

Off the floor

Jenny & John - The Backtrack

Late one night in 1995, Jenny found herself in a gay bar in Melbourne.

She and Rosalie Mackay were there to compete in the Netball Masters Games. After a long hard day, Rosalie asked if anyone wanted to go to a line dance venue just around the corner.

Jenny learnt *God Bless Texas* and loved it. She immediately phoned John at home in Sydney to say they just had to do this line dance thing.

A while later, Jenny and John were driving past the North Ryde Golf Club and saw a sign advertising line dance classes. They went along and started classes with Jenny (Little Jenny) and Peter Magnusson, known as P&J Gone Country.

Jenny and John have been dancing ever since.

JENNY:

I was very nervous and self conscious at my first lesson. And I didn't have a particular interest in country music at the time, but of course I do now.

As a kid, I did classical ballet for about 7 years then about 3 years of jazz.

We went to as many classes as possible. And when Wendy Hughes moved to Perth in 2000, we took over her classes at North Sydney and her competition team.



We formed Northern Riders mainly to have an identity for competition dancing. After Wendy left, some of the dancers who had competed with her wanted to continue. So John came up with the name Northern Riders. I think we have a good reputation as a club and as competitors. And I am very proud to be a member of the team.

'Little Jenny' introduced us to our first competition. I think it was in 1996 at Parramatta. We didn't place in the dancing, but it was fun. It was also our first attempt at choreography and we placed 1st and 2nd in the Beginner Section.

The first time we danced in Tamworth was in a small team with City Slickers. I was so scared my legs were shaking like jelly!

The team was John and I, Patch, Lyn, Iain, Norma and Dave. Dave had trouble remembering which hand to have on his hat at the end of the dance. We have a video of the performance and there is Dave still switching hands at the end of the routine! We always have a go at him when we see him.





Competing adds another dimension to line dancing. It probably stems from my competitive nature. I like to try and be the best at anything I do. And I enjoy the training as much as competing. It can be a lot of fun trying to do hat and skirt movements, and keep the feet moving correctly as well.

I haven't kept a tally of how many medals we've won, but it is quite a lot. The club that wins the most gold medals at the ALDC is named 'Club of the Year'. We have been runner up twice. The second time we only had six competitors so that was a real achievement.

I was really proud when we won the Inter Club Dance Off at the Southern State Championships in Melbourne recently. Eight clubs from around Australia competed, all doing the same dance but to their own choice of music.

I really enjoy meeting dancers from other states and overseas.

There is terrific camaraderie amongst the clubs

We ran the Sydney Showdown at the ANZAC Club, North Sydney, from 2003 to 2006. We started the competition because there wasn't one in Sydney at the time. That was so much fun.

The Kidz first started to compete with us when we were all at Wendy's class at the ANZAC Club. That was a fantastic period. They were just bursting with energy and so exciting to watch. They have all grown up and moved on to other interests now.

Then when Robert Fletcher's niece first danced a duo with him at the Sydney Showdown, other young dancers followed and they became *The Young Riders*.

Some of them are still dancing but others have moved on to different interests. It was great having them with us as they taught us oldies some new tricks and we showed them the importance of good footwork. I think we are all better dancers as a result of competing together.

The funniest moment I have experienced was when I was competing with Wendy Hughes. They tell you if you make a mistake you should just keep on dancing. So when Wendy slipped and fell over, I just kept dancing around her!!

"When I'm dancing I forget about everyday pressures.

Line dancing also gives me exercise – of the mind and body."

Jenny

The family usually have to fit in with me. We plan special occasions around our line dance commitments!

I also enjoy being out in the garden and I like doing puzzles such as Sudoku. I have recently taken up Pilates. If I hadn't taken up line dancing, I would probably still be involved in netball.



It may sound pretty boring but there is never a day goes by when we don't think about something to do with dancing.

Even when we go on holidays, we always pack a CD case of music. The number of CD's depends on the length of the trip! We often work on some choreography. And we even try to get to a dance class wherever we are.

When I practice a dance at home, Boots insists on partner dancing, or else he barks and jumps at my feet.

JOHN:

I felt so nervous and awkward at my first line dance lesson that I almost didn't go back!

And if anyone had told me twenty years ago that I would become a country music fan, I would have told them they were crazy. There was no way in the world I would listen to that rubbish!!

When I was about 14, I did three weeks of ballroom dancing classes at the insistence of my mother. But she got sick of my whinging and very quickly gave up on me. I wanted to play rugby league, not do the waltz and Pride of Erin! That's why I tend to dance a bit like a rugby league player!

*"Jenny is Northern Riders
and I help out when I can
and where I am needed."*

John

Jenny is full of common sense. She is a very down to earth, practical person and believes in doing things well. She sets high standards for herself and has an amazing capacity to learn and retain dances. She can pick up a dance just by reading the step sheet and then dance it straight off.

Sometimes on our way to class, Jenny will drive and I will read a new dance sheet to her. By the time we arrive, about 25 minutes later, she can repeat the whole sheet back to me and dance it immediately.



In 1996 we entered our first competition - I was so terrified I could not remember a thing until the music started!

Training is the best part of competing as far as I am concerned. The challenge of learning new steps and hat moves. It is great to see the routines come together. We have a lot of fun, quite often following up with a long lunch afterwards.



Jenny judges, but I only do it when they are desperate. I enjoy DJing, especially at competitions. I don't compete in as many events as the others and I would much rather be occupied than sitting around doing nothing.

I don't know why more men don't line dance. Whenever I ask them they either say they have two left feet or they seem to think it isn't masculine enough. Some men tend to scoff at it at first, but when they see it done properly they change their attitude. They still say they could never do it though.

We first started to choreograph a few dances together back in 1996. I started because I would hear a song I wanted to dance to and nobody else was using it.

I think Jenny's style has changed. She is doing more difficult dances to a variety of music. But I don't think my style has changed much. I like to choreograph easier dances to country songs with a bit of fun in them.

We sometimes bounce steps off each other. And we take notice of each other but that doesn't mean we always use what is suggested!

*“The friendships
I have formed
with so many people
from all over Australia
are what give me
the most pleasure
from line dancing.”*

John



Students seem to learn much faster now, and the standard is higher. One of my favourite dances is Deep River, mainly because it took me so long to learn! But by today's standards, it really isn't difficult at all.

The music is also much more varied now. Personally I think that is a shame as there is so much really good modern country music out there. I think I am in the minority though and would probably be classed as an old fuddy duddy!

Line dancing takes up most of our spare time. We both gave up other interests to focus on line dancing and Northern Riders. Jenny used to play netball and I used to play tennis.

I also enjoy reading, crosswords, movies, listening to music and watching sport on TV. I am a mad keen West Tigers rugby league fan and have followed them since I was a kid. I also plan to landscape our back garden one day

Our family often say: “You guys are always out line dancing.” But we get together for lunch or coffee and family celebrations. They like us line dancing and a couple of them have given it a go – albeit a very short go! My son, Tim, says he likes some of the music and Jenny's daughter, Amy, can pick a country song a mile away, even the modern ones. The others just tend to ignore it!

I sometimes lie in bed thinking of new steps if I can't get to sleep. I find it better than counting sheep!

Line dancers are such a fun group of people. One of the very funniest moments was when a group of us went to Melbourne to attend Stephen Patterson's Beach Party social. We went as the cast from Baywatch and rescued people all night, whether they wanted to be rescued or not.



But one of our trips to the Mildura Country Music Festival takes the cake as the funniest ever. We took two mini buses and they both ran out of petrol on the Hay Plain at exactly the same time.

When the NRMA guy came out from Balranald to rescue us, he could not stop laughing at the stupid city slickers. He contacted the NRMA in Sydney and told them about us. Apparently it went around all the NRMA drivers!