

50th Anniversary
COOPER PEDY AMATEUR RACING CLUB
1969 – 2019

It was during the celebrations following Michael Coro's baptism at Christmas time in 1968 that the idea of forming a Racing Club in Coober Pedy first arose. Discussions took place there between Father Frank Cresp, Ian Rankin the then owner of Mabel Creek Station, Bob Coro of Opal Inn, and Frank Titheradge a town leader, on a Racing Club with the aim of fostering a closer relationship between the people of Coober Pedy and those of the surrounding stations. Other enthusiasts on the idea were Ron Gough of Coober Pedy and Dick Nunn, manager of Anna Creek Station.

Charlie Kunoth, owner of Mt Clarence Station at that time, donated the land for the track, though he said when the site was chosen, "I'm not going to let you have this land for nothing. I want a cent a year for it." It is now owned by the Racing Club.

All early work to make the track, build yards and other facilities including a bar, were done by voluntary labour, their work recognised by being granted committee membership. Dick Nunn, a strong supporter was made the Patron of the club. In the early years Anna Creek supplied the majority of the gymkhana horses. Sometimes more than 80 horses were

walked the 160 kms to Coober Pedy, taking 3 or 4 days.

Ian Rankin of Mabel Creek was the first President of the Club, followed by Ron Gough, while Frank Titheradge was the first Secretary and Fr Frank Cresp the first Treasurer.

The first race meeting was on the October long weekend in 1969.

Stuart Nunn winning the Coober Pedy Cup in 1970 on Stuart Starter.
 Photo: Peter Gaus

The Race Club got off the ground financially with generous donations and interest free loans from local individuals and businesses, most notably the Coro family. From its inception the club has donated funds raised, to the Royal Flying Doctor Service, the Mine Rescue and the local Ambulance Service as well as other community groups, at one time donating \$15,000 toward automatic lighting of the airstrip.

It was traditional in the early years for the weekend to begin with a cocktail party, the very first in 1969 held at Faye Naylor's dugout, the event made memorable by the blow of a big dust storm. In following years this party was hosted by the Hospital Auxiliary at the Italian Club and was a great meet and greet starter for the weekend.

After a full day at the races on Saturday, many people used to attend the Race Club Ball, always held at the Opal Inn. The one exception was in 1976 when it was held at the school quadrangle, after the hotel burnt down. It was always THE social event of the year in Coober Pedy.

The race meeting was planned from its beginning to have thoroughbreds and stock horses compete in separate races and gymkhana events. It grew to having 10 races run on both Saturday and Sunday as well as gymkhana and novelty events, such as egg and spoon, musical chairs and barrel races. From its inception, the feature race on Saturday, the Coober Pedy Cup, has been sponsored and the cup donated by the Coro family of the Opal Inn, so the race has always been named the Opal Inn Coober Pedy Cup.

On Sunday, the feature race was the Ladies' Bracelet for which Tony Wong has donated an opal bracelet as the prize. Many other local businesses and individuals as well as others outside of Coober Pedy, too numerous to list here, have donated prizes for other races and events.

Cover and first page of 1976 programme

An important identity in the early days was the race caller Bob Kempe, the then owner of Mount Barry Station.

Hans Starter from Mabel Creek owned by Ian Rankin has perhaps been the greatest horse, winning the Cup 4 times as well as the Bracelet twice.

Other notable Cup and Bracelet winners were *Aimbury* winning 3 Cups and 2 Bracelets, *Gaconda Bey*, *Fire Beau*, *Markham*, *Lord Vauxy* and *Tia* each with multiple wins

Jockey Justin Nunn takes the honours winning 3 Cups and 4 Bracelets, just ahead of Stuart Nunn with 3 Cups and 1 Bracelet win. Rider Gary Birchmore deserves special mention winning the cup in 1977, 1979 and then again thirty years later in 2009.

Some of the most successful and notable owners and trainers have been Ian Rankin, Bob Kempe, Peter Giles, Neil Brett, Bill Pettie, Eddie Nunn, Tom Martin and the Macumba Syndicate.

The Opal Inn Coober Pedy Cup 1976 Photo: Brian McArdle

Pictures of the Race Meeting in 1987, from the Australasian Post, 6/2/88

Gymkhana events such as the Texas Barrel and relay races became very popular as is the last event on the program, the Stock Whip Challenge. Initially known as the Cadney Park Challenge, then later the Tony Thon Stock Whip Challenge, this has been sponsored in recent years by The Old Timers Mine. The current Tony Thon time trial prize sits at \$2,000 for whichever rider beats the fastest historic time.

Gymkhana Event 2012 Photo: Peter Rowe

Over the years there have been many changes to the races. Following Dick Nunn's death, horses were no longer walked over from Anna Creek but were trucked in from surrounding stations. Now horses are floated in from towns south of Coober Pedy like Port Augusta and Quorn.

Other changes over the years have involved the betting side of the race meeting. It was decided because of difficulties, not to have a tote and so bookmakers were invited to operate on the course. Then later, the betting side was done away with altogether, apart from "Calcutta" bidding on the two big races. It became more of a family weekend with additional fun events and more for children.

Camel racing was tried and ran for some years, then motor bike events were introduced, following the increasing use of motor bikes on stations.

In 2007 the decision was made to hold the Race meeting on a weekend in August to avoid the often hot, windy and dusty weather in October when it also clashed with events held on the long weekend in other places. This has proved to have been a sound decision.

Also in 2007, when it was recognised that the club facilities needed revamping, a design for the building resulted from discussions between Derek Rowe, Tom Curnow and Peter Rowe, the then President of the Club. An application for a grant was successful to fund the new development and the work was completed by voluntary labour in time for the race meeting in August of that year. In 2008 a new toilet block was built, finalising the upgraded facility.

In 2014, a fierce mini-tornado ripped the roof from the main club building which fortunately was covered by insurance.

First page of 2007 Coober Pedy Races programme

Winners of the Coober Pedy Opal Inn Cup 2012 - The Khan Family of Marree with Robert Coro Photo: Peter Rowe

Over the years, a highlight of the race meeting has been the race club poster, becoming a work of art in the hands of Mike Constantinou, a teacher at the Coober Pedy Area School in the 1970's. A spin off from this has been the Race Club mirror, manufactured in limited numbers so becoming a much sought after collector's item.

A major sponsor in later years has been and still is OZ Minerals. Consequently the name of the annual race meeting has changed to **The Coober Pedy OZ Minerals Races and Gymkhana**.

Now in 2019, with Club Patrons Jenny Gough and Stuart Nunn, the 50th Anniversary Race meeting will begin with a meet and greet at the Race Club on Friday night, with pig and lamb on the spit cooked by enthusiastic volunteers, followed by motor cycle events under lights. On Saturday there will be a full program of horse and motorbike racing, gymkhana and novelty events.

Thanks to the generosity of sponsors providing prize money to attract participants to the race meeting, and the hard work by volunteers who make the event happen, the aims of the founders 50 years ago hold true today. The local community, regional community and visitors all enjoy a family, social event which fosters a closer relationship and friendship between them.

The club's contributions to charities and local projects is a long tradition and is on-going. Since 2009, some of the donations made by the race club include: SA Ambulance Coober Pedy \$8150, Kupi Gliding Club \$7000, Coober Pedy Hospital Auxiliary \$5000, Coober Pedy Play Ground \$7000, Blue Light Police Club Coober Pedy \$2000.

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