

saturday magazine

Famous horse race sparked off Dr Fitz's lifelong belief

Medicine, racing, athletics and radio — all these and many other activities are the interests of one of South Taranaki's "grand old men", Dr Thomas Michael Fitzgerald.

Still in general practice at almost 76 years, "Dr Fitz", as he is known to a couple of generations, has no thoughts of retiring.

One of his greatest convictions through life has been the value of training — for people as well as horses — and this came about through seeing a famous race in 1919 when Desert Gold, Gloaming and Creosus clashed in the weight-for-age Egmont Stakes at Hawera.

The mare Desert Gold, then the idol of racegoers and today a legend, had won at New Plymouth the previous week.

She had won 36 times, was unplaced only five times from 59 starts, and had won more money than any mare in Australia or New Zealand.

Desert Gold was beaten by Gloaming that February day at Hawera, which is by the way. More important, the effect of those gleaming, trained-to-the-peak horses

on young Tom Fitzgerald was to change his whole life. Dr Fitz was born in Hawera on August 10, 1900, one of three children of James and Annie Fitzgerald, both Irish, who had come to New Zealand at different times.

By Shirley Bourke

James Fitzgerald came in 1860 at the age of six years, around Cape Horn in the sailing vessel Helen Denny, later to serve New Zealand in the Holm Shipping Company's fleet.

James went to the West Coast to the gold mining town of Goldsbrough where his mother had a small store.

New Zealand miler Jack Lovelock (left) with Dr Fitzgerald (second from right) at Hawera in 1936.



Later he came to Hawera and started a grocer's shop, the West End Store in High St, now demolished, and later still he established a butchery near Victoria St.

Annie Theresa McNamara was a registered school teacher in Ireland before coming to New Zealand. She married Tom Fitzgerald at Okato in 1899.

The Fitzgerald's butchery was not a great success and James took on a milk run.

He ran his cows for the milk supply on 35 acres of a triangular block between Waipi, Glover and Turuturu Rds, formerly the Brown estate in Hawera.

Dr Fitz well remembers helping his father hand milk the cows, and delivering milk night and morning with a horse and cart — a penny a pint, tuppence a quart and one shilling a gallon, measured out into the housewife's jugs and billys.

In the winter they had to go far out into the country to obtain milk to keep up the

supply. For three years the family did that.

Then in 1912 James Fitzgerald bought a property in Nolan Rd, just west of Hawera, for 50 pounds an acre, less two pounds ten shillings an acre because there were no buildings on it.

A house for the family was built for 100 pounds. The property is still partly owned by Dr Fitz's sister, Miss M. Fitzgerald.

The third member of the family was Mr Con Fitzgerald, a racing photographer who died last year.

Young Tom Fitzgerald attended Hawera Convent School and in 1917 went to Sacred Heart College in Auckland for his secondary education.

His reports were not good, however, and he did not return for a second year.

There were no jobs going at the time so he farmed with his father.

"But I didn't like farming," he said.

By February, 1919, he was fed up generally. At this time his father decided to go to the races to see Desert Gold and Gloaming fight out the Egmont Stakes.

James Fitzgerald had been a racing and betting man, but not for some years because of hard times. But off they went.

Young Tom was profoundly impressed by the raining of both horses and jockeys — Desert Gold was ridden that day by Hector Gray, one of the finest riders in New Zealand.

So impressed was young Tom that he went home and thought about it.

Why, if horses and jockeys could be trained on such a pitch, could not people also be trained?

That was quite a revolutionary thought at a time when most people relied simply on natural ability in athletic contests.

Tom Fitzgerald had always been interested in chemistry so, next thing, he got a job with the UFS Dispensary at Hawera.

He worked there for three years, from 1920 to 1923, but again, found himself looking for something else.

So he studied at home for matriculation and university entrance, working to a system and training himself all the time.

By November 1925 he was through those examinations, and went to Auckland University for his pre-medical year.

Dr Fitz pays tribute to that one year of secondary school in Auckland which gave him the knowledge of how to go about a self-training programme.

The year 1926 saw him gain his medical preliminary in Auckland. The years 1927-30 were spent at the medical school in Dunedin.



Dr Fitzgerald at his desk in Hawera.

and during 1931-32 he was a house surgeon at Wellington Hospital.

On October 12, 1932, he began general practice in Hawera.

His 43 years of practice in Hawera have been broken only by service during the World War II at a hospital at Tamavus near Suva.

All the while, Dr Fitzgerald's interest in racing never waned.

He has been honorary doctor to the Egmont Racing Club, Hawera Trotting Club and Opunake Racing Club since 1934, and is a life member of each club.

He has acted as doctor to other Taranaki racing clubs on occasions, including once when the Taranaki Jockey Club fled to race at Hawera.

Schools of horsemanship owe their existence to his concern for jockey training. With Mr Ian Cox, a racing identity of Hawera, he was

instrumental in starting the South Taranaki training school in 1952, which through its success, led to the establishment of other such schools.

He retired from the school in 1974 after 22 years as its principal.

He fought, and won, battles to get apprentices medically examined for physical fitness before they were apprenticed, and also a higher standard of education for apprentices.

Now apprentices must have a minimum of two years secondary education or be actually studying before they may be apprenticed.

The plot is woven around efforts by the Western powers to build and operate a fusion reactor in space and thus solve earth's energy crisis.

A powerful ecological group discovers that the generator, if started, will damage the ozone layer with severe consequences for the human race. The order is given to shut down the operation.

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His interest in athletics dates from the time in the 1920's when he raced over sprint and middle distance. There were no coaches then and self-training was again required.

As president of the Hawera Amateur Athletic and Cycling Club for five years before World War II, he rejuvenated the sport in the town by getting the first permanent lighting on the Egmont A. and P. grounds (now Hicks Park) for night meetings.

A dinner to raise funds for this on November 4, 1936, was attended by the immortal miler Jack

Lovelock, — and Dr Fitzgerald still has the menu, autographed by Lovelock.

The lighting was for a special athletics meeting at which overseas athletes competed, and he has the programme of that too.

Dr Fitz had the second ham radio transmitter in Hawera — the late Dr W. P. Buist had the first. The Hawera Radio Society which began activities in 1935 and went into recess in 1956, is restarting again with Dr Fitzgerald as its patron.

He is patron also of the Hawera Camera Club, the Hawera Orchestral Society and the St John Ambulance branch.

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He was created a serving brother of the Order of St John of Jerusalem in 1949, and was created an officer of the order in 1960.

Dr Fitz is a collector, of weaponry (a hand grenade case acts as paperweight on his office desk), books and papers.

He has had a lifelong interest in fishing, both sea and river, and tells of catching a three and a half lb rainbow trout in the Waipi Stream on Denby Rd on a rod which cost two shillings and elevenpence.

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