

A SHEARING TO REMEMBER

They were scattered around the shearers mess, a dozen hard men, quick to joke or take offence. Some were playing cards and a couple were slacking in easy chairs, legs pushed towards an unlit fire. I was making a sandwich with an old bent bone-handled knife.

Suddenly the door swung open and a figure was outlined by the setting sun. We looked up, squinting into the light. The time it took for the man to enter the room was time enough to get a good look at him. A big man, but light on his feet and dressed to the nines with the flashy touch of a bowler hat and gloves.

He certainly had our attention. Yarns stopped mid telling and the card game was forgotten, along with my sandwich building.

“Who’s the ringer here?” he asked. No one said a word but he must have caught a few of us glancing at a thick set bloke sitting on a straight backed chair. The new fellow stepped up to the seated man who looked up as he ran a rollie along his bottom lip.

“If you are him I will relieve you of that position first thing tomorrow morning” he said. They eyed one and other for a moment until the new fellow reached out his hand and with a big smile said, “How are ya mate, My name is Bill Greig.”

“Jackie Howe,” replied the seated man, taking the offered hand and returning the smile.

Ah yes, that moment, late on a Sunday afternoon in the shearers mess at Cordillo Downs in the top corner of South Australia was a moment that I shall never forget.

All of us knew that we would be witness to something shearers would be asking about for years to come. Something that we would talk about in every shed we shore at from then on - about the meeting of the two greatest shearers that the world has ever seen, Bill Greig and Jackie Howe.

Jackie Howe, world champion with both blade and machine; the man who shored 321 sheep in one day at Alice Downs Station in October of 1892. I was shearing there with him that day and I reckon that he could have gone on and shored 330 except that the other blokes got him to knock off. They knew that he had the world record and started to tickle him and got on his goat. Seemed funny at the time but I wish now that they had let him keep going. No one should stop a bloke when he is doing something special like that.

Anyhow, the other bloke, the Tasmanian called Bill Greig, was known to us all but this was the first time that any of us had set eyes on him, except for the overseer who had met him at the Melbourne Cup and talked him into coming up here to shear with Jackie Howe. Bill Greig regularly shored over 250 a day and was renowned for making an especially clean job of them. Like Howe, Greig had been the ringer at every shed they had shored at for the last ten years.

If you visited any shed in the country the topic of who was the best shearer, Howe or Greig, would often come up and I had seen more than one fight start over a difference of opinion.

Monday morning in the shed we found ourselves speaking to one another in hushed voices. Howe and Greig never spoke a word. You could see that there was something going on inside each man, a concentration of attention perhaps. Both men had a look in their eyes that I have only ever seen once since. It was when Les Darcy walked down the aisle on his way to the ring for a world title fight.

Everyone realised the importance of what was about to take place and the fact that I was there and would be shearing alongside these two great men gave me a funny feeling down the back of my neck.

Both shearers were standing with their hands on top of the catching pen doors when the bell rung. They had their sheep out and the bellies off while most of us were still reaching for the cords to pull our machines into gear.

Blow for blow they shored and they continued like that all morning with never a sheep between them.

Morning smoko came and the tally board read;

Howe 72

Greigg 72

The day went on and the pace slackened not a bit. By knock off time the tally board had both men still equal;

Howe 285

Greigg 285

The second and third days came and went and both shearers had increased their daily tally slightly. They shored as if in a trance. The ease with which they seemed to shear, their speed and co-ordination was hypnotic. It looked like they were doing some sort of dance. They were sweet to watch.

By the end of the week a small crowd had started to assemble to witness this superb match. They had come from neighbouring properties and they said that more were on their way. The tally board now read;

Howe 1433

Greigg 1432

After a week's shearing there was only a sheep in it and with another three days to go either man could finish on top.

Over the weekend more and more people kept turning up. Word had spread and anyone who could get there wanted to see the last two or three days. There were a lot of shearers in the crowd and it seems that many of them had just walked out of their sheds mid shearing. They knew that this would be the

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greatest event that they would ever be likely to witness and the sheep would just have to wait. Apparently some of the Cockie's went crook but most of them finished up coming as well.

All-in-all there must have been close to three hundred people there on those last days. Most unrolled swags and slept outside. Some had their own tucker but apparently the cook made a killing flogging extra meals.

Come Monday morning and we were all up early and the day looked like being a real scorcher. It was already 90 degrees and not yet seven in the morning. Both men paced themselves a little this day, as if by agreement, although I am sure that they never said anything to each other. I reckon that neither of them wanted to bust themselves because tomorrow would be cut out and they would have to 'have-a-go' whatever the temperature.

It was Tuesday morning and every vantage point in the shed had been taken by six. Howe and Greig had now shorn exactly the same number of sheep. I was as nervous as a kitten and by the look of the others they were as bad as me. We all wanted to see which shearer would come out on top and we all wanted to put up good tallies with so many watching. We also knew that history would judge us by how we shored today, alongside Howe and Greig.

During the first run the pace was incredible. Howe shored 80 and Greig 81. At smoko both shearers sat with eyes glazed. The temperature inside the galvanized iron shed was cruel. Someone had stuck up a thermometer on the wall and it showed 100 degrees.

The run before lunch was more of the same, neither man yielded an inch. Occasionally one would get in front by half a sheep then the situation would be reversed. The crowd watched in silence. I don't believe that a bet was placed or a joke was told that day. Everyone stood in one place, transfixed, hardly believing what they were witnessing.

The pace of these two great shearers dragged the rest of us along in their wake and every man shored at least thirty more than they had ever shorn before. I shored 278, not having previously shorn more than 240.

It was getting towards knock off time and we were shearing like we weren't human. Exhaustion and pain had swept over and left us - we shored on. Never a man faltered on this day and I still believe that it was the greatest feat of endurance ever seen in the outback, a place where endurance is required daily for survival.

It was four in the afternoon with the thermometer showing 103 degrees and both men on pace to create a new world record.

Howe and Greigg was shearing blow for blow, as if joined together by a rope. Sweat was pouring off us all. It ran down our foreheads, stinging our eyes and blurring our vision. It dripped off our noses and our hands were that slippery that we could hardly hold the handpieces. One of the roustabouts was giving Howe and Greig drinks as they shored, to save them time.

A murmur went through the shed and the overseer knelt by each shearer in turn. Cut-out was in sight. Did we want to shear on for an extra hour to finish the sheep?

The answer from each man was the same. Yes. Knock-off time came and went. We shored on.

The roustabout yarding the sheep had arranged the penning so that the rest of us finished some time before the champions. Although we had just completed a remarkable shearing feat we didn't congratulate each other, we joined the spectators and just stood, watching, in silence. One of the visiting shearers announced that there was still less than a sheep between them.

It should have been impossible but Howe and Greig seemed to have dug something out from deep in themselves and had lifted their pace. I could hardly believe what I was watching and I still can't find the words to properly explain what I saw. Their speed was stunning. You could hardly comprehend what

they were doing. They seemed to flow over and around the sheep in one continuous motion and the fleeces just fell away.

Fifteen minutes went by. They were both on their last sheep. Howe finished first. Greig was three blows behind. Both men were now leaning over their catching pen gates, facing away from us.

We stood in silence as the overseer added up each man's tally. Funny what your mind remembers but I can recall that it was so quiet that I could hear the ticking of the pocket watch on the bloke next to me.

The overseer looked up from his book and ran his gaze slowly from one end of the shed to the other, then announced, "Howe 342, Greigg 342. Howe finished first."

It seems hard to believe but after seven days of shearing, many days at close to world record pace, not a sheep separated these two remarkable men. They had smashed the existing world record but neither would be able to claim it as they were shearing out of hours.

No one spoke. Howe and Greigg turned and looked at the crowd, almost as though they were seeing them for the first time. Without a word being spoken they packed their handpieces away in their bags. Still no one spoke. Finally both men turned to each other and a big grin spread across Bill Grieg's face.

"You wouldn't fancy a beer would ya mate?" he said. They stepped forward and put their arms around each other. As they embraced every man, woman and child there let out the biggest cheer that you would ever hear. It damn near blew the roof off that old tin shed.

Many a grown man had tears rolling down his cheeks and not ashamed of it. We were all babbling with excitement now. I saw shearers, cockies and rousies, laughing and crying, holding each other to support their emotions.

Yes, that was something to remember - the year Howe and Greig shore together at Cordillo Downs.