



## BackTrack Update | NSW Stud Merino Breeders Association, April 2022

**Our joint pilot program has been building great momentum since its commencement in January 2022 and we wanted to share an update with you:**

### Relevant Background on BackTrack

Based in Armidale NSW, BackTrack supports young people (aged 12 - 25 years old) who are having a hard time and are falling through the cracks of a mainstream system that doesn't meet their complex needs.

The BackTrack Core Program is designed for young people aged 12 - 18 years old and combines:

- Skill-based learning (focused on the practical application of literacy and numeracy in a wide variety of settings)
- Hands-on vocational training across agriculture and farming, horticulture and natural resource management, dog training, metalwork and woodwork, and mechanics
- Accredited training (such as white cards, skill sets and machinery operation), delivered in partnership with local Registered Training Organisations
- Diversionary and community engagement activities

Alongside the Core Program, we operate the BackTrack Works social enterprise, which delivers commercial services and community projects across agriculture, construction, fabrication, disaster recovery and asset maintenance to customers in the New England region and beyond. Our social enterprise model means that we are able to provide accredited training, Traineeships and employment opportunities for young people who would otherwise lack the technical qualifications, soft skills, aspirations and networks to find and keep a job.



### Rationale for the Pilot Program

Informed by BackTrack's track record of training and employing vulnerable young people, the pilot program with NSW Stud Merino Breeders Association focuses on practical, hands-on work experience as a crucial first step in piquing a young person's interest in working in the Agricultural sector.

Our goals for the program are to showcase shearing and rouseabouting as viable jobs for our young people and to encourage strong uptake of Rural Operations Traineeships and related external employment opportunities.

The program is delivered by our Transition Supervisor, Milo, who has extensive experience as a professional shearer, and the cohort combines:

- Newer trainees and employees who are still in the early stages of their transition into BackTrack Works
- BackTrack Core Program participants who have an interest in transitioning into Traineeships and employment within BackTrack Works

Notably, this cohort is still building their 'match-fitness' when it comes to the world of work. By immersing them in the genuine workplace environment of an active shearing shed, the pilot program is helping them to develop essential soft skills (like turning up on time, being prepared for the job at hand, appropriate language, attire and behaviour for the workplace) and understand the reality of what it means to work in the Agricultural sector.





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### Progress To Date



Since January 2022, our Transition Supervisor, Milo and a group of young people have been visiting shearing sheds in Walcha, Woolbrook, Bendemeer, Ashford and Armidale. They have been able to lend a hand as part of the working team in these sheds and complete a range of activities, including sheep handling, crutching, rouseabouting, skirting, wool rolling and pressing. In several active sheds, they have had to chance to try their skills at the shearing stand, shearing the belly wool of multiple sheep.

The exposure to this real-world work environment has been invaluable, reinforcing the need for initiative, stamina, self-responsibility and focused labour when you're 'on the job'. For our younger participants, it has been a supported introduction into the workforce, enabling them to step outside of the school-style setting of BackTrack's Core Program. For our existing BackTrack Works trainees, it has broadened their technical skillset and knowledge, and helped to consolidate the soft skills that are just as vital to successful traineeship completion. For everyone, it has been a chance to dive headfirst into an industry that most are relatively unfamiliar with, piquing their interest in shearing and rouseabouting as viable employment pathways for them.

Under the mentorship of Milo, all participants have been able to engage with other shearers in a supported environment, which is a crucial confidence-builder. Many of our young people have had fraught relationships with positions of authority - whether it's at school, out in the community or with employers - and being able to flex their social skills and take part in informal conversations with working professionals plays a powerful role in changing this narrative.

In any given week, young people have been visiting the sheds for a few days at a time and have even participated in several overnight stays in genuine shearers' huts. This has provided an important 'pressure off' dimension to the program, where participants can bond with each other, chip in and help around a camp site and access the kind of on-the-fly youth work, coaching and wraparound support that is so vital for vulnerable young people.

Looking forward, BackTrack has coordinated an accredited training opportunity through TAFE NSW. In early May, some of our pilot program participants will complete a Statement of Attainment in Introduction to Wool Harvesting. This will focus on crutching and sheep shearing techniques, basic wool handling skills, catching and dragging a sheep and loading a shearing handpiece.

### Here's what our Transition Supervisor, Milo, has to say about the program to date:

*"The program has given them a real insight into what it's like working in an active shed. You can't learn this stuff any other way, you've got to feel that sense of time pressure, you've got to move fast, you've got to take responsibility and initiative to see what needs to be done. It's been awesome to see our kids become more confident in their skills and recognise that this may be the right career path for them."*

### Here's what participants have to say about their experience so far:

*"It's something different every day. I love the atmosphere of the shed, especially when the boombox is pumping and everyone gets in and has a real go."*

- Rusty, BackTrack Works Trainee

*"It's a good environment. It's great meeting new people and going to a different place every day. I've liked getting in and shearing, and learning about rouseabouting."*

- Daniel, BackTrack Works Employee



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### Here's what a local shearer has to say about why the program will have an impact:

*"I think the program has been fantastic so far. It's just a really good opportunity for young people to come and have a go. It works because there's not too much pressure on them and they've got plenty of help and guidance. They've done very well shearing and we would be happy to have them back!"*

- Jason Hoy, Owner of 'Sunnybrook' (property in Walcha NSW)

### Meet Hollie



Since she first arrived at BackTrack a year and a half ago, 16-year-old Hollie has been kicking goals left, right and centre. Most recently, she's become the first female trainee employed by our social enterprise, BackTrack Works!

Before coming to us, Hollie had a hard time in a mainstream school environment and disengaged around Year 8, with very low rates of attendance. But as she found her feet amongst our Core Program cohort, we started to see big shifts in her confidence, attention span and attitude. Hollie was drawn to the practical learning opportunities on offer and showed a particular interest in all things vocational training. She was also able to achieve her L's and work towards a white card.

But where Hollie has shone most of all has been in the shearing sheds, through her participation in the pilot program delivered by Backtrack and the NSW Stud Merino Breeders Association. This real-world insight into the industry prompted Hollie to think about her work and life goals, and with her Year 10 Record of School Achievement (RoSA) under her belt, our team has now supported her into a School-Based Certificate II Traineeship in Rural Operations with BackTrack Works. This will enable her to work towards her Year 11 and 10 certificates, while pitching in on shearing, fencing, asset maintenance and fabrication projects. Hollie says:

*"Back when I first came to BackTrack, I wouldn't have thought I'd end up with a job but here I am. My dream is to be a rouseabout (working with sheep in shearing sheds)."*

[Click here to hear Hollie talk about her experience with BackTrack founder, Bernie Shakeshaft.](#)

