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Weekend Herald

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A race that's Plain exciting

From ANDREW RULE

OMEQ. — The buck starts here.

In this mountain town where the football ground doubles as a rodeo arena and where there is always fresh horse manure in the main street, riding hard and risking falls is no novelty.

But today and tomorrow a work-a-day pastime takes on added interest when locals pit themselves against riders from what they call "the other side" ... a sweeping, slightly scornful reference taking in fellow mountain people from Dargo to Licola, Mansfield to Myrtleford.

The occasion is the annual mountain cattlemen's get-together, hosted in turn by the various high country districts.

This year it is Omeo's turn, and there is movement at the station; literally. Cobungra Station, Victoria's largest cattlerun, has supplied an ideal backdrop for the action about 26 km from town.

It is called Junction Plain, a rather grand name for a natural clearing on the banks of the Victoria River, which is a rather grand name for a pretty little creek that a good stock horse could leap in a single bound.



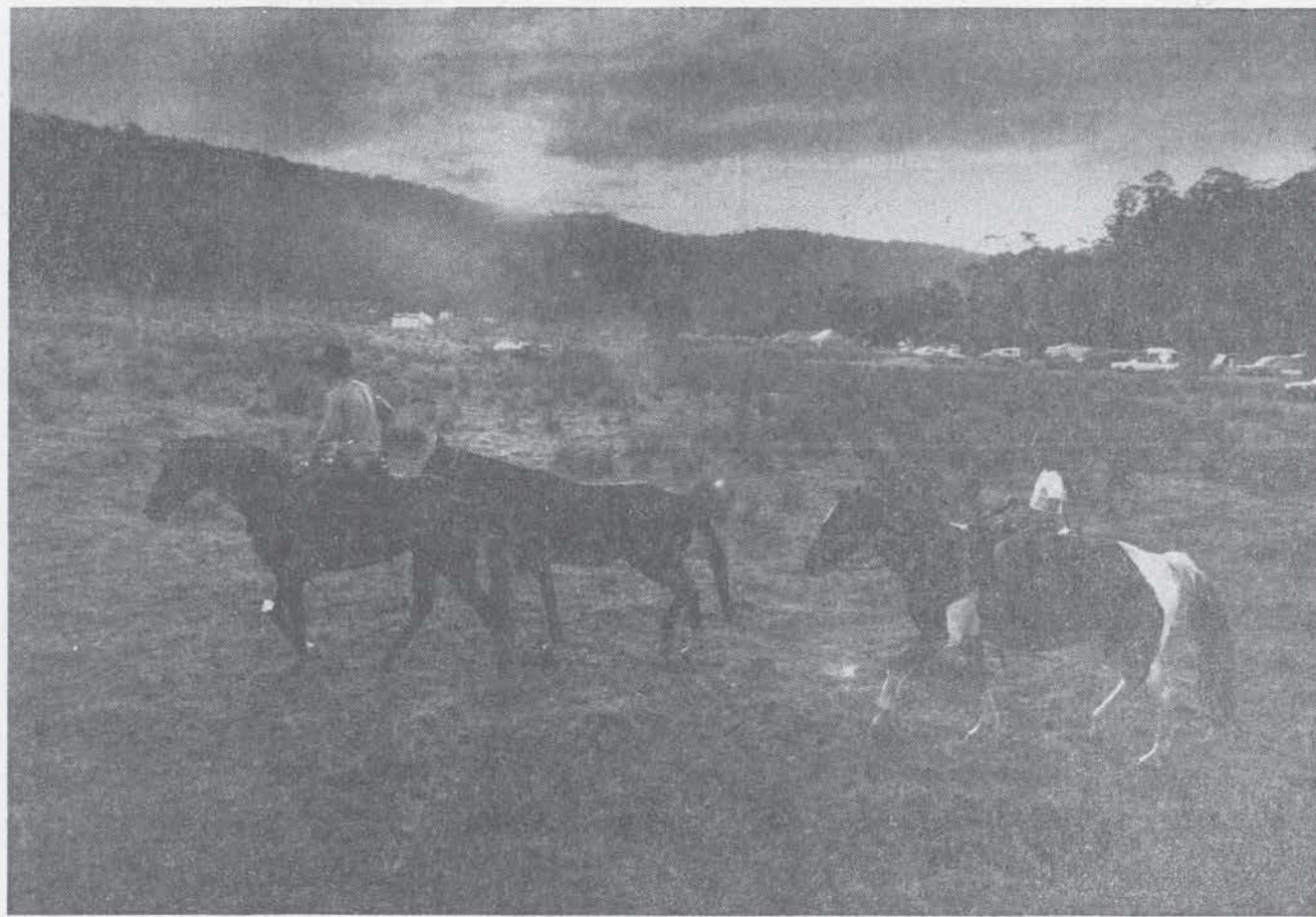
The Men from Snowy River — mountain cattlemen practise for their annual race against the locals at Omeo. Picture: LEIGH HENNI

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There was movement at the station . . .



The mountain men come over the Great Divide from Dargo to pit themselves against the Omeo locals.



Dawn — and the cattlemen begin preparations for their annual get-together at Cobungra Station.

At the Plain today the sun rose on dozens of hangovers.

The Stoney family of Mansfield took their friends in to the Golden Age hotel last night to toast the birthday of 18-year-old Anne Stoney.

There was also some celebration because the Stoney party had ridden in across country to arrive hours before other groups of riders who trickled in to the camp from all directions by late yesterday. The less adventurous came by truck and four-wheel drive.

This morning the plain was a tent town surrounded by temporary yards full of horses which are no strangers to jumping creeks and a lot of other things.

Tomorrow most of them will be

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ridden in the third annual Cattlemen's Cup — a torturous race through snow gums and hills and logs and wombat holes and water.

That is tomorrow. Today the likely contestants are saying it is all *really* for fun and fellowship and they're not *really* in it to win. Of course, no one believes them.

It is a well-established fact, for instance, that the horse that has taken out both previous cups has been trained to the minute for a tilt at a glorious hat trick.

The animal in question is as plain as a Hereford bull, but he was bred near Mt. Kosciusko by the legendary

McGuffick family, and he has run down more than 200 brumbies.

Late in the day there is another race — a new event where riders saddle pack horses and lead them at full pace over a gruelling track.

So much for that side to the weekend at Junction Plain. As much as they wouldn't mind winning the odd race, the organisers have a broader purpose.

That purpose goes back to 1969 when the mountain cattlemen formed their association in response to mounting pressure from radical conservationists to abolish the then 135-year-old practice of summer grazing on the high plains.

At first the association went almost unnoticed apart from occasional sorties in newspaper let-

ters columns by one of the founding members, Jim Treasure, patriarch of a Dargo cattle clan.

As it became increasingly likely that the conservation lobby would succeed in ending the tradition carried on by 130 families, help came from an unexpected quarter.

Because of their part in the filming of "The Man From Snowy River" four years ago, the mountain cattle families have become de facto film stars.

After more than a century of minding their own business they realise that their main chance of survival lies in projecting what the public relations experts call a high profile.

That's why their Cattlemen's Cup will be seen in a million voters' living rooms tomorrow night.