

# From Turf to Rodeo, The Ranch Roundup Lights Up Caulfield Racetrack

ARTICLE BY TIFFANY CHAPMAN | IMAGES COURTESY OF KELLY MARTYN PHOTOGRAPHY

**W**hen the M5 Rodeo Promotions crew rolled into Caulfield, they brought more than a few arena panels and barrel drums. They brought the heart of country rodeo into one of Melbourne's most famous racing venues, turning a city racecourse into a western playground for two special days, Stakes Day on the 15th and Ranch Roundup on the 29th.

The connection came through Equitana, where Nicole and her husband Matt Burns are already well known. The Melbourne Racing Club team reached out to long-time contact Matt, and Nicole quickly joined the conversation.

Introducing western sports to a metropolitan racing is no small feat, at they found the sweet spot to start. Barrel racing and reining for Stakes Day, with Cow Kids Hour to light up the family crowd. Then barrel racing and cutting for the Ranch Roundup on the 29th. Clean, sharp, and easy to understand, even if you had never seen a rodeo before.

*"To be a small part of the M5 Rodeo Promotions feature at Caulfield Racecourse for our spring finale race day was something very close to my heart. I have grown up in the western industry doing a bit of cutting, reining and camp drafting, and to encourage a different audience of family's and race-goers to the western industry was a fantastic initiative put on by MRC and M5 rodeo Promotions. I had such a fun and enjoyable day riding my Quarter Horse and was lucky enough to swing my leg over a very special horse in Maxi Brakes!*

**-Jamie Lee Melham**



## Cow Kids - Family First Fun

Cow Kids Hour was meant to be a small part of Stakes Day. On the run sheet, it was scheduled for an hour. At Caulfield, it ran for four and a half.

“They saw Cow Kids Hour on the 15th and loved it,” Nicole says. “We just kept the kids in, having fun, it did not stop.”

The concept is simple, and that is why it works. Cow Kids Hour is run by M5’s junior ambassadors. Local kids get to try hands-on activities and learn directly from young riders who are already competing. For the ambassadors, it is a chance to practise leadership, communication and confidence.

“They have to walk up to complete strangers, introduce themselves, shake their hand and ask what they would like to do,” Nicole explains. “Then they go and teach them a skill. It is huge for them.”

In the Caulfield Cow Kids area, children could:

- Rope off the “horse saver”, a life-sized horse frame with a saddle that lets them rope from the saddle, safely on the ground
- Practise on roping dummies
- Play with bucking dummies
- Race around on stick horses
- Take photos at the boards and soak up the atmosphere

It looked like fun from the outside, but there was a deeper purpose behind it.

“Originally, I started Cow Kids Hour because I wanted kids to understand what we do,” Nicole says. “I wanted them to grow into adults with the right perception of what rodeo life is about. It was really an educational thing.”

At the start, Cow Kids Hour was run mostly by adults. As interest grew, Nicole realised two things. One, she was surrounded by young riders keen to help and families offering support. Two, if she brought those kids into the fold properly, they could grow with the sport while lifting M5’s profile at the same time.

So the M5 Junior Ambassador programme was born. Today, ambassadors help run Cow Kids Hour at every M5 rodeo. In return, M5 sponsors them through the year with help towards entries and finals, backing their goals in and out of the arena.

At Caulfield, junior ambassadors included:

- Kade Odea
- Savannah Hayman
- Lawson, Carter and Slater McDonald
- Loch Mofatt
- Max Burns
- Taylon and Kash Marsh

They are part of a growing list of young riders whose paths are deeply tied to M5. One of the best-known ambassadors from the program is barrel racer and roper Molly Harper.

“Molly was one of our original junior ambassadors,” Nicole says. “She was involved with the program for around three years and aged out as she got older.” During that time, Molly spent many hours riding and training, gradually building her skills and confidence through experience

## Building a Junior Rodeo Culture in the South

From the very first M5 rodeo, junior competitors were not an afterthought, they were the foundation. The M5 team structured their days so junior events are front and centre.

“Our gates open at two o’clock,” Nicole explains. “There is a full junior rodeo programme from about two thirty until five.”

In the early days of M5, the junior numbers looked very different.

“We had four junior team ropers, four junior breakaway ropers, about five junior steer riders, and maybe twenty something junior barrel racers. The junior rodeo ran for about an hour, not even.”

Now, they need two and a half to three hours to get through the junior draw. Typical entries sit around:

- 15 to 20 junior steer riders
- 15 to 20 junior breakaway ropers
- Solid numbers in junior team roping
- Over 40 junior barrel racers

The growth has changed the map for young competitors.

“It used to be really hard for the southern kids to make the junior finals,” Nicole says. “There just were not enough events. Parents were having to cart their kids all over Queensland. Now it is the other way around. Queensland kids are coming to Victoria because they know the southern kids will get the jump on them if they do not.”

For Nicole, it is about more than numbers. It is about the long-term health of the sport.



“I was really concerned about where the longevity of rodeo in Victoria was going, simply because we did not have junior kids coming through. Seeing those junior entries now, I am really proud. It feels like we are doing our bit for the future.”

### Growing M5, Event by Event

Long before Caulfield, M5 Rodeo Promotions was born out of concern and opportunity.

The McDonald family had spent years managing stations up north and working in the trucking game. When they moved home from the Territory, they noticed something. Many of the great Victorian rodeos they remembered had disappeared. Committees had moved on, COVID hit, and events simply stopped running.

“We just thought, our kids are not going to get to experience these fantastic rodeos,” Nicole says. “We knew how good they could be, and no one was really doing what we started doing in Victoria.”

M5 began with three rodeos, Geelong, Echuca and Bendigo. Geelong was first cab off the rank and drew a crowd of around 6,500 people. With such strong support, it was a steep learning curve.

What people saw, though, was the vision. M5 built a scaffolding deck beside the arena, dressed it beautifully, and seated all their sponsors up there.

“It looked so pretty and so awesome,” Nicole recalls. “Everyone was in complete awe of this scaffolding deck.” They took their lessons from that first season into Echuca and Bendigo, adjusting the way they moved people, placing infrastructure differently and improving services around the grounds. All of this while they were still working full time, running a trucking business and raising three kids.

Each year, they reinvested. More infrastructure. Better amenities. Grandstands. Improved flow. They listened to feedback and kept refining. One of the most loved additions in recent years is the Cowboy Bar, a space dedicated to competitors only, with couches, a big screen, a bar, wine barrels and shade.

“They can walk around the corner, pull up a chair and have a cold drink,” Nicole says. “Later in the night we have food there. Competitors have really appreciated it, because no one in Australia has ever really done anything to look after them like that.”

The culture it has created is noticeable.

“The competitors’ attitude now is incredible. I could ask them to help me move a mountain and they are such good people who would say, ‘of course, no worries’. Everyone is there for everyone.”

Alongside the atmosphere, M5 has been carefully growing prize money. Instead of jumping to big figures early and risking the future, they made a promise, then stuck to it.

“From the very first year, we increased our competitor prize money by \$250 every year,” Nicole says. “We did not say, ‘right, let us go to \$2,000 an event’, and then not be able to support it. We grew it slowly. Now, this year, we are at that \$2,000 mark and we know we can back it.”

Events are still a tough, high-risk game, especially with weather and costs outside anyone’s control. But the M5 team have found a balance between dreaming big and staying sensible, and that mindset is written into every new idea they roll out.

### A Powerhouse Team and a Hand-picked Line-up

Ranch Roundup on the 29th was a milestone for another reason. It was the first time Nicole was not physically at one of her own events. She was in Scone, competing at the national finals and trying to put herself first for once, while her team ran Caulfield in front of a global audience.

“That was a massive deal for me,” she admits. “But I have an amazing team. That is why we can do what we do.”

She is quick to credit the women around her.

- Kelly Martin, the photographer everyone wants.
- Prue Houston, who leaves such a strong impression that major event directors cannot stop talking about her.
- Long-time friend Jane Ryan, who has been there since they were little girls and is always ready to dream as big as Nicole does.
- Kathryn Anderson, a key player in the success of Mount Isa Rodeo in previous years and another woman who never shies away from a big challenge.

Inside the arena, the line-up at Ranch Roundup was just as intentional.

Among them were:

- **Georgie Capala**, fresh off winning the Australian average in the breakaway roping.
- **Teresa Jones**, Nicole’s mum, sixty-three years old and still one of the most competitive barrel racers in the country. On the 15th she owned every single horse that won, from the junior barrel horse to the mare Nicole rode, and Jimmy the roan gelding that took out the first round.
- **Trish Johnson**, on the palomino horse on the 29th, a former Australian champion from Corryong whose daughter and granddaughter also barrel race.
- **Sam Ferrari**, who came from a sporting horse background, fell in love with barrel racing and has thrown herself fully into that world.
- **Ashlee Van Egmond**, Nicole’s sister, a hairdresser and mum of two who is putting herself back out there and getting competitive again.
- **Savannah Hayman**, one of the junior ambassadors who rode both the 15th and the 29th.
- **Isla Moffat**, whose connection to Caulfield runs deep. Isla’s grandfather, farrier Peter Bookluck, shod a Caulfield Cup winner and worked out of a little shoeing shop across from the track. Her presence in the arena closed the loop on a family story that began on those same grounds decades ago.
- **Sasha Willoughby and her daughter Lottie**, a third-generation cowgirl, who have recently moved over from South Australia.
- **Tamara Walker**, Molly’s mum and a champion barrel racer in her own right, whose family line of horses and riders reads like a stud book of modern Australian rodeo.

It painted a rich picture for the Caulfield crowd. Three generations of horsewomen. City kids trying roping for the first time. A country crew who know how to put on a show without forgetting where they come from.



Cowkids demonstration - Young cowgirl Savannah Haymen Caulfield  
Orr Stakes Ranch Round Up X M5 APRA



Georgie Kapeller accomplished barrel racer and breakaway roper -  
Caulfield Orr Stakes Ranch Round Up X M5 APRA



Nicole McDonald founder of M5 Rodeo Promotions and announcer  
Matt Burns



Deanna Moffatt and daughter Isla.  
Deanna's dad Peter Bookluck was a farrier at Caulfield for many years



Sam Ferrari showcasing barrel racing.



Teresa Jones Barrel racing



Trish Johnson



Nicole McDonald founder of M5 Rodeo Promotions with her horse Reba



Roping showcase with Jess Marsh and Matt Burns announcing

## When a History-Making Cup Winner Wants In

One of the most unexpected pieces of the Caulfield story was the interest from superstar jockey Jamie Melham, fresh from making history on the turf. This season she became the first woman to complete the Caulfield Cup and Melbourne Cup double on Half Yours, and only the second female jockey ever to win the Melbourne Cup, adding to a record that already includes being the first rider to notch 100 winners in a Melbourne metropolitan season.

“She actually got herself involved,” Nicole says. “She saw what was happening and rang the MRC guys and said, ‘can I come down and get on a horse’.”

The answer was an easy yes. Melham came down, swung a leg over and instantly looked at home in a western saddle. After Stakes Day she rang again, this time asking if she could bring her cutting horse, Hammer Time, for Ranch Roundup on the 29th. She also hopped on one of Corey’s horses and threw herself into the ranch and reining style of riding with the same focus and feel that has taken her to the top of Australian racing.

Now she is heading to Bacchus Marsh with M5, the crossover between racing royalty and rodeo gathering even more momentum.

“She is a serious legend,” Nicole says. “In person she is very down to earth, just a good horsewoman who loves riding.”



Roping demonstration JR Marsh

## The Dream for M5 Rodeo Promotions

Underneath all the logistics and late nights, the dream for M5 is simple. From the beginning, the McDonald family imagined building to around ten events a year. Not ten monster shows for the sake of numbers, but ten genuinely successful rodeos that are sold out, well run, and leave everyone wanting more.

“Super successful, to me, is not ten thousand people at each event,” Nicole explains. “It is sold-out crowds where competitors and patrons walk away wanting more. Where the next generation is learning, and we are showing kids there is another way to grow up than just sitting in front of a television.”

M5 is already being brought into other rodeos to advise and help committees improve their events. Nicole is clear that she does not expect everyone to run things the “M5 way”, but she is passionate about raising the bar across the sport.

“It is a small sport and a tough world. We may as well learn from each other,” she says.

Looking ahead, she would love to see competitors able to include M5 events as part of their season when working towards finals qualification, without needing to travel endless miles. These events offer a practical option when planning a balanced competition schedule. At the same time, her love for travelling north to Mount Isa, Cloncurry, Warwick and other iconic rodeos remains unchanged, with those long-standing events continuing to play a vital role in the sport.

“M5 is the five of us,” Nicole says. “It started because we wanted our kids to have great rodeos to grow up with.” From dusty station tracks to a polished deck above the Caulfield arena, M5 Rodeo Promotions is carving out its own path, one sold-out crowd at a time, carrying the next generation along with them.

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