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and rewarding.’



HEATH HARRIS

Central Coast craftsman saddle-maker, movie horse master, entrepreneur.

WORDS CATHARINE RETTER PHOTOS REED PLUMMER

Heath Harris was a horseman before he was a saddler. He started his working life as a ringer drafting mobs of cattle out in the bush where he found out the hard way that there were some saddles that helped you ‘stick’ to the horse and others where ‘you just knew if things went haywire, you’d end up in the dust.’

Then, a chance meeting with a saddler in Coonamble led to a fascination with saddle-making. Heath left the bush and headed for Sydney where he asked none other than the city’s most venerable saddle-maker, JP Talty, in the Haymarket for a job.

Talty’s name was synonymous with saddlery and he was known as something of a delightful eccentric. In spite of his trade, he was an avid collector of motorcars, as well as rare books, death masks of famous people, and even Hirohito’s elaborate saddle on which he was seated when Japan surrendered to the Allies at the end of World War II.

‘Old Talty was nearly 90 years old at the time and I didn’t have any experience but he took me on. There were no TAFE courses, you learnt on the job and one of the first things they started a young ‘un on was cutting and sewing stirrup leathers — lots and lots of them — and then I progressed to kneepads. They were made of sole leather, very tough to stitch. Talty taught me the art, the craft and the profession of saddle-making.’

Today, it’s Heath’s 50 years of saddle-making combined with his early background as a ringer, then a rodeo rider, before becoming Australia’s foremost trainer of horses for movies that make the difference in his saddles. Think, *The Man from Snowy River*, *Phar Lap*, *the Legend of Zorro*, *Breaker Morant*, *Gallipoli*, *The Young Black Stallion* and you’ll cover just some of Heath’s career as a trainer and horse master in Australia and Hollywood.

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Heath has also developed an ingenious way for his customers to be able to fine-tune the fit of their saddle for a particular horse and, if a horse has back irregularities, he can adjust the wool packing inside the saddle with the right tools to make an even contact.

He’d love to use local leather for his saddles but, where Australia once had 38 tanneries, there are now two and they can’t specialise

in everything. Even different parts of the one saddle need different tanning processes: vegetable tanning for heavier, stronger, water-resistant leather; chrome tanning for less rigid areas. It’s for these sorts of reasons that the leather for Heath’s work saddles come from Mexico, the dressage saddle leather from the UK, and jumping saddles from Argentina.



Heath stitches a bridle cheek strap, kept in place on a wooden horse.



The saddler at work on a multi-purpose stock saddle.

‘We get the leather delivered from where they are made best, wherever that is in the world. They come as flatpacks which we then shape around the saddle trees and sew and finish here at Mt White.’

Heath’s Hawkesbury River Saddlery is just up the road from one of the Central Coast’s sought-after restaurants, appropriately called ‘Saddles’, where saddles from Heath’s collection feature as barstools.

Back at the saddlery, the wonderful aroma of leather wafts over to you as you walk into the storeroom. Here you can find up to 30 different types of trees — the skeleton of a saddle — made from hoop pine and covered with rawhide.

Another area has shelves with layers of uncut and cut hides. It takes the equivalent of a complete cowhide to make one saddle, with different parts of the hide used for different parts of the saddle. Thick leather is used for critical, heavy wearing parts such as the fenders and stirrup leathers (fenders are the ‘mudguards’ of a saddle or, more correctly, ‘sweat guards’, protecting the rider’s legs from the horse’s sweat). Lighter-weight leather is used for areas that need to stretch around different shapes. Some parts of the saddle expose the rougher ‘flesh side’ of the hide — good for grip in the seat — other parts use the finished (and more slippery) outer side or ‘grain side’ of the hide.

‘The best part of the hide is the back leather, used for the seat,’ says Heath.

Step into Heath’s main workroom and you’ll see flat awls, sewing awls, round awl blades, curved awls, tack pullers, groovers, hasps and hafts, punches, edge creasers, tack hammers, doorknob bouncers, stretching pliers, bleeders and trimmers — and you begin to get an idea of the craft involved in saddle-making.

It’s difficult to talk to Heath without wanting to ask about his experiences in the movies. He has been the horse master, trainer,

stunt coordinator, and second unit director for over 40 feature films and around 120 commercials and television series. His partner in much of this has been wife, Krissy, who has also represented Australia internationally as a leading showjumper.

Heath has done his fair share of stunt riding but he’s best known for his liberty horses — where a horse performs without a rider and without a harness of any sort.

How do you train a horse to do that?

‘You make it fun for the animal,’ he says. ‘They don’t do it to please you, they do it because they want to, so you have to make it fun and rewarding.’

What’s the most challenging role you’ve had in the movies?

‘I did four films in Namibia. None of the Hollywood horse masters wanted to touch that. Namibia is desert. There are no horses there. They asked me could I do it. I said “sure” and then I had to figure out how.’

Each was a massive undertaking. For *The Young Black Stallion* movie, Heath had to find 40 Arabian endurance horses which he bought 1,000 km away in South Africa, as well as 10 camels.

‘We had to transport them, rest them along the way, then bring in stabling, veterinary care, horse yards, horse feed and water, the lot,’ Heath says. ‘Then I had six weeks to train them. The norm in Hollywood is six months! We trained them to run free over the desert sand as well as the famous race over Black Mountain that has a treacherous loose black rock surface. We had to make it safe even though it looked treacherous, and for the horses to run exactly how and where the director wanted them.’

‘If you don’t get it right you have a crew and equipment and actors standing around costing a lot of money. You *have* to get it right. And, most importantly, you have to make sure no animal is injured or placed under stress.’

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After their return to Australia, Heath and Krissy trained a new team of liberty horses for their own live shows in which Heath demonstrated how he trained horses to ‘lie down and die’, and how ‘wild stallion attacks’ were choreographed.

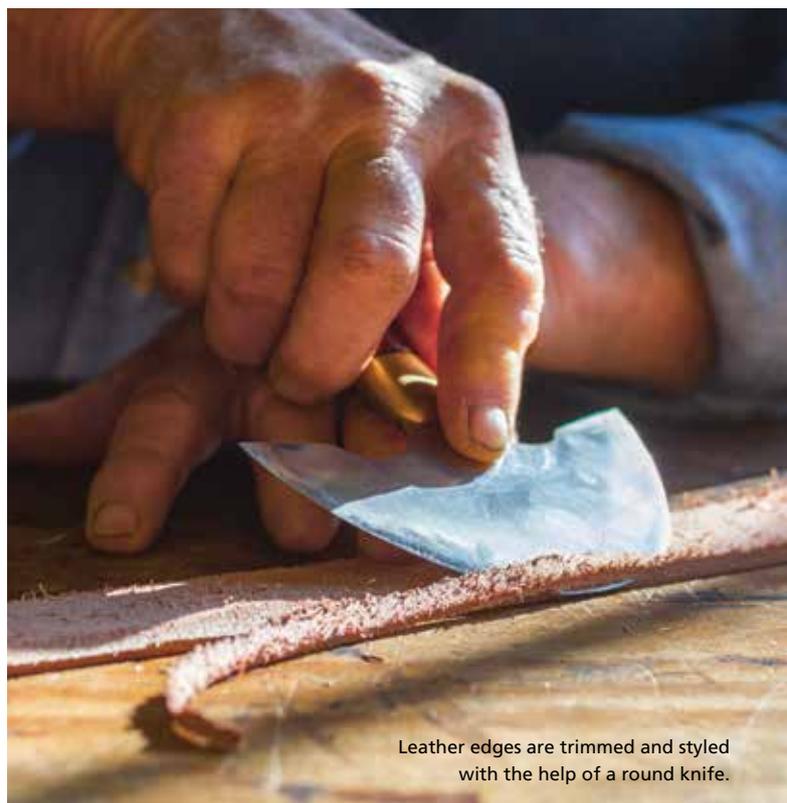
So, has Heath slowed down at 71 years? Not likely. He and Krissy are developing a major international equestrian property at Mangrove Mountain because, he says, ‘There’s a shortage of international-standard competition equestrian arenas in Australia.’

The 90-acre property, named *Stonewall* (after Heath’s favourite drop of wine), has a kilometre of newly built drystone walls. When completed, they hope to have stabling for 250 horses, four 100 metre x 100 metre arenas and six pavilions. They’ve already removed 10-metre high lantana and privet and hauled away six semi-trailer loads of scrap metal found on the property. They’ve eradicated noxious weed along Popran Creek and planted 3,000 shrubs and trees, with another 3,000 to come. They’ve built a sawmill on the property to cut their own ironbark timber to build fences and a bridge over the creek.

Their aim is to stage an annual 5-day show, the first annual derby in the southern hemisphere — ‘the Melbourne Cup of show jumping’ — and to make the venue available for hire at a highly competitive rate.

It’s been a long-term project, not yet halfway through, and not expected to be completed for another couple of years. ‘In some ways it’s my “Namibia challenge”,’ says Heath. ‘I like a challenge.’ To that, we’d have to add patience: it takes endless patience to make even one saddle, patience to train horses and, it seems, yet more years of patience to build his dream property. 🍷

Hawkesbury River Saddle Company
www.harrisentertainment.com.au



Leather edges are trimmed and styled with the help of a round knife.



Saddle trees made from hoop pine and covered in rawhide are the foundation of the saddle.