems to be too much emphasis put on showing and not enough on horsemanship. It's like the old saying "Every horseman is a rider but not every rider is a horseman." How true.'

Gordon showed at halter and in ridden classes for many years. Some of his achievements include winning and placing in cuttings on Clover Pinaroo Q-951, winning the Working Cow Horse class at the Queensland Quarter Horse Championships and winning and placing in many reining classes and futurities. He played A Grade Polocrosse for 12 years and his club, Alton Downs Polocrosse Club, was undefeated in the Central Queensland Zone for many years.



Colt starting clinic at Charters Towers in 2004

He played in the mixed final in the Queensland Polocrosse Championships and in the B Grade final in the Men's National Polocrosse Championships. He was one of the first to train a Quarter Horse for polocrosse, declaring, 'I'll show them that Quarter Horses can play.' His mare, Pacific Lady R1-3255, was the first to receive a ROM Polocrosse with the AQHA, back in 1980. She wasn't just an athlete, on one occasion he pulled her out of the paddock and threw her in a halter class with 16 other mares. She won, earning her lifetime total of three halter points.

Now aged 70, Gordon has had to work hard to make a living. He still travels the nation for eight months of the year, instructing and promoting safe horsemanship. His easy teaching style

gets across his message that a soft, flexible horse is a safer horse so he teaches his students how to soften the horse's five body parts – the head, neck, shoulders, ribcage and hindquarters. He says, 'If you can move them all around the horse will be safer and happier.' He still stands behind his horses, if something goes wrong his clients know they can bring the horse back and he will fix it for them.

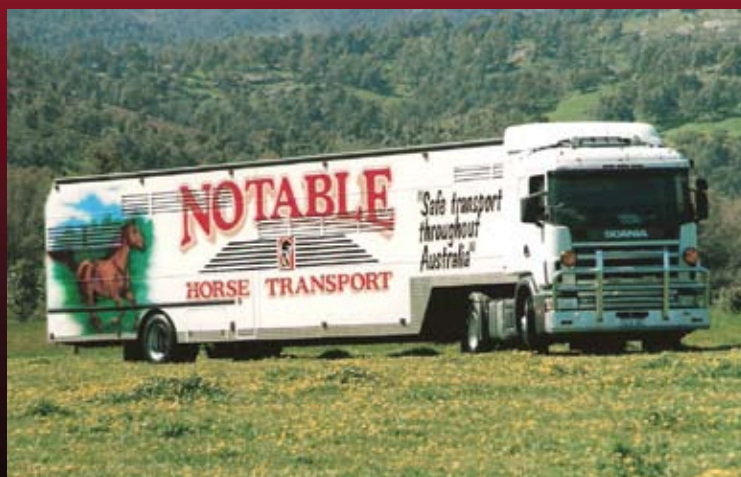
He mentors young horsemen and one stand-out among his many talented apprentices is Clinton Anderson. Clinton absorbed what Gordon taught him, put his own spin on it, took it to the States and turned it into a multi-million dollar business [see Australian Quarter Horse May 2007]. Clinton credits Gordon with

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With his protégé, Clinton Anderson, in the USA October 2007



At a clinic at Tanumbirini Station in the Northern Territory, 2004



Gordon's Rocky Sale team in 2006: Simon George, Alice Durkin, Tammy Weldon, Gordon and Enid.



Gordon and Enid at Gordon and Clinton Anderson's combined clinic in the USA in October last year

teaching him all his colt-starting skills and all his problem-solving skills saying, 'He had a phenomenal influence on me and without his knowledge I wouldn't be where I am today.' Clinton – a clinician who demands, and gets, US\$10,000 a day to teach you in the comfort of your own arena – mentions Gordon at every clinic he conducts in America and maintains, 'Gordon is the king of the round pen. No one in the world can catch, saddle and gentle a horse as good a Gordon can.'

To thank his mentor for giving him a solid start in the horse world, Clinton travelled to Australia at the beginning of August to assist Gordon at two clinics held in the tiny outback Queensland town of Thargomindah. Within the first four days of the only ad for the clinics appearing in the Queensland Country Life, the Thargomindah telephone exchange rang hot with 150 people wanting to attend. A report on the clinics follows this article.

CLINICS IN THE USA

In October last year, Gordon and Enid travelled to the US so Gordon could work with Clinton at his clinics. Gordon was astounded to receive a standing ovation when he first walked into the arena. Clinton's followers knew who he was, they knew he was coming and they were waiting for him. The crowd roared a heartfelt welcome to the man behind the man who has made millions from teaching safe horsemanship to everyday American riders, and the clinic was described as 'history in the making' as Clinton and his mentor worked together for the first time in 17 years; Gordon in control of the horses they broke in with Clinton as his helper. Gordon says, 'It was something I'd never felt before. It was a bit of a shock because I didn't know it was going to happen.' It was an emotional moment for both mentor and disciple.

In a moment of male bonding that Gordon vows will never be repeated, Clinton took him shopping for a new hat. 'I was wearing an old baseball cap at the Reno Cowhorse Futurity and Clinton decided I needed to look the part.' The first hat Gordon liked the look of was

\$1100, 'I nearly had a heart attack and suddenly it didn't fit.' The next one at \$900 was the wrong colour, another at \$800 was the wrong shape – and so it went until he finally settled on a \$400 number which still caused his toes to curl in his old boots. 'Then Clinton said I had to have new boots and new jeans – and have you ever tried to get into starched jeans? You cannot get into them, then once you're in you can't move.' He has vowed never to buy or wear starched jeans again.

SAFETY FIRST, LAST AND ALWAYS

A horse is a dangerous animal – a reaction waiting to happen – and Gordon drums into his students that their body is their greatest asset, saying, 'If you get hurt, you can't ride, if you can't ride you can't work and if you are a trainer who can't ride because of injury, you can't make a living and you lose customers.' He is as conscious of his own safety as that of his students – but that doesn't mean he has never been injured. He suffers chronic pain from a variety of accidents, some of which happened when he worked in the bush, others more recent that demonstrate just how easily and quickly accidents can happen. The most serious occurred in the 80s as he leaned forward on his horse to open a gate, the horse shied and leaped back and Gordon crashed into the fence, breaking his pelvis. He spent 12 weeks in hospital with his body in a sling, and his doctor told him if he broke his pelvis a second time, he may never walk again.

Gordon and Enid have known more than their share of tragedy. Their daughter, Fiona, died suddenly one night when she was only 24 and in 1969, when he was 31, Gordon was diagnosed with terminal melanoma. He underwent surgery which removed a secondary tumour but surgeons were unable to locate the primary source of the melanoma and they gave him six months to live. Forty years later he is working as hard as ever and has no plans to retire. His battle with melanoma has made him very aware of how dangerous the Aussie sun is and all students at his clinics must wear hats, long-sleeved shirts and sunscreen.

A quietly-confident and popular man, Gordon was delighted when more than a hundred people attended his 60th birthday in 1998. This year 120 of his friends joined him to celebrate his 70th. Is he thinking of slowing down? Not really. He says, 'I still enjoy it and I'll keep going until I can't do it any more.' If he has just one piece of advice for horsemen and women everywhere it would be to never give up. He says, 'Too many people give up when success is just around the corner. Most of the time it only takes a few more steps to achieve what you're aiming for.'

Gordon thanks his darling wife, Enid, for her love and support, Carl and Gail Morawitz for the opportunity to work with so many good horses, and the great horseman, Lee Reborse, for pointing him in the right direction. He says, 'To all the wonderful people who have believed in me and supported me over the years, you have been my inspiration. Thank you.' 