

Fels still giving to Julia Creek

When it comes to the races in Julia Creek there is one person who has been involved for longer than most.

This person has seen horses come and go; jockeys come and go; and even trainers come and go.

This person has helped out each and every time they have been called upon.

Mrs Ellen Fels has been a familiar face at the Julia Creek races for over 30-years and even longer at the Julia Creek Pony Club.

Fels is now teaching the grandchildren of the children she once taught to ride.

She first rode as clerk of the course back in 1972 and reflects on her past in the thoroughbred industry.

"The first race meeting I helped out at I was just observing," Fels said.

The previous clerk of the course was leaving the district and had approached Fels to take over the role on raceday.

"There was a horse raring in the barrier and the jockey thought it was my fault and abused me," she said.

"After that I wasn't too sure whether I should take on the clerk of the course role."

Having a woman on the course was new to most, particularly the jockeys, but Fels was happy to continue helping out the Julia Creek Turf Club.

"A bit of swearing wasn't going to put me off," she said laughing. "The first day I was actually clerk of the course it all went off well."

Fels soon found that the racing officials didn't appreciate the vulgar language and discouraged the jockeys from using it.

So after an eventful beginning Fels became the regular clerk of the course and for years did the job on her own.

"Once the inside rail was erected I had to have help," she said. "It was too hard on a horse to get back to the finish from the barriers once we could no longer cut across the track.

"We then had one clerk to start and one clerk to finish."

A lot changes in 30 years.

Fels said the horses today were much easier to handle than the horses when she first took to the course, but that is not to say all horses were pig headed.

"The horses have been more educated now and don't seem as naughty," she said.

"I remember being told to not let a particular horse go as he was known to play up, but it butted up against my horse and was a real gentleman to lead."

Fels also said the jockeys' manners have improved from that first memory too.

"Most jockeys are very polite," she said. "We even get comments like 'thank you ladies' and 'wonderful job'."

Picking a horse to use for the job was easy for the horsewoman. "I used a horse that I used regularly at pony club.

"It was spot on. I used him for a good few years, and I knew he wouldn't kick."

Despite the racing tradition of grey horses being used as the mode of transport for the clerk of the course, Fels said she never got around to using a grey.

"I was always going to get a grey horse but I never got around to it," she said. "But we always wore the red jacket."

Fels' involvement with horses dates back to her time as a child growing up in South Australia.

Once she moved to Julia Creek in the early 1960s, Fels was asked to help out at pony club.

"I was asked to help out, but in the kitchen," she said. "I didn't want to be in the kitchen, but I did my year in there before I went outside to help with the horses."

RIGHT: Ellen Fels has contributed immensely to the Julia Creek Turf Club for 30 years
Jim Fels photo

FEATURE

Ellen Fels Julia Creek

BY BECCLIEMIE

Having worked at the Julia Creek Hospital for the past 40 years, Fels remembers some of her bosses not liking her enjoyment of horses as much as herself.

"One of the DONs (Director of Nursing) once said I was a really good worker until I got horse fever," she said jokingly.

Fels is obviously a strong supporter of country racing.

"I used to ride racehorses when I was younger at Beltana and Blinman (in South Australia)," she said.

"I had a few wins. I was the best jockey at Blinman one meet.

"Country racing is great. More of us should have a racehorse to make sure it keeps going."

Fels was recognised for her years of dedication to both racing and pony club in 2009 when she was awarded an Order of Australia Medal (OAM).

An achievement well deserved for a lady who has spent years making sure races in Julia Creek can go ahead, and that the children of the district know not only how to ride, but how to look after their horses. «

