



Masters of the muster: Brett Lancaster, top, leads a spare on high country. Below: men and horses on the trail of brumbies.

They catch horses, don't they?



BY Kosciusko's side, where the ridges raise their rugged battlements on high, the air is clear as

inside and have to get off for a crap after half an hour chasing horses," explains one. An attitude that is hardly surprising when you see the gear the

Sky above, earth below. Men, women and horses in between. To Australia's high country, they come



partnership going for a long time yet. Point taken.

Meanwhile, Dean gets on a raking chestnut with three white feet and enough thoroughbred blood that he won't fatten. He's called Ronald, after the Buchan grazier who bred him, and has been after brumbies only three times.

Nine riders string out from the camp, a spot deep on the Victorian side of the border somewhere between Suggan Buggan and Benambra. Brumby runners, like fly fishermen, are cagey about giving away their best spots.

Mick Flanagan, a butcher by trade, rides a rangy chestnut galloper, banned from mountain racing "because he was too mad". His partner, Georgie Boucher, starts with a sensible brown. Kelvin Baylis rides a twitchy grandson of Sir Tristram who never made it on the racetrack. Brett Lancaster, five days shy of his 21st birthday, but with 31 brumbies on his tally, rides a



UP BY Kosciusko's side, where the ridges raise their rugged battlements on high, the air is clear as crystal and the white stars fairly blaze, the rum has passed around and all the cracks have gathered to the fire. It's freezing, and wild horses couldn't drag them away.

They scorch boots and steaks over the coals, drink and swear and swap insults of the sort that only friends can.

There's Chris, who tired of winning the Cattleman's Cup, and made his pile when sheep and cattle prices went up. And Dean, who's won so many mountain races that the man who holds his own with him is good enough. There's no Clancy of the Overflow, but there's Kelvin and Brett from down near Lindenow. And Mick and Georgie from Lindabyne have crossed the Snowy to lend a hand.

And one is there, a striping with a small and weedy beast. She is Rachel, an English university girl, three parts thoroughbred at least, with lots of time for ponies. She read the *Silver Brumby* books when she was little, now she's set to play out a storybook tale, chasing wild horses in far-off places once dreamed of: The Playgrounds, Rocky Plains, Native Dog and The Limestone, among others. One can't doubt her power to stay. She arrived in Australia three years ago, met Chris, and looks like sticking on, though chances are that three days without a shower will take the romance out of this leg of a most excellent colonial adventure.

At dawn, Barjo's ghost is gone and reality bites. The fire is out, the water has ice on it, even the tinned food is frozen. Not that food seems to worry anybody much in daylight hours. The serious riders mostly favor the dingo's breakfast: a drink and a good look round. A few hunger pangs can be better than the alternative.

"Don't want to get all jiggled around

inside and have to get off for a crap after half an hour chasing horses," explains one. An attitude that is fairly surprising when you see the gear the modern brumby runner puts on.

Undereath, they wear the thermal versions of grandpa's "longjohns"; these beat the cold and ease chafing of calves and buttocks that comes with long hours in the saddle in steep country. Then they strap on heavy duty kneepads such as an ice hockey player might use, followed by jeans and heavy shirts, Tasmanian "bluey" jackets, long boots and leather chaps strapped from groin to ankle. Last on are gloves made of wetsuit material.

Chris Stoney, who can step on a horse as easily as most people get in a car, walks stiff-legged to a rock to use as a mounting block to climb on his smart grey mare. No wonder, once the riders get all the gear on, that they don't want to take it off until after dark. Even then, they're not fussy. They say Kelvin rolled into his swag wearing his chaps and boots on the last trip.

The only bit of anatomy they don't protect is their heads, which figures. Anybody whose idea of fun is chasing brumbies at breakneck pace through bogs, rocks and bush doesn't have self-preservation high in their priorities.

The Akubra hats keep off the sun and deflect twigs — but not the sort of damage a tree trunk or rock can do to the skull. As sport, it's safer than Russian Roulette, not quite as extreme as brahman bull riding and hunting wild pigs with a knife. But it has its moments.

Each runner carries a catching rope, as fine as a man's little finger but strong enough to hold a grown horse snubbed to a tree, and stiff enough to hold the shape of the running loop made by putting the shank of the rope through the leather-lined "eye".

Bundles of tough homemade halters are lashed to the pommels of the big stock saddles. They are made of plaited

Sky above, earth below. Men, women and horses in between. To Australia's high country, they come



hayband, the plastic twine used to bale hay. The reins are also hayband, and Dean, master of most bushman's skills, plait complete bridles the same way when he's not busy shoeing horses. Hayband costs nothing, is hard to break, easy to replace, and won't slip through the hands like leather. Happiness, says Dean, is never having to oil the gear.

Before saddling up, Mick asks if everyone has matches, and tosses boxes to those who haven't. Get lost in the mountains in cold weather and a fire can save your life. The warmth stops you freezing while you wait for someone to spot the smoke.

Dean and his mates are members of one of Australia's most exclusive clubs, the Alpine Brumby Management Association. Money, influence and old school ties can't get you in: members run brumbies in high country where the hills are, as the poet wrote, twice as steep and twice as rough. Which is why there are only about 60 in the association so far.

They are mostly Victorians but some members — like Mick and Georgie — are from the New South Wales side of the ranges. The association was formed four years ago after rumors leaked out that the authorities planned to cull

brumbies in national parks and wilderness areas by shooting them from helicopters. Brumby runners, many of them mountain people who have "run bucks" for generations, were appalled.

For them, catching brumbies has always been a mixture of sport, tradition and even economic necessity. Some families catch enough horses every year to help pay the bills, especially when prices are good. For decades, horse sales at Bairnsdale have drawn truckloads of brumbies from the high country, brought down mountain roads by bowlegged men in big hats and oilskins who talk slow and ride fast.

The older, intractable horses go for meat; the best young ones can be raised for riding ponies. Either way, the brumby runners argue, they are not left to rot in the bush after being shot from helicopters at huge public expense.

A generation ago, only mountain people ran brumbies. But the public profile fostered by the Mountain Cattleman's Association after the filming of *The Man From Snowy River* in the early 1980s saw the rise of "mountain racing," among horse people who followed campdrafting, polo-crosse, rodeos and picnic races. This brought fresh blood to a past-time

that dates to the mid-19th century.

DEAN Backman, 29, was born in Melbourne but grew up at Bairnsdale, where his father ran a knackery and bought hundreds of horses a year. After leaving school at 15, his first job was to test any horses that looked useful to see if they could be sold as hacks instead of being slaughtered, a task that earned him a few broken bones and a lot of practical knowledge about handling horses. He killed and butchered hundreds of horses before switching to being a farrier, and is no bleeding heart. But he hates the idea of random shooting.

Dean caught his first brumby at Nunniong when he was 12, but didn't learn all the tricks until he worked for a year for Ken Connley, of Benambra, a colorful bushman who has caught more than a thousand brumbies in his lifetime. Dean worked on Connley's farm and trail ride business, running brumbies before and after work in the bush outside Omeo.

By the time he had his driver's licence he felt at home in the mountains, though he never took risks for granted and knew that second chances, like good horses

and dogs, are scarce.

Dean has had plenty of horses and dogs, and a couple of girlfriends, but none has lasted as long as his favorite "bush horse", Danny, a compact 12-year-old buckskin with a hogged mane, strong quarters and a reputation. Like his owner, the horse is tough, but not mean — except, maybe, when it comes to breaking bridles. He can't be tied up for long, and if he does get away, he turns his head to one side so he won't stand on the reins. He ignores other horses, walks fast on a loose rein without breaking into a jog, and steers himself through the bush with minimum damage to his rider or himself. "Once he locks on to a brumby, I just let him go," Dean says nonchalantly.

His feeling for the horse is close to affection, but on this frosty May morning he's not riding him. Instead, he's lending him to this reporter because he has agreed to show *The Sunday Age* alpine brumby running first hand.

"If y' lose him, don't come back," he warns. He adds that he's caught 204 brumbies on Danny in nine years — and counts on the

partnership going for a long time yet. Point taken.

Meanwhile, Dean gets on a raking chestnut with three white feet and enough thoroughbred blood that he won't fatten. He's called Ronald, after the Buchan grazier who bred him, and has been after brumbies only three times.

Nine riders string out from the camp, a spot deep on the Victorian side of the border somewhere between Suggan Buggan and Benambra. Brumby runners, like fly fishermen, are cagey about giving away their best spots.

Mick Flanagan, a butcher by trade, rides a rangy chestnut galloper, banned from mountain racing "because he was too mad". His partner, Georgie Boucher, starts with a sensible brown. Kelvin Baylis rides a twitchy grey mare related to some of the best stockhorses around. Rachel, the English girl, is on a fit little bay, bred and educated in the high country.

The Sunday Age's photographer, Jason South, is on a registered race mare who ran a place at Canberra last time in work, and is set to return to the luxury of carrying jockeys on the turf after a tour of duty lumping heavyweights in the mountains. Even for someone who spent weeks dodging Timorese militia bullets in Dili, carrying cameras on a racehorse in the mountains is no picnic.

After half an hour, Dean pulls up. His sore hand — nine stitches and a broken bone — makes it hard to hold both the catching rope and the reins. The chestnut jiggles and pulls a bit when he's fresh. He'd like Danny the buckskin back, and fair enough. Who wouldn't want to ride an old mate when you're trying to rope wild horses one handed?

As Dean swaps saddles he mentions he got the chestnut from a showjumping trainer who got sick of the horse bucking. "But no worries," he adds carelessly. "Hasn't bucked much lately."

Three hours later the sun shines in a flawless sky, there's no wind, and the scenery is beautiful. But the rough going has taken its toll. Two horses have lost front shoes, Mick's chestnut is favoring one foot, and Chris's mare has a gashed fetlock that has to be bandaged. "And we haven't even seen a bloody brumby yet," mutters Dean.

THE first sign of brumbies is when a big smile spreads over Mick's face. A mare and foal are grazing in the gully ahead. The



Top: Dean Backman and his horse lead a brumby mare out of the bush. Below left to right: Mick Flanagan speeds through the bush, and end of day, it's boot camp.

in search of the brumby. Andrew Rule and photographer Jason South joined them on the muster.

“

Anybody whose
idea of fun is chasing
brumbies at
breakneck pace
through bogs, rocks
and bush doesn't
have self-
preservation high in
their priorities.

”

Top: Dean Backman and his horse lead a brumby mare out of the bush. Below left to right: Mick Flanagan speeds through the bush, and end of day, it's boot camp.

in search of the brumby. Andrew Rule and photographer Jason South joined them on the muster.

runners gather reins and shake bigger loops into their ropes. The mare lifts her head and trots away, and it's on.

Chris leads the charge after the black foal, who runs into the bush and out of sight, riders crashing through the bush after him. Rachel and Dean follow the mare along the gully. She is slow, a relatively easy mark, but Rachel politely moves aside, and the Dean and Danny partnership nail brumby number 205. Chris, meanwhile, has caught the little black colt. "I reckon I'd be good at this if I didn't have to use a rope," he jokes later.

The mare is in foal and in poor condition. Dean grabs her and looks at her teeth as she snorts and rolls her eyes. "Eight-year-old," he says. "Fairly old for a brumby." He thinks she'd knock up being led back to camp, and turns her loose. Like anglers who return fish to the water, for brumby runners the sport is in the pursuit.

The bush is criss-crossed with brumby tracks, dotted with neat piles of manure left by stallions to mark their territory. Here and there are bleached bones. Tough winters and wild dogs take their toll on the old and the weak. Dog trappers used to shoot horses to poison the carcasses or to set traps around them. Some mountain cattlemen still shoot brumbies as pests, and hunters occasionally shoot them because they can't find deer.

Brumby runners regard shooting horses as like blowing up fish with gelignite: brutally effective, but unsporting and wasteful. They make a case that they should be used to control brumby numbers by being allowed into national parks and wilderness areas. Riders see more feral horses than kangaroos and, near Thredbo at least, brumbies have bred up so much they wander onto roads and are a traffic hazard.

On the second day out, the first brumbies are sighted about 8.30 am, less than half an hour from camp. It's a fast run, but speed isn't everything when brumbies head for rough country. Two good bushmen, Dean and Chris, riding the two best bush horses, catch a brumby apece.

For Dean and Danny it's number 206 on the tally. For Chris and his mare, it's about 200 less than that, but they're working on it. "I could get keen on this," says the man who says he has given up mountain racing to concentrate on his farming and trail riding interests at Mansfield.

Georgie, who has been doing this since her teens, is content to wander along at the back. She and



Mick light a fire while we wait for the others to find their way back to the track from where they caught up with the brumbies. Mick says when he first started running wild horses as a teenager 14 years ago he was too scared to follow them far in case he got lost. It's not hard to see why. Ride out of sight, get caught in bad weather without matches, and you could be dead.

Two hours later, brilliant sunshine bathes a natural clearing beside a creek, but there's still ice on pools of water. The creek flat is full of treacherous bogs; if a riding horse gets stuck, it can take half a dozen others pulling together to get it out.

A weanling filly grazes by herself on the far side. Mick, who has fallen in bogs before, picks his way carefully before he splashes his big chestnut through the creek and chases the filly into the snow gums, full pelt.

A minute later, he has her snubbed to a tree and is putting the halter on to lead her back to the track. Like others, she spends a few hours tied to a tree in a clear spot before being led back to camp at day's end. The younger the horse,

the easier it leads, but a few hours of being tied up helps: it teaches them they can't beat the halter.

The creek blossoms into little plains around each bend. Three big kangaroos sit on the edge of one. It's noon, and almost warm, but there's still frost on shaded bits of grass and the water the horses drink at every opportunity is icy. The group splits up. While half follow a pair of brumbies onto a hillside of mountain ash — and lose them — the others go round a bend onto a bigger plain. A great sight is waiting.

"A mob of 30 or 35 horses," Mick is to say a few minutes later, grinning like a schoolkid. Soon, like the fish that got away, it gets bigger. "Musta been 50 horses," he says. None of them can remember seeing more brumbies in one mob in the open.

They hit the mob at the gallop, selecting one each. By the time the rest of us arrive, Mick has a stroppey bay mare tied to a tree, striking at anybody who comes near, and Kelvin has a colt that's lying still after rearing over backwards. Dean and Danny have roped brumby number 207, a bay colt. The canny old buckskin has his ears pricked

and isn't even sweating.

An hour later, Chris catches his third weanling in a patch of saplings where a horse can just squeeze. "Geez, it's the ultimate sport," he says happily. "But I'm glad I've got these kneepads. Look at all the sap on them where I've hit trees." He's already thinking about how to fit three baby brumbies into a double float with two riding horses for the nine-hour trip home across the ranges. He'll grow them out, break them in and put them in his trail-riding string, where they will be fed and shod and live twice as long as they would in the bush.

First, they have to make it back to camp. By late afternoon everyone is saddle sore, tired and thirsty. Especially photographer Jason, whose backpack has unzipped during the last run, dropping a \$7000 camera somewhere in the middle of a million wild acres.

Along the way we pick up the six brumbies left tied to trees during the day. The four young ones tend to follow the riding horses, but the two grown mares aren't so cooperative.

Later, four of the riding horses are unsaddled and led, leaving four

riders to retrieve two Toyota utes planted in the bush. One ute has a stock crate. Loading five wild horses into a small space without getting kicked, struck or bitten takes some doing, but Mick and Dean know all the tricks.

The light is fading. Dean is at the wheel of his Toyota, crawling behind the one loaded with brumbies. It's been a big day, and a good one: six horses caught and no one hurt. He scrabbles around and fishes out a cassette. "Have you heard the *Man From Snowy River* song that *Waltzing Matilda* do? It's my favorite," he says.

Paterson's well-worn lyrics float above the clatter of the motor as the sun sets. Dean lights a cigarette, lost in the moment.

Was he born 100 years too late? "Yeah," he says softly. "Think I was."

At camp, all the crocks had gathered to the fire. After two days hard riding, there are bruised knees, chafed legs and stiff joints, but tongues are in good working order. Talk turns to horses, dogs and danger.

One Sunday a few years back, says Georgie, they were chasing brumbies



south of the area known as the Tin Mines when a friend smashed his head against a tree. She galloped six kilometres back to the camp, threw two buckets of water over her thoroughbred's heaving flanks, stuffed a mattress into the back of a four-wheel-drive and drove back to bring out the injured man. Her mother, meanwhile, drove to what they call "the helipad", a clear spot on a hill — and the only place a UHF radio signal would work. A truckie at Swift's Creek heard the SOS, and called the helicopter ambulance at Traralgon.

The camp was in an old cleared paddock with one flat spot suitable for a helicopter. They lit a huge bonfire and turned their car lights on. The chopper landed safely, loaded the battered brumby runner, and had him in hospital in half an hour. He lived. So did another friend who, soon after, had his face smashed when his horse stepped in a rabbit hole and somersaulted at top speed, but he spent three weeks on a life support system. He still goes brumby running.

Injury is the obvious danger; getting "bushed" can be just as lethal if you run out of daylight. Dean tells how he "got nighted" when he was 18, after he and a mate were split up running brumbies at Wombargo.

Dean thought he knew his way but it was dark before he saw anything familiar, then he lost confidence. He could have gone on, blindly, or he could sit out the night. He didn't smoke then, and had no matches. But he did have four dogs and some animal psychology.

Working dogs are among the most faithful creatures on Earth. When chastised, they try to get close to their boss to win back his approval. "I gave them a belting, crawled into a hollow log and dragged them in with me and

they stuck with me," he says. It was the longest, loneliest and coldest night of his life. It might have been the last, except for the dogs.

When the sun rose he staggered out of the log, stiff and frozen, climbed on a horse as cold and hungry as he was... and rode back to camp in 10 minutes. He'd been on the right path all along. His mate was also lost overnight, and also survived.

The greatest brumby dog he'd ever seen belonged to Ken Connley. Called Husky, he was the wonder of the high plains: a freakish crossbreed with a dash of labrador, he could do the work of three good dogs. It's a sin for a dog to bite sheep; Husky would push them with his chest but never mark them. With cattle he would go in hard, heeling or nosing rogues like the toughest heeler. But when they went brumby running, he ignored cattle and looked for wild horses, ranging through the bush to find them, then barking to alert the riders. "I reckon he knew when we were after brumbies and not cattle because he saw the ropes in our hands," Dean muses.

When Husky was swept away in a flooded creek, Connley dragged him out, rushed him to Benambra and got a pilot to fly him to a veterinary surgeon in Bairnsdale. He was dead on arrival. Connley had him stuffed, and sometimes still takes him out in the bush, sitting the stuffed dog on the seat of his Toyota beside him.

Dean shakes his head at this. He's awful fond of his horse, Danny, he admits. But if the day comes that Danny breaks his leg in the bush he'll kill him and skin him and feed him to the dogs. That way, even in death, the horse would be useful to the end, the way he's been all his life.

"I'm not a sentimental bloke," he says.