



HORSES AND JOCKEYS RUSH FOR THE LINE ON MATAMATA BREEDERS' STAKES DAY 2015.



## Matamata Club racing ahead as an industry leader

The township of Matamata, nestled on a fertile plain close by the Kaimai Ranges that separate the eastern Waikato from the Bay of Plenty, boasts numerous attractions, not least of them the Matamata Racing Club.

Horse racing had its origins in the district well before the Matamata Racing Club came into being. In common with much of colonial New Zealand, it began as an entertainment amongst local Maori and pioneer farmhands, in this case on the 55,000-acre estate established by Josiah Firth in the 1870s.

An annual racing and sports fixture staged on the area of land surrounding the fortified Firth Tower east of the township took place on Boxing Day, with the equine events contested by local farm hacks. That became the foundation of the Matamata Racing Club, which in time relocated to grounds on the western outskirts of the town.

In 1904, however, when the Firth Estate passed to the Crown and was subdivided, the club went into recess with reserves of £20 placed in trust. Informal race and sports meetings continued at a number of regional venues until a meeting of enthusiasts in 1917 committed to the revival of the Matamata Racing Club with the aim of gaining a totalisator permit.

That was still some years in coming, but in the meantime the decision was made to secure a 112-acre block of land to the south of the town. The purchase was financed by a "joint and several" guarantee by club members and the property was vested in three trustees – G Johnston, J Price and P Quinlan.

The club's early years were far from plain sailing, with its survival depending on non-tote race meetings. However in 1923 Matamata, in conjunction with the Franklin (Pukekohe) and Morrinsville clubs, gained a totalisator permit for a race meeting at Ellerslie, from which Matamata gained a payout of some £600. The following year marked Matamata's first annual totalisator race meeting on its home ground and further strength came in 1926 when the Matamata and Tirau (Oxford) clubs amalgamated.

Racing at Matamata has continued since on the Hinuera Road property, with the original holding now comprising some 150 acres. The Matamata Plain, renowned for its fertility and world famous in a dairying and thoroughbred breeding context, is situated on the former Waikato River basin, where the country's longest waterway flowed directly north to the Firth of Thames and the Hauraki Gulf.

However, some 20,000 years ago the river changed course south of Matamata at Piarere, deviating north-west and eventually meeting the Tasman Sea on the west coast at Port Waikato. The former riverbed, added to by volcanic deposits - mainly of the Taupo (200AD) and Tarawera (1300AD) eruptions - was the foundation of the highly fertile farming region.

The Matamata Racing Club is centred on a left-handed racecourse measuring 1,623 metres in circumference with a 1600-metre chute allowing a back straight run of more than 800 metres to the first turn. Aided by the region's free-draining loam soil, the volume of racing and training at the venue has steadily increased over the decades, with trainers Bob Martin and George Cobb prominent in the years immediately after World War 11, then into the 1960s Bill Ford was another to lead the way in the training ranks.

The arrival in the early 1960s of former jockey Dave O'Sullivan went a long way to advancing Matamata's place on the racing landscape. A decade later he had risen to the top of his profession as well as bringing through others who would make their mark. His eldest son Paul became his training partner and younger son Lance

rewrote the record books for New Zealand jockeys, while others to advance through Wexford Stables included the successful transtasman trainer Mike Moroney.

Jim Gibbs, another former successful jockey and contemporary of Dave O'Sullivan, also went on to forge a hugely successful training career and likewise make a massive contribution as a mentor of jockeys and trainers. It's fitting, therefore, that the membership of the New Zealand Racing Hall of Fame includes Dave and Lance O'Sullivan and Jim Gibbs, as well as the champion O'Sullivan-trained and ridden horses Mr Tiz and Horlicks.

As with so many fields of sporting endeavour, success in racing leads to further success, as illustrated by Matamata's growth in recent decades as both a racing and training centre. From four annual race meetings in the 1970s, 14 are now staged there each season. On a monthly basis more than 700 horses make use of the training facilities, as illustrated by Matamata supplying close to 12 per cent of total New Zealand raceday starters and nearly 400 winners – amongst them eight of the country's 22 at Group One level – being trained locally in the 2013-14 season.

Led by a succession of forward-thinking administrators, the Matamata Racing Club has become a model of what is best both for its own future and that of racing in general. In the late 1960s a concept of investment by local studmasters led to the establishment of the Matamata Breeders' Stakes, which has since risen to Group Two status as the country's highest rated race for two-year-old fillies.

The J Swap Contractors Matamata Breeders' Stakes headlines the club's late February Premier race meeting, one of two Saturday dates along with the Team Wealleans Matamata Cup Feature raceday in early October. Matamata also hosts 12 midweek Industry race meetings, headed by the hugely popular December twilight Christmas at the Races fixture and including the South Waikato Racing Club's autumn date.

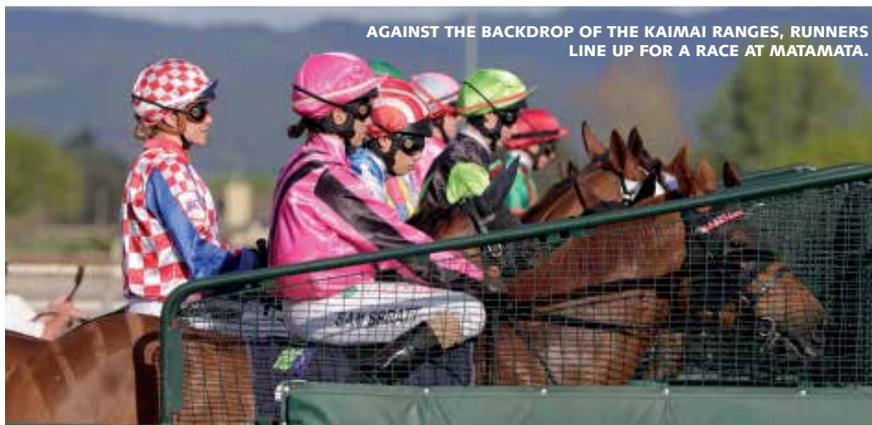
The development of its training facilities has included significant spending by the Matamata Racing Club on tracks and amenities. Some 15 years ago a major investment was made in a 20-metre wide "all-weather" sand training track, complementing plough and sand surfaces for fast work along with smaller sand and plough slow work tracks. The 30-metre wide course proper also has a designated jumpout track on its perimeter, complete with a set of four customised Steriline starting gates. A filtered circular swimming pool and weighing scales are other amenities available to all track users.



FASHION IS ALL PART OF THE FUN ON MATAMATA BREEDERS' STAKES DAY



MICHAEL COLEMAN (LEFT), TOMMY HAZLETT (RED CAP) AND LANCE O'SULLIVAN (SECOND RIGHT) ARE JUST TWO FAMILIAR FACES DURING TRACKWORK AT MATAMATA.



AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF THE KAIMAI RANGES, RUNNERS LINE UP FOR A RACE AT MATAMATA.

Earlier this summer the Matamata Racing Club completed the installation of a new boom and reel irrigation system covering the full width of the course proper. The \$500,000 project was funded by the club in conjunction with a loan from New Zealand Thoroughbred Racing's strategic development fund and a grant from the Racing Minister's Safety Development Fund. Matamata's new irrigation system has been in place for a matter of just months but the benefits have taken little time to become evident, along with the unanimous accolades of stakeholders.

Extensive investment has also taken place elsewhere at the Matamata complex, including more than \$2 million on four on-site training barns. The first two 40-box barns were constructed 12 years ago and another two barns of 30 boxes each followed three years ago.

Advancing its policy of attracting trainers to its facility, the club leases the barns under contract, with its current tenants Stephen Autridge, Graham Richardson, the Lance O'Sullivan-Andrew Scott partnership and Paul and Kris Shailer.

A further strength of racing at Matamata is the tremendous local sponsorship support it receives, both from within the industry with such as major studs Waikato and Rich Hill and veterinary operation Marks Ewen & Associates, as well as from the wider business community. Local businesses big and small find raceday sponsorship an attractive proposition, aligned with recognition of the racing industry's economic significance to the district combined with the opportunity to host clients through that quintessential Kiwi social pursuit, a day at the races. ■