

# LECONFIELD - THE ORIGINAL OUTBACK SCHOOL

*by Heather Phillips*

An hour away from the town of Kootingal, New South Wales Australia, there are two outback schools, which both specialize in training young men and women to become Cowboys or Cowgirls or as spoken in the Australian lexicon, Jackaroos (male) and Jillaroos (female). Both schools are owned and managed individually by a father and his son. Brian Skerrett runs the 11-day school and his son Tim Skerrett, runs the 5-day school. Located near Tamworth, the heart and soul of Australian Country Music. Leconfield has belonged to the Skerrett family for four generations.

It is in a part of the region that makes up the Great Dividing Range, Australia's most substantial mountain range. The town of Kootingal was originally an Aboriginal Mission and its name traces back to the early Aboriginal inhabitants who spoke the Kamilaroi language.

Many international participants are assisted in gaining their second year Australian work visa and in finding employment. In fact, the days participated in the 11-day school go towards a second year work visa. This is enormously beneficial to the individuals who want and need to enhance their knowledge of rural workmanship in order to secure either short term or long term employment. But you don't have to hail from overseas. Many that attend the school come to learn the skills associated with finding work in rural Australia.

It's nigh on impossible to gain employment

on a cattle ranch or on a farm if you have no experience of the land.

Both Brian's and Tim's love for horses began at a young age. Brian believes horses are an asset to the human race and like his son sees the relationship riders have with their horse as important and one based on trust. Horses factor big at Leconfield. However if you have never ridden one before, it's not a problem. A bit of coordination is all you need.

There are also numerous rides included in both Schools and the scenery in this neck of the woods is truly spectacular. I'm ashamed to say that as an Australian hailing from Sydney I had never heard of Leconfield. Many urban dwellers could appreciate better the type of life that goes on outback if they had spent a few days there.



Tim and Blake



Brian





## Leconfield The 5-day Jackaroo and Jillaroo School

Like his father Brian, Tim has shared his knowledge and experience in farm work with thousands of students from all over the world for many years. Tim's 5-day school began as a shorter extension of Brian's 11-day one and it covers a lot of ground. There is no greater satisfaction for Tim than seeing the transformation of participants who have come to the school with an anxiety towards horses. Many leave his school having conquered whatever fear they had in this regard and in turn this brings to the student self-confidence, a natural benefit of conquering one's own fear.

Tim is an advocate for natural horsemanship (known to many as 'horse-whispering') and has been practicing what he preaches for over seventeen years.

He studied the Parelli Natural Horsemanship in 1998 gaining his level 1 and 2 certification. Tim cites natural horsemanship as understanding how a horse thinks and communicates. It's a symbiotic relationship between human and horse. Tim believes that, "you're not born a horse man but you can be made one".

The 5-day school starts with a lesson in grooming and saddling up, a lesson in natural horsemanship followed by a ride where one learns bush survival and where to find native Australian bush food, which Australians call 'tucker'.

The other 4 days include catching and saddling horses, whip cracking and lassoing lessons, barefoot trimming lesson (a more natural approach to hoof care; making sure the horses' hooves are worn down naturally so they don't experience overgrowth or splitting) sheep mustering, barrel racing on horseback (racing around pre-set barrels).







On a course: sheep shearing, a seminar on sheep, pasture improvement in the saddle, fence building, yarding and drafting cattle, calf wrestling and branding, swimming with horses (but not in winter) a demonstration on how to work with working dogs, maintaining saddlery and hours of fun learning Tim's preferred method of working with horses, natural horsemanship.

Like Brian's, the success of the 5-day school lies in the fact that this is a working property. Learning all the 'ins and outs' of farm life, combined with excitement and fun, makes it an experience of a lifetime.

Four years ago Tim's School began offering half day, full day and overnight rides. Folk from everywhere visit the school, random turn ups and school groups are the norm. Tim said he has never cancelled a group since beginning his school 16 years ago, a quality worth respecting. Participants also have the opportunity to learn traditional bush skills as well as take out their swag and sleep under the stars. A 'swag' is the Australian word for a bundle of personal belongings which were traditionally carried by shearers or those travelling long distances on foot.

Many people come to the 5-day school to tear away from the madding crowd! Tim calls it a 'digital detox' especially for the younger ones, having no wifi forces people to interact. The 5-day school though will obviously appeal more to those who can't afford to remove themselves from their regular lives for longer than a working week.

Tim and his wife Courtney (who is incidentally a wizard with the whip) have recently built a late 18th-early 19th century replica of a 'settler's cottage', which couples and families requiring private space can utilize. It's a great idea for families wanting to undertake the 5-day school but would also like 'family time' away from the school when night falls. This is why both schools in fact are also perfect for families desiring that memory-making holiday together.

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