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Outback Dromedaries

The finding, capture, training, sale & racing of Aussie's wild camels

BY HAL DRAKE

WEEKENDER AUSTRALIAN CONTRIBUTOR
PHOTOS BY HAL AND KAZUKO DRAKE

John Jewell never walked a mile to sell camels to Arabs. They came to him.

He basked in a business that abounds with billionaires in burnouses. Willing to travel from the United Arab Emirates to his outdoor showroom in the Australian Outback. There they bought four-footed Ferraris and Corvettes, not with fishtails, but that single tapered hump seen next to pyramids on travel posters.

Jewell was a wrangler in a helicopter over the Simpson Desert, seeking wildlife that was once a necessity but now a nuisance trampling over posted acres and breaking down fences. Using flash-and-sound thunder, he forced them into pens and sifted out of the best for a distant, oil-rich ruler who wanted fresh, fleet stock for his stable of racing camels.

Why would Crown Prince Fayed, one of the world's wealthiest men, go Down Under to buy a disused Dromedary? Did Lee Iacocca go abroad to buy a Bugatti or purchase a Porsche? Why, then, would Fayed disdain the native stock in his own hemisphere to shop

for camels? in Aussie? Wouldn't this make him a set-up for an oily huckster who sold lame horses with a false hump?

Nothing like that, Jewell insists. Fayed was a poor potentate before gas and oil was found under his sand. Arabs were conned out of easy millions, developing a hard-shelled suspicion of outlanders.

It made Fayed an astute businessman and Jewell learned his first lesson: follow any business script to the letter. To an Arab, once burned was always learned.

Besides, Jewell had what Fayed wanted—a plentitude of pure-strain camels that were narrow in the chest and long-bodied with long legs. Best of all, with the only wild camels in the world, Australia was a treasure trove of thoroughbreds—not the intermixed mongrels on Fayed's own ground, full of fierce and stubborn temper and fit only for long-haul caravans. The camels here were the single-breed Dromedaries that were brought in by Afghan drivers in the last century and used by explorers who opened the forbidding Outback.

Camels were ideal for the work. Rugged and durable, they were better than horses because they needed little to eat or drink and had twice the haul-and-pull capacity of a packhorse. But as frontiers widened, roads were built and wagons were powered by

popping cylinders, the day of the Dromedary was done. Some Afghans sorrowfully shot their mounts. Other camels were spared a finishing bullet by compassionate handlers who unharnessed them into a harsh wilderness, feeling that Allah would provide.

"They were right," Jewell shrugged. "Camels flourished." They were so prolific that decades later, farmers who inspected the wreckage of a fence ran out of profanity to

define a camel. By conservative guesstimate, there were some 200,000 of the useless and destructive creatures where the borders of Queensland, South Australia and Northern Territories collide.

This granted Jewell open license to be an airborne rustler, rounding up pests for profit. And it gave his life a drastic turn, pulling him away from the ulcerating grind of a big-city businessman.

Out of school at 14, Jewell was a business prodigy. In time, he got into the coming thing, computers, acquiring seven shops and all the headaches of success.

"After awhile, I had 40 staff, two repair centers. And all of a sudden, the computer business was running me, not me running the computer business. My life wasn't my own."

Jewell was buyer, advertiser and personnel manager with a turnover workforce. Less than honest labor lifted expensive parts and his shops were frequent targets of blunt-instrument break-ins—ordinary through-the-window burglaries or a truck driven through a shopfront, the engine idling while laptops were loaded aboard and carried away.

Jewell's brother was on the critical list after he encountered two intruders in one store and was stabbed.

Who, Jewell asked himself, needed this? Share by share, shop by shop, Jewell pulled loose, looking for a life that would give him a born-free feeling. That came at a New Year's Eve 1986 party.

"A very good friend said to me, 'Hey, I'm going to go into this camel race.'" Worn out and bored with business, Jewell told Peter Barry that he needed a break. This looked good. A 3,660-kilometer race that

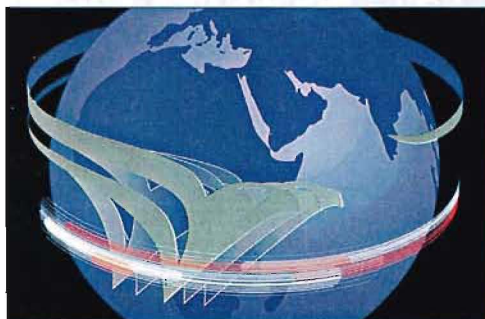
(Continued on Page 15)



Camel entrepreneur John Jewell tucks in at his rancho on the edge of the Shire of Esk forest.



'Round the turn and headed home are these non-Arabian Outback cowboys aboard their graceful mounts.



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UAE potentate comes calling to the Outback seeking racing camels

(Continued from Page 1)

would run for three months from remote Ayers Rock to the bustling resorts of Gold Coast, all done at the loping pace of the placid camel.

"It could have been giraffes or ostriches or anything," Jewell says. "I was just looking for that break."

So was wife Mary who also needed a recess from hard work and hectic pace.

Jewell talked himself in as Barry's back up. With boyhood experience in the Outback, he would drive both a competing camel and a four-wheel drive truck, a rolling warehouse of provisions and fodder.

Doing spade work for a future trade, Jewell was helpful to race organizers. He found them a vet who should treat lame or ailing animals. Alex Kinsen knew little about camels—few vets knew anything at all—but would learn as he went along. And while Jewell and Barry came nowhere close to winning—they fell out along the way—Jewell found vistas beyond the finish line.

Enter Fayed, ready to search for camels in Australia. He first needed a reliable vet, reasoning that a long-race veteran like Kinsen was his man. Flown to the UAE, Kinsen first treated Fayed's domestic stock, then told him where he could get better, fresher mounts—referring the Crown Prince to a former computer salesman.

Jewell got into the trapping trade, hiring a helicopter and foraging over the desert for a dense herd or a wriggling line of wild camels. Then he was on his quarry like a foxhound, lurching and turning, herding the beasts into large but portable pens with solid steel walls.

The traps could hold up to 200. Camels were rested overnight, then a sorting-out began. Besides John's hired wranglers, the Crown Prince's own retainers stood by to pare the herd with a nod or a waveoff.

The best 50 were prodded aboard road trains, a long chain of vans, then towed to the first settlement on the edge of the desert. From there, it was a thousand weary, gulp-of-coffee miles to a fairground in Darwin—just across the street from a Royal Australian Air Force base.

This had been deliberately chosen because it was the only far-north field that could take Fayed's Airbus—one of 23 he owns personally.

Training started and Jewell found that the camel was a gentle and intelligent animal, easily tamed and never broken like a wild mustang. A patient trainer could have

him on his haunches in a few days, and he would trustfully accept a human load from a kindly captor.

Then, crated, the camels went into the Airbus, a combined stable and luxury jetliner. Trainer and retainers rode ahead of the animals in first-class comfort, tended by hostesses and served *haute cuisine*.

Jewell never went along, collecting cash-on-the-counter payment a few hours before liftoff. He would never forget one of those payoffs.

"The gentleman was going to pay me in American Express Traveler's Checks because that's how they did business. We were talking about \$5.5 million and he was giving me hundred-dollar checks. He had this wallet about eight or nine inches long, six inches deep and five inches wide. And he unzipped this thing and opened it up and just started pulling out thousand-dollar lots of hundred dollar checks."

He signed only the top of the checks, without the confirming signature below.

Jewell exclaimed, "No, no, no. You have to sign them all." He wouldn't, and told Jewell: "Just take this to the bank."

Jewell did. The checks cleared.

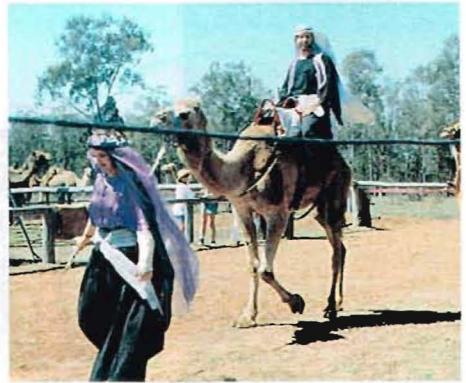
By this time, John and Mary had moved from Gold Coast to the Shire of Esk, a few hours inland. This is settled but authentically wild, with koala in tall, thick gum trees, shy but visible wallabies and a black dingo, a bush dog that glares balefully at visitors but never approaches. Their neighbors, Cedric and Diane Zischke, became friends and business associates, combining acres and assets. It would open yet another doorway to Jewell.

He and Mary traveled only once to the UAE, as Fayed's expense-paid guest in a Hilton penthouse. They never met him. Few did. A recluse like Howard Hughes, the Crown Prince was close to only a handful of friends and retainers.

Business flourished, and John ignored frowning skeptics who wondered what kind of con man would tell them he sold camels to Arabs. The camel trade continued, then stopped.

Enter Saddam Hussein, and a brief war that left the Persian Gulf boiling with tension. In 1992, the orders from a shaky area stopped, although John is confidently hopeful he'll get more of those royal commands. In the good days, before oil wells in Kuwait started burning, Jewell carefully kept some of those rejected camels—still pure and intelligent stock, capable of conceiving the first captive camels bred in Australia.

In the meantime, he's in touch with the sport of sheikhs, keeping his own camels in prime trim, standing at railside when Cedric and Diane run annual races on a quarter-mile track at the edge of their prop-



Decked out in Sahara gear comes Abou bin Boogie, ready to rumble on the camel track.



Diane Zischke in her harem garb and mask, all home-made.

erty. There isn't an authentic Arab in the crowd, but riders and attendants wear robe and turban that make them look like extras out of an old Jon Hall movie. All are designed and sewn by Diane, who at the last run, wore a black, bare-midriff costume and harem mask trimmed with gold baubles.

Races are brief and fast. The starting gun sends camels bolting forth in a graceful blur, then a long-stride gallop that is as precise as a quarter-horse trot. Flat hooves raise red dust the color of Georgia clay.

The action was constant. As soon as one sweaty relay of racers finished, nodded to cheers and dismounted, more haltered camels were led out and another race run. To many spectators, the pinnacle of the afternoon was a run by raw amateurs—the highest bidders in a charity auction to help troubled kids. There was also an intermission attraction—the running of gazelle dogs, which look like lap collies but are capable of bringing down full-sized venison.

Jewell felt his instincts as racer and trainer tingle, but hasn't been idled by a break in business. He is managing director of Aussie Bush Adventure Co., owned by the Zischkes. Jewell coaxes cityfied outlanders—mostly young Japanese and Koreans—into campouts close to bush and wildlife and beneath the glittering clarity of the Southern Cross. They're taught to make the campfire biscuits called "damper" and taken on supervised safaris to learn bush lore where it was born—told of the nomads who carried blanket rolls, called swags, across their backs and shoulders. This burden was also called a "Matilda" and when a swagman walked, the Matilda swayed along like a dance partner. A policeman taking a sullen swagman in tow might tell him: "You'll come waltzing Matilda..." And, of course, there is the relaxing sway of a camel ride. Jewell is watching, waiting, hoping.

"By next year, if we train those we have and they've got a lot of the characteristics His Highness likes, if they are even semi-successful, His Highness will buy."

One camel, sold for \$3,000, could be that champion with the golden gait—that constant, consistent winner whose earnings are shared with the breeder.

"One camel, one million dollars," Jewell ways with an easy-come, easy-go shrug.



Young Akemi Yoko-yama, visiting from Dai Nippon, scrambles aboard a seated camel, ready for something definitely different.

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