

Barellan's New World Record



Barellan's New World Record- a 62-horse team!

"To us it was important to do it right, to have the horses drive and work as a team. It was really important that we weren't just trying to chase a number," Aleks Berzins explained.

"I knew Don Ross who had driven the Australian record 50 horse team with Blue Bunyan in Queensland (in 1985), so the seed was planted to match it for NSW and Barellan. "We had put the number at 54 at the end of the last year (2024) as an idea, but I was talking to Don Ross' wife in Queensland this year and she planted the seed about the 60 as Don had always aimed to drive 60 horses."

"We have lost Don now so I put together a few more horses and revamped the energy to make sure we got the 62.

Aleks contributes his horsemanship skills and knowledge to his greatest mentor, his grandfather, Sid Samuel, a passionate breeder of Belgian and Suffolk Punch draught horses.

"To have Steve Johnson and Bruce Bandy, who have been doing this forever, and the whole horse community, have been a mentor, I'm learning things all the time. This just shows what you can do when you love something so much. It's nice to be able to do things with a bunch of blokes who are passionate about it at the same time."

In 2024, 'they' (Aleks, plus Steve Johnson and Bruce Bandy) collectively put together a team of 35 draught horses, and they worked very well together, so the idea to expand on that just grew from there. Over half of the team were registered Australian Draught Horses, five registered Shires, three registered Suffolk Punch, some registered and unregistered Clydesdales and Percherons.

"We put a lot of confidence in the leaders – Hank, Lady, Digger and Margaret - it takes a long time to build. For Steve and Bruce, it has been years upon years and for me too – it can be 10 years in the making to get to this point where we have the right horses. This was the year to do it. Jason Gavenlock, Cowra, NSW, Allison Prentice, Kamarah, NSW, and Heather McFarlane, Barnawartha, Vic, also contrib-





Bruce Bandy, Aleks Berzins, Shane Carroll and Steve Johnson- a quick celebratory photo as the team is being unharnessed after their first breaking piece of history!

uted horses, and Shane Carroll was the brakeman.”
“It’s hard to get that many horses to do it – you can risk it and hope that it all works but we know it will work.”

Aleks admitted the build-up of excitement to the record attempt had been enormous.

Guinness, the authority on records, has accepted this as the largest team of draught horses pulling a fully laden wool waggon.

Owned by Ian Dahlenburg, Murrumbidgee, NSW, the historic Australian-built Bennett waggon weighed 3.8 tonnes and was loaded with 32 bales of wool from

the Flagg family, Moobooloolool, NSW, to give a total weight of 10.2 tonnes of load.

The huge team was driven entirely under voice command with no outriders nor handlers/walkers, four times around the 800m track over each of the two days of the festival.

In past times in Australia, teamsters would hook up double and treble teams to help get each other through wet, boggy or hilly areas of difficulty – 16 to 18 was a more usual number for bigger teams to take the wool clip from farms and stations to the rail head. Barellan itself once held a record in the 1930s for the largest number of horse drawn wagons of grain delivered to the town’s rail siding.

This 62 horse team at Barellan comprised of 15 spans of four abreast, plus two in the shafts at the back. It took half a dozen people about two and a half hours to harness the team up, and bring each span of four out at a time to put them in their place.



The horses were tied up, harness and unharnessed together in their spans of four, and their collective collars, hames, backbands & chains were also kept together, so that harnessing would be as efficient as possible - a 2-1/2 hour task for the 62!

Collecting and repairing the mountain of harness was a feat in itself. Many of the chains were provided by Noel Wiltshire. ALL horses wore Australian-made long-straw collars. Some of the team used standard Australian leader harness with backbands and hip straps, while some used ‘spider harness’. (Breeching, which is common in North America, is a foreign idea and not used here in this type of instance)

“I only have one set of reins – the majority of the team other than the leaders are tied in, making





First the shafters are put in, then the 'pin' horses - the first span in front of the shafts. These ones are often as big as possible



Each horse's trace chains were 11 feet long, so with 15 spans, that stretched to 165 feet per side, plus the two shafters and the 22 foot waggon – made it nearly a 200 foot long item. The team chains at the back are heavier, considering they take a greater load than the front ones do.



Steve Johnson 's span of four follow him out to their place in the team. Steve has done some liberty work with them.

Congratulatory messages from around the world included one from Sue Meggers, the daughter of the late Dick Sparrow, of Iowa, USA, and who single handedly drove a 48-horse hitch in the Cotton Bowl Parade in Texas, earning a spot in the Guinness Book of World Records in the 1976.

More than ten thousand tourists descended on sleepy Barellan to witness not just this, but also a new modern record of a team of 40 bullocks (oxen) as well. Bullock driver Phil Thomson OAM, of Numinbah Valley, Queensland, teamed up with fellow Queensland bullocky, Matt Stanford, Darcy Quinn, of Adelong, NSW, and Joey Reedy, of Forbes, NSW, to create the composite team.

all horses in the hands of the leaders. There are a couple of sets of reins, one into the body of the team and one into the shafts and to the pins. (the 'pin' horses are the span in front of the shafters or wheelers- it's a term from the bullock driving days for the ones in front of the pole.) Everything else is at the peril of the leaders up the front wanting to get the chains tight and hold them in there."

As the record team moved off, there was a brief hiccup when the offside lead rein a became hooked under a spreader bar, but that was quickly remedied, and they moved off like old hands after that.

The 40 head eclipsed the previous record at Barellan of 28 set on October 3, 2025, and set a new Australian record for the 21st century on October 4, 2025,



Some team horses wore standard Australian leader harness with hip straps and spreader bars, (left), while others wore spider harness (above)



'The Hawk' and her load of wool - nearly 10.5 tonnes in total



Barellan- 2 January 1932 the town pulled off an incredible feat of 116 teams, over 600 horses and 13000 bags of wheat delivered in just ONE day

As well as the big teams, led classes, ploughing, turnout classes, ridden and obstacle courses occupied many competitors all weekend, while other heavy horse exhibitors attend to just participate in the parades or demonstrations. Russell Bradford and family coordinated a big group who drove 30 horses in 13 waggons, travelling a couple of hundred kilometres to get there from Stockinbingal NSW over the previous 10 days.

Barellan's other unique claim is the largest working display of mixed species draught animals, considering they also have camels in harness, donkeys, mules, and goats, as well as all the horses and bullocks.

The dates for 2026 are 2nd to 4th October, at Barellan, NSW, Australia – about halfway between Sydney and Adelaide!

Compiled by Ian Stewart-Koster, from discussions, and from interviews by Kim Woods.

Photos courtesy Kim Woods & Ian Stewart-Koster

at the Good Old Days Festival, Barellan, NSW. The national record stands at 102 bullocks set at Cessnock in the 1980s when the timber industry was at its height in the 20th century.

The team comprised dairy breed and beef cross bullocks pulling a Bennett tabletop wagon also loaded with wool bales.

Phillip said it was unlikely that number would ever be broken as the timber cutting and milling industry had declined.



Hank, Lady, Digger and Margaret became the face of the weekend for ten thousand spectators - a very memorable occasion!



Dick Sparrow's record team from the mid 1970s in USA. His daughter, Sue Meggers, was quick to send congratulatory messages, and later generously posted some souvenirs and memorabilia from Dick's team's efforts, to the Barellan committee.



Every one of the 62 collars used, were long-straw Australian-made collars



A new initiative for 2025 was the Tim Peel Cup. This is first in Australia, an encouragement award for young teamsters under the age of 30 which recognises their skills and knowledge, and in doing so promotes the art of the teamster driving any species of draught animal. It was well-contested, and Joey Reedy (above left, aged 18) was the winner. Judges Andrew Duyvestin and Dave Pitstock are behind Tim Peel.



Matt & Kim Fitzgerald gave cultivating demonstrations all weekend - there had not been sufficient rain for a harvesting



Phillip Thomson OAM with a scale model log waggon made from flooded gum- built by Allan Langfield from Wagga



Elemer Showman was 2nd in the ridden Clydesdale class, and shown by Eddie Davis, was 2nd and reserve champion gelding. Eddie also won Junior Handler under 16 years. The led classes were judged by Sarah Kent from New Zealand, who attended with her mother Sue, and sister Emma. Sue Kent, a tremendous historian of the breed, has been breeding and exhibiting Clydesdales since the 1960s under stud name 'Glen' near Christchurch.



Undoubtedly a TEAM effort - many hands make light work, and it sure was heavy work over many months to reach this pinnacle



Sam Weir with Misty Park Duelling Banjos- 2nd in the led stallion 4 years and over, 1st 4-wheeled turnout and and champion turnout. Stephanie O'Toole won the 2-wheeled turnout.



Jason Gavenlock was 'Champion Ploughman' this year, winning the Norma Zingel Memorial Trophy, driving something a bit different from his usual Australian Draught horses



Henry Lawson's great poem, 'The Teams' is most apt here, especially the aspects of dust!

A cloud of dust on the long white road,
 And the teams go creeping on
 Inch by inch with the weary load;
 And by the power of the green-hide goad
 The distant goal is won.

With eyes half-shut to the blinding dust,
 And necks to the yokes bent low,
 The beasts are pulling as bullocks must;
 And the shining tires might almost rust
 While the spokes are turning slow.

With face half-hid 'neath a broad-brimmed hat
 That shades from the heat's white waves,
 And shouldered whip with its green-hide plait,
 The driver plods with a gait like that
 Of his weary, patient slaves.

He wipes his brow, for the day is hot,
And spits to the left with spite;
He shouts at `Bally', and flicks at `Scot',
And raises dust from the back of `Spot',
And spits to the dusty right.

He'll sometimes pause as a thing of form
In front of a settler's door,
And ask for a drink, and remark `It's warm,
Or say `There's signs of a thunder-storm';
But he seldom utters more.

But the rains are heavy on roads like these;
And, fronting his lonely home,
For weeks together the settler sees
The teams bogged down to the axletrees,
Or ploughing the sodden loam.

And then when the roads are at their worst,
The bushman's children hear
The cruel blows of the whips reversed
While bullocks pull as their hearts would burst,
And bellow with pain and fear.

And thus with little of joy or rest
Are the long, long journeys done;
And thus — 'tis a cruel war at the best —
Is distance fought in the mighty West,
And the lonely battles won.

H. Lawson.



The record team of 40 bullocks - 20 spans of two abreast - a wonderful composite effort from Phillip Thomson OAM, Matt Stanford, Darcy Quinn and Joey Reedy.



Maintaining the variety of draught animals, Rodney Sansom's family, aided by Peter Towle, brought working camels, donkeys and goats in harness, while Noel Wiltshire had a team of mules



Rodney Sansom at left. Above, Jan and Steve Johnson and family found time to give chaff cutting demonstrations as well as being a significant part of the big team, while Bruce Bandy managed to also give some mowing demonstrations.



For the 1958 Brisbane Royal Show or Ekka as it is fondly known, in discussion with Frank Robertson (councillor) and Billy Kinghorn (chief redcoat) it was decided that some form of new entertainment was needed- an exciting horse-based act for the night show. So chariots were built in a nearby workshop by Jim Stafford, and with Don's brother Jim, Don organised the chariot races for what was then called the Bushmen's Carnival. (Bear in mind this was a year before Charlton Heston's 'Ben Hur' was released to the public!) That began a lifelong movement of show entertainment up and down the eastern coast of Australia.



A 1958 press photo of Don in his first chariot at the Ekka that year for the Bushman's Carnival

Don Ross – Horseman

4th August 1934 – 21st December 2024

Obituary

“I once heard someone say, there are horsemen, and there are horsemen, and then there is Don Ross, so I think that just about sums him up,” says Judy Ross, Don's wife of 61 years.

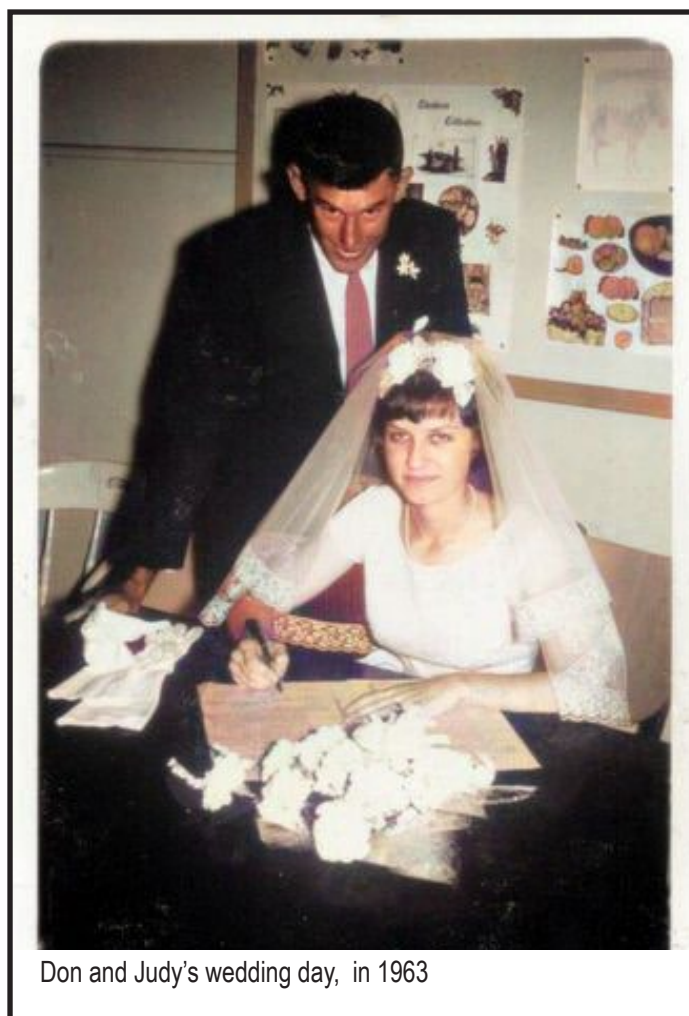
“Don had a truly remarkable life, but what he did with horses was as natural as breathing to him, it was his oxygen. His life was horses and family and everything he did and achieved was for us. He loved his children and grandchildren, and he was so proud of them all and of the amazing people they are. He was not a man to talk about himself or what he had done in his life, but I often heard him having a quiet little boast about what Jenny, Donny and his grandchildren were doing with their lives, when he talked to his mates.”

A book or a set of encyclopedia could be written about Don and his achievements in the horse world, so this will be a tiny summary.

Don married Judy in 1963, and a few months later Don headed off with Bill Bolton, driving his horse teams along what was the world's longest horse-drawn coach trip- 3000 miles from Port Douglas in north Qld, to Melbourne, to raise funds for the Royal Flying Doctor Service. That took three months and one week.

John Osborne recounts “The teams and of 5 coach drivers were totally controlled and managed by Don Ross who Mr Bolton considered as “the best of the best ever Cobb & Co Coach Driver.” They raised £66,000, which the Queensland State Government

subsidised pound for pound, the New South Wales Government – 10/- per pound, and the Victorian Government gave 5/- per pound. “That was a fair whack of money in those days” Don recalls.



Don and Judy's wedding day, in 1963

Daughter Jenny was born in 1964, and son Donny in 1967. In 1968 the family moved to Belmont (a suburb of Brisbane) and thereafter every weekend was either at a show, at the trots or a rodeo.

Don became well known for movie work, and one day, (as all good stories go...) Don saw an advertisement in the Brisbane Sunday paper – WANTED – 20 Clydesdales for a movie. Actually, one of Don's mates saw the ad and told Don who had had up to 70 heavy horses by them.

Don phoned the producers, and the three directors flew up to discuss “things” with him. They asked for a price, and agreed then that Don would “do” it since they also had had no luck sourcing a team elsewhere. The only hiccup was that they did not communicate with Don about dates and he was left in peace for twelve months. In the meantime, Don had bought a few more horses, and sold a good few, then the 1977 phone call came out of the blue “Are

you ready to go?”. They'd been short of funds earlier hence the “go-slow”, but now things were ready to roll from the directors' point of view.

Don “scraped together” a team - not entirely the originally intended horses - and made preparations to go up to Charters Towers for the filming which was to take three months.

The film adaptation of the book ‘The Irishman’ required a 20 horse team pulling a large box wagon. (six spans of three abreast, plus two back in the shafts) It was filmed around Charters Towers, and while Paddy was seemingly driving the team by voice command, Don was sometimes lying in a false bottom built into the wagon and steering the leaders with very long reins! Other times he stood just out of the scene, and called them by voice command as they were well-used to. Don organised the whole team, and helpers, and the movie was very popular. For the premiere of the movie, the team was trucked to Sydney, and they drove the team of 20 over the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

In some of movie scenes, two big boxes can be seen on the back of the waggon – they housed water tanks which were filled up to give added weight and therefore traction when braking, otherwise an unladen waggon mightn't be much of a load for a twenty-horse team, and when going down steep banks, would throw an unnecessary load upon the shafters.

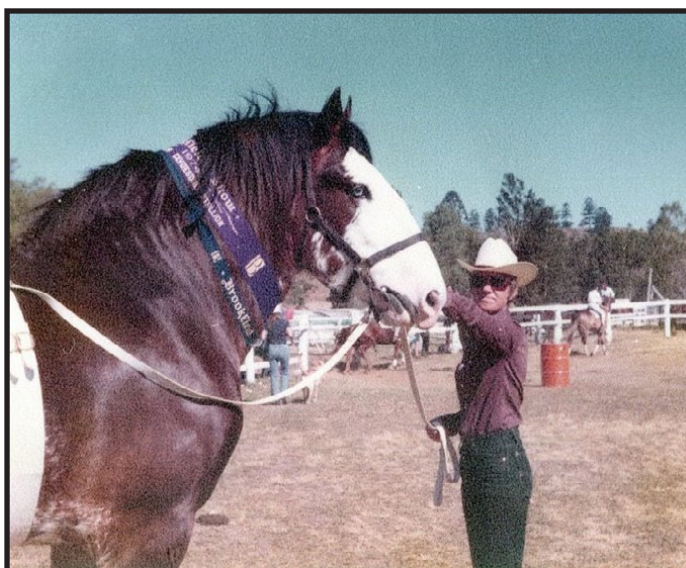
On one occasion, while crossing the Leichhardt River, they became hopelessly bogged – the movie crew had dozed a cutting down into the creek and onto a sticky silty backwash. The team pulled the waggon down through the cutting and onto this mound where the waggon promptly sank down to the naves [wheel hubs].

They jettisoned the water from the tanks, then tried using a bulldozer to move the waggon. The dozer became bogged. In time, Don worked the team and with a few whacks from some biggish branches, the dropped down and hauled it out by themselves. In the movie, Paddy walked the team down to the water – a one-take-scene – and he coaxed the leaders into the river saying “Come on, my beauties, come on” whilst he was riding Sally, one of the team mares. In the background, (unseen in the film), two kids with a handful of pebbles were employed to toss them at subsequent horses to get them into the

water and through the river.

Other movies Don was involved in were the Man from Snowy River, Wild Ride of Cobb and Co and the opera Aiada, plus the big Ben Hur re-enactment in Sydney.

Don's wife Judy bought the Clydesdale stallion, Valmont Hiawatha, and they started breeding many of their own draught horses. Hiawatha was three times Champion Clydesdale Stallion at Brisbane Royal Show (1974, 76 & 77) and the Ross family was in constant demand with requests for carriages for weddings and funerals, as well as general rides. At one stage they had 300 of their own horses!



Valmont Hiawatha with Judy Ross at Brokfield Show
He was champion in 1974

Jenny says, "Every year our family "holiday," a working one of course, was spent at the show supplying horses for all manner of main ring entertainment including Blessing of the Plough, Chariots, Robbery of Cobb and Co, Roman Riding, Waggon Races, the Cavalcade of Transport, transporting the Governor, Governors General and Queensland Premiers for the Official Opening of the RNA on People's Day. Dad became Horse Superintendent at the Ekka from 1982 until 1996.

Dad supplied horses for the Queensland Mounted Police and for many events, the phone would ring, an event would be suggested and no matter how many horses and men were needed it was always a "Yes". Even if he didn't have the horses available, with his uncanny ability to get the right horse for the job and have the reliable men behind him the job

would get done and done well."

Graham Daly recounts, "In 1976 the Ekka celebrated its 100th show and the centre ring night program was an extra special event, the feature nightly act being The Robbery of Cobb & Co coach.



Don with the team and coach built by Ernie Yates, in a 1988 Ekka grand parade- the Bicentenary year.

As the announcer narrated the story of Cobb & Co and its role in carrying the mail and passengers, Don drove the five-in-hand sedately around the ring, with his trusty guard Bob Henderson carrying a real 12 gauge shotgun beside him. When narration got to the part where "bushrangers were a constant threat", six wild riding felons would burst onto the track firing real .45 colt revolvers and Don let 'em go flat out.

The chase was on and Bob returned fire, shooting two of them off their galloping horses, Don Bourke and Graeme O'Keefe alternated, but Alan Storie got shot and took a fall every night.

The other four bushrangers overtook the coach and grabbed the leaders and pulled them up and proceeded to rob the coach and the passengers of their valuables, all to no avail, the announcer would declare "but the troopers were never far away".

Three in period uniform galloped out to save the day, Doug Conway, Warren Bruntflet (Brumy) and yours truly, (Graham Daly) firing our revolvers and killing two more felons and arresting the other two and then escorting the coach to safety.

As we did, Merv Ross would drive in with a bay clumper (draught) mare pulling a tipdray to pick up the dead. We played to a packed house every night and the crowd went wild. I can't remember when there was a larger audience.

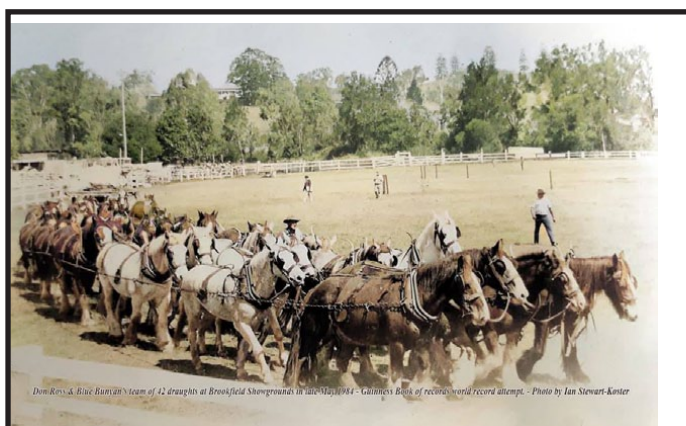
The Queensland Police supplied the weapons and

loaded them with blanks. The authentic noise of the gunfire was terrific and added to the spectacle.”

In May 1984, with Bill Kay’s suggestion for the Gentle Giants field day at Brookfield, Don and Bluey Bunyan started assembling a team of 42 horses to pull an old tabletop waggon of Blue’s. This was an attempt at a world record, but apparently Dick Sparrow had beaten them to it and nobody told them! Not to be outdone, for an Australia Day festival at Carrara near the Gold Coast in 1986, they assembled and drove a team of 50 draught horses – 12 spans of 4-abreast, plus two back in the shafts. But this was apparently somehow not a record either... still it was a tremendous feat for the era, and gave many Aussies a very appreciative and unique glimpse into the old ways this was done.



The 42-horse team at Brookfield’s Gentle Giants field day in May 1984. Helpers were Bob Bone on brakes, Doug Heiner, Brad Ryan, Don (beside the offside leader) and Blue Bunyan (beside the nearside leader)



The team at Brookfield. Here, Don was almost 50, while Blue Bunyan was 56 years old.

Don Ross was invited to be Clerk of the Course at Albion Park race track, an honour he held for 38 years.

In 2009, he received the Brisbane Royal Show’s highest award being named the 14th Ekka Legend- a fitting tribute to his almost half a century involvement, none deserved it more.



Don, with David Bolton, son of the late Bill Bolton, and John Osborne OAM, presenting him with the first Cobb & Co Meritorious Award in May 2024. They are standing in front of coach #100 which he drove the 3000 miles from Port Douglas to Melbourne in 1963.

Don was Patron of the Qld Branch of the Commonwealth Clydesdale Horse Society from 2007 to 2023, and was in 2024, awarded the Cobb & Co Museum’s first Meritorious Award for services to the harness horse and coach industry and history. He had numerous citations and Life Memberships of harness racing clubs.

Some health issues intervened when Don was in his mid 80s, necessitating a hospital stay with a perforated bowel, kidney dialysis three times a week for 4-1/2 years, and a heart attack in 2023, but Don was looking forward to turning 90 in August 2024, as well as being involved in the Cobb & Co Centenary trek from Surat to Yuleba. Fortunately he achieved both!

On the morning of his 90th birthday, Judy could not find him. He’d saddled his old favourite redcoat horse ‘Blue’ early, and had gone down the road for a ride!



On the road with the coach between Surat and Frogmoor Changing station, with Donny as offside.



At Bainbilla changing station north of Surat, August 2024, aged 90.

Don Ross had been a tremendous and positive influence throughout his life, to SO many, for SO long. "Legend" doesn't even come close to describing him!

Ian Stewart-Koster

When Don Ross Drives the Coach

A poem written by Geoff Elliott

He sits with his foot on the wheel brake
 With the reins loosely held in his hand
 The collars are loose on the shoulders
 And the leader bars rest in the sand
 The hocks on slack traces are brushing
 There's a stamp from the big bally bay
 As heads toss and jangle the snaffles
 All restless to be underway.

Then he gathers the ribbons with purpose
 And calls up the centre lead's name
 With a whistle to tighten the traces
 And as one, the five rise to the game.
 The thoroughbrace creaks with the movement
 As swindle bars lift to the fray
 Twenty toe clips dig deep in the gravel
 And the Cobb and Co coach is away!

They swing through the gates to the roadway
 Each horse willing and eager to run
 But his voice holds their pace 'til they're steady
 And they're trotting and pulling as one.
 He feels every mouth with his fingers
 And he watches how every horse moves
 As the the hills at a canter are conquered
 And the miles are flung back from the hooves.

Ears forward with manes and tails flowing
 What a sight as they sweep round a bend
 There's no whip just his voice or a whistle
 When to slow up and when to extend
 Through the great coaching days are now history
 And the back country roads are now passed
 What he knows is a treasure of lifetimes
 So the romance of driving will last

There are many who'd covet his knowledge
 They'd give gold for his touch on the reins
 For his instinct to understand horses
 And the magic that pumps in his veins.
 His exploits have rewritten history
 With a record beyond all reproach
 The past comes alive for our pleasure
 When Don Ross is driving the coach.