

Horse breaker and maker

NO HORSE IS TOO DIFFICULT FOR MARK LANGLEY, WHOSE GENTLE BUT FIRM APPROACH IS YIELDING AMAZING RESULTS.

STORY **AMANDA BURDON** PHOTOS **MATT MIEGEL**



Mark Langley works a green horse in the round yard, one of the first steps in the process of starting horses. **BELOW (l-r):** Mark practises his farriery skills on the recently started mare; partner Jenny Barnes rides with Mark on their property outside Glen Innes, NSW; Mark's farriery tools.



THE HANDSOME creamy mare in the roundyard fringed by stringybarks is wary, her ears back, her eyes watchful. She turns sharply in the soft dirt, darting left, then right, anything to avoid contact with the neatly bearded man leaning on the fence. His body, in sharp contrast, is relaxed; his jeaned legs are still, his steely blue eyes downcast beneath a buckskin hat. The thick summer air is charged and thrums with cicadas.

"When a young horse like this first comes into the roundyard I give them time to get used to their surroundings," horse-breaker and educator Mark Langley says softly. "I observe how it reacts, how long it's listening to me and where its attention is, and give it time to get used to its confinement. You need to learn about the horse and the horse has to savour you, too. It's important to show them that you don't pose a threat."

The five-year-old mare has only recently begun her education with the New England horseman on the property "Wallaroo Waters" that he shares with partner Jenny Barnes in the foothills of Bullock Mountain, just outside Glen Innes, in northern New South Wales. But over the course of a remarkably quiet and intimate hour, she progressively accepts Mark's touch, a saddle rug and even a rope simulating a girth strap. Her movements become more fluid, her body softens, and she stands calmly and meets his gaze.

"Everything with horse training is about pressure and release," Mark says. "I approach the horse one step at a time and when she relaxes to the adjustment I step away to reward her. I begin touching her – first with a long lunging whip and then with my hand – and similarly approach and retreat. At each stage I reward her by taking the pressure off and giving her a rest."

"You can make it very easy for a horse to do the right thing by not pushing them, by

giving them an open door to make mistakes and escape, and then correcting that behaviour, not through force but through education. I then move on to desensitising the horse to the things they find scary. I can't stop her from feeling frightened but I can help her to learn how to behave better when she is frightened. It's built on a foundation of trust and that takes time. It also means leaving your ego behind."

It's telling, then, that this modest proponent of natural horsemanship does not wear a watch, rarely appears harried and that the business founded on his natural talent does not bear his name. Unlike the celebrity doyens of this gentler horse-breaking style – including the famed Pat Parelli, for whom he worked for a time in the United States – 31-year-old Mark is cautious and uneasy with self-promotion. "I would rather produce the goods to garner respect; people can talk about me when I'm dead," he says. "It's all about the horse; it's not about me. When I'm breaking a horse I enter into a mutual agreement with that animal, to teach them better ways of behaving, and the biggest training tool is patience. When things are not going right I stop to have a cup of tea. As soon as you lose your cool, you lose your consistency. And riders, above all else, want a consistent horse."

Hands hardened by years of contract fencing, horse trekking and more latterly carving out this simple but functional work base stroke the young mare tenderly before she is released into a neighbouring paddock, the day's lesson over. In the rustic log cabin Mark and Jenny built from timber milled on-site – electricity was deliberately not connected – the kettle boils on the slow combustion stove. "Living here, pretty basic, brings us back to reality," Mark says. It also creates the right environment in which to indulge his passions for whip-cracking, camp-



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Exposing young horses to lots of experiences is part of Mark's training process; Mark's late father Steve on horseback during one of the legendary pub rides he pioneered, with his teenage son on the back; Mark, at the age of four, getting ready to head out on a seven-day, 150-kilometre pack horse ride to Grafton, NSW.

cooking, woodwork and farriery ("I like to see the old values and talents that are at risk of being lost maintained"). A strong regard for tradition and a self-reliant attitude bred into him growing up on "Boolabinda", just a stone's throw away, form part of this horseman's bloodline.

"I used to ride bareback all over Bullock Mountain and the best job was running the horses in; going flat knackers following them home," Mark says. "My parents [his father Steve pioneered the region's legendary pub crawls on horseback] gave me an open rein; they loved me and I knew that. Trust developed through honesty and for me there was always an open door. I take a similar approach with horses. You trust them enough to allow them to make mistakes, but always start them safely."

It's a philosophy that is finding favour among horse breeders and enthusiasts throughout New England, but also further afield – people impressed by Mark's preparedness to give every horse a chance, and his profound results. Over the past four years he and Jenny have finished about 100 horses, including brumbies from South Australia and far-northern Northern Territory, and five whaler descendents from Western Australia, hand-picked for endurance competition in the United Arab Emirates by a wealthy sheik.

"Not being selective about what horses you take teaches you a lot about horses of all types," Mark says. "Every owner wants a common result – to have a safe, soft, responsive and consistent horse that wants to do things – but every horse is different. I've taken well-bred horses, children's ponies and horses with bad habits, through to ex-racehorses that buck like a train and stand to be turned into dog food. I like working green horses that have had no

contact because you start from scratch, but the more experienced horses progress faster. Here they have access to thousands of acres of rough country, three rivers and the mountain. They learn to pick up their feet and to look where they're going; to get used to dogs and farm machinery, stock and gates. But once a horse is finished here, the owner has to follow up with the work back home."

The learning never ends for Mark, either. He and Jenny are actively developing their property along organic lines, breeding goats and improving pastures with the view to future self-sufficiency. They also breed performance horses suitable for most quarter horse and stockhorse disciplines, and offer specialist-riding instruction.

"Working with horses and Jenny's influence, especially, has helped me to level my own personality, to become calmer, more caring and to have greater respect for the environment," Mark says. "It has also helped me to understand people better, too. I've judged horses too quickly in the past and I try not to judge people too hastily either. Like horses, some people can kick and bite because they don't know how to react to you or because they feel insecure. But there's nothing better than convincing a wild horse to trust you and even become your friend."

Like the wary mare, Mark softens a little and a warm smile canters across his ruddy face. "I like to think that I help horses to stand a good chance of making the grade," he says. "They are such amazing animals, with natural ability and pronounced senses, a great memory and capacity to learn. If a rider can harness that talent and power and energy then, together, they can become a great team and that's really special."