

For the
LOVE *of*
HORSES

THE WILSON SISTERS' INSPIRING JOURNEY
TO SAVE NEW ZEALAND'S WILD HORSES



KELLY WILSON

This book is dedicated to our parents Heather and John, who have supported us throughout every step of our 'wild ride' with both the showjumpers and wild Kaimanawas; also to the supporters of Kaimanawa Heritage Horses, both past, present and future, and the family, friends and sponsors that supported us well before we were champions.

THE WILSON SISTERS

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Cover caption: From left: Showtym Viking and Amanda Wilson, Showtym Cadet MVNZ and Vicki Wilson, Kelly Wilson and Showtym Memento KH.
Image on pages 4–5: The aged grey stallion, Elder KH, gallops across the Argo Valley with his herd.

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Wild Kaimanawas
being sorted during the
biennial DOC musters.



Elder overlooks his herd
after a blizzard during
the winter of 2013.

INTRODUCTION

Wild Ride





The Wilson sisters' first sighting of Major KH, the 17-year-old wild Kaimanawa stallion they saved from slaughter during the 2012 muster.

Wild stallions are the stuff of legends, and as little girls we had dreams of taming wild horses. From a young age, my sisters and I read novels about famous steeds, the Silver Brumby and the Black Stallion series among our favourites.

We grew up on horses, riding before we could walk, and quickly learnt the value of working hard for what we wanted and building a partnership with our ponies. Unlike the privileged few who had champion ponies bought for them, my family could only afford the inexperienced or difficult ponies that others had given up on. Many had been hardly handled and were essentially wild, and in the years that followed these ponies became our tutors, teaching us more than any instructor could have. Our horses were never a hobby or a job; they were our friends, and so deeply ingrained in our lifestyle that we simply did everything with them.

Although we had immersed ourselves in fictional stories about American mustangs and Australian brumbies, we were woefully ignorant about the wild horses in our own backyard; it wasn't until March 2012 that we became involved with the Kaimanawas. By then, dreams of owning and befriending a wild stallion were long forgotten, the stuff of fiction. Over the years we had focused wholeheartedly on showjumping and both Vicki and Amanda had won many Grand Prix classes and national titles. At our stables, Showtym Sport Horses, we trained clients' horses alongside our own, and held popular training camps for young riders.

But childhood dreams have a way of catching up with you when you least expect it, and for us this started in the form of Boon, a very plain bay pony that we purchased for only \$500 in 2010. Boon was sold to us as a Kaimanawa, and while at the Showtym property we trained him to jump before selling him to Tegan Newman who registered him under the name Watch Me Move. Over the next two seasons, under the tuition of Vicki and Amanda, the pair won a number of Grand Prix classes including New Zealand's most coveted title, Pony of the Year,



FROM TOP

Vicki Wilson, Amanda Wilson, Kelly Wilson.

in 2012. Following the win, Kaimanawa Heritage Horses invited us all down to view the wild herds in the ranges; and from our very first sighting of these horses we were all awed by their remarkable beauty, set as it was against such a rugged backdrop. The first band we saw was scattered among rocky cliffs and when they saw us they took flight — it was a breathtaking sight to see them gallop down onto the tussock plains, their manes and tails flying in the wind.

The deeper into the Kaimanawa Ranges we ventured, the more we learnt about the plight of our nation's wild horses: the mountains are unable to sustain large herd numbers and for the past 20 years the wild herds have been subjected to mustering, to preserve both the population and the rare flora and fauna found in the area. It is hard to believe that the wild horses have to leave this land which seems so well suited to them, and even harder to comprehend that so many of them have to be slaughtered during the biennial musters due to a lack of people willing to re-home them.

That day we saw more than 50 horses in the wild, and they reminded us of the types of ponies we'd had growing up. We looked past their shaggy coats and focused on how they could look with correct training and conditioning; we had no doubt that there were future champions among them. Within each of us, a small piece of our heart was forever lost to the Kaimanawa horses and the unforgiving mountain ranges of the Central Plateau.

Only two months later we saved 11 Kaimanawas from slaughter during the 2012 muster; five of the mares went on to have foals. Four of the horses we saved were fully grown stallions, one so old his mane had dreadlocks hanging down to his knees. That day in the muster yards his proud bearing was totally captivating and the thought of him dying before nightfall had been unacceptable. Twenty-four other stallions lost their lives that day and the following morning 48 pregnant mares were also sent to slaughter.

THIS IS THE TRUE STORY of our early years with horses and our work with the wild Kaimanawas. It is in no part embellished and



LEFT

Kelly's award-winning photograph of Kaimanawas being mustered in 2012.

TOP

From left: Soldier KH and Vicki Wilson, Gizmo KH and
Amanda Wilson, Ranger KH and Kelly Wilson.

CHRISTIANE SLAWIK

BOTTOM

Wild Kaimanawas being mustered in to the yards during the 2012 muster.

nothing is glossed over. This is the raw and honest account of the 11 wild horses that we were honoured to encounter and the defining years leading up to their mustering. While our journey was highly publicised and most days were captured on camera, the footage could not show just how much these horses meant — and mean — to us. It is the private moments that have made them worthy of a legacy and left a lasting impression on each of us.

The following pages take you back to our childhood where it all began . . . We hope you enjoy our journey and that it will inspire a new generation to love wild horses.



TOP

Vicki Wilson and Showtym Cadet MVNZ winning the Horse Grand Prix at the 2013 New Zealand World Cup Finals.

BOTTOM

Amanda and Showtym Cassanova competing in their first Horse Grand Prix in late 2013.

NED DAWSON

Showtym Spotlight and Vicki Wilson performing as Pegasus during the opening act for Equidays in 2013.
TUIIMAGES

PART 1

*The Showtym
Journey*





TOP

Our mum Heather (left) grew up with a love of horses.

BOTTOM

Our dad John teaching Vicki to ride on our pet ram.

CHAPTER 1

Humble Beginnings

From the very beginning there was no doubt that we three Wilson sisters would grow up with horses. Our parents both rode, and encouraged our love of horses from an early age, but they could never have imagined just how much horses would define our later years.

Mum herself grew up horse-crazy, but with unsupportive parents she used to spend her afternoons helping out at a local racing stable. When she was 13 she was given a broken-down thoroughbred from the track and taught herself to ride without any previous experience. Although she never competed, this sparked a lifelong love affair with horses. Dad, however, grew up in a racing, hunting and polo family, and rode extensively until he injured his back in a rugby scrum and followed this up with a bad accident when his horse fell in a gully and landed on him. Sheep-shearing during the early years of my parents' marriage worsened the injury, the pain in his back limiting his ability to ride.

On our farm near Raglan, by the coast west of Hamilton, Vicki started her equestrian career as a toddler sitting astride a life-sized toy pony and, for want of her own real pony, then began riding the pet ram. Although of a suitable size, riding a sheep proved no easy task and it quickly earned a bad reputation for rushing at people. The first time this happened, Dad had settled down to read the newspaper. Absorbed in it, he failed to spot the ram's approach and was jolted from his thoughts when it head-butted a hole straight through the paper, their heads ending up only centimetres from each other.



TOP

Vicki spent hours riding her life-sized toy horse and by 12 months she had a steady seat and a firm grip on the reins.

BOTTOM

Vicki sitting on a real horse for the first time.

A few days later, Mum — who was heavily pregnant with me at the time — was startled to hear Vicki screaming. Bored of playing with her toy horse, the 18-month-old had gone out to the paddock to ride the sheep. As soon as she entered the paddock, the ram rushed at the toddler and knocked her to the ground. Rather than staying down, Vicki stood up, shook the dust from her clothes and turned — only to be knocked to the ground again. By the time Mum had run down the hill to reach her, Vicki had stood up and been knocked down several times, showing the tenacity that has been evident in everything she has done in life since.

Not surprisingly, the ram was deemed an unsuitable mount for young Vicki and she spent more and more time being led around on the farm horses. She was often found wearing her helmet and holding a crop in hand as she attempted to ride her toy horse, or waiting impatiently at the paddock gate for the horses to be caught.

Dad's back injury was causing him serious pain and he began to struggle to manage the steep hill-country farm. Hoping to ease their workload, about 18 months after I was born our parents sold the farm, moving to Whangamata and purchasing a picturesque 26-acre property overlooking the ocean and golf course. Over-mortgaged in an unstable economy, their plans to subdivide were quickly shattered by the 1992 crash and they lost everything, including the property, which reverted back to its previous owners who had left some money in it.

On the brink of bankruptcy, Mum and Dad waited for a call from the bank. Eventually, after months hearing nothing, they phoned to find out what would happen next. Expecting the worst, the young couple was told that the bank had changed ownership and there were no records of any mortgage under their names — and therefore the bank could make no move to foreclose on them. Debts can only be claimed for seven years, and our parents spent the whole of that time waiting on tenterhooks, hoping that the mortgage records wouldn't be found and there would be no demands for money they simply didn't have. When the seventh year rolled around without any such demand having been made, there was a collective sigh throughout our household; to this day

Mum and Dad still can't quite believe it happened that way.

In those early years, every day was a struggle. With no money in the bank, the income from Dad's sickness benefit barely covered costs. Amanda was born at the end of 1992, so Mum's time was fully occupied with the three of us and options to earn additional income were limited. In the nearly five years we lived in Whangamata we moved home five times, each house more decrepit or unfinished than the last, and money was always tight. We quickly learnt to go without, buying only the bare necessities and renting half-finished or run-down houses because that was all we could afford.

THE ONE LUXURY MUM AND DAD ALLOWED was horses. Not long after I was born, another addition joined the family. Although they hadn't been looking for a pony, a newspaper ad had caught Mum's eye: *SAMSON 10yr old Shetland gelding with all gear \$1000*. The little bay looked just like a Thelwell pony with his expressive eyes and long mane, and was just perfect for a horse-crazy little girl like Vicki. Well before I could crawl, Mum introduced me to riding too, and at only six months old I was taken out for pony rides, Vicki leading Samson and Mum holding me steady.

Samson and his young riders became a familiar sight in Whangamata town. By the time Vicki was three years old, she was a competent rider and kept a nice steady seat as Mum trotted around the neighbouring farms on her thoroughbred Wings, with Samson cantering to keep up. Samson could often be seen tethered on the lawn of whichever house we were living in, being led into town, or tied up outside the shops while Mum took us grocery shopping. Living in a beach community proved idyllic, and when our parents' financial burdens seemed overwhelming Mum would take us down to the beach and we would ride Samson along the golden sands. It was a wonderful place to live and grow up in.

Always avid readers, Mum and Dad picked up financial advice from books and in the years following the property crash saved 10 per cent of their income in the hope that they could become property owners once again. With money being so tight, they often haunted garage sales



TOP

John and Heather on their wedding day.

BOTTOM

From the age of three Vicki was confident riding Samson on the lead and followed Heather and Wings everywhere.



and in 1994 Dad came home with a \$40 trailer and soon after bought a small ute canopy for another \$40, which he welded on top. It proved to be an effective means of transport for Samson; a year later, when we moved to the 'winterless north', this \$80 trailer carried our little 10-hand Shetland along with most of our worldly possessions.

The years of scrimping had paid off, and the cashing-in of power shares offered to Whangamata residents in the early 1990s took my parents' savings to \$10,000 — enough for a deposit on 4 acres of bare land bought at a mortgagee auction for \$32,000. With this purchase early in 1995, my parents became the proud owners of a small lifestyle section on the outskirts of Kamo, Whangarei. Their income remaining low, Mum and Dad couldn't afford to rent a house as well as service the mortgage on their newly acquired land and in May of that year, with three young daughters to look after, they settled in for a long, wet winter living in tents on the property's flats.

Late that month, torrential rain caused a flash flood and water sheeted down from the hills above and swept under the floors of the tent. Hoping to divert the water, my parents began digging ditches along the hillside. Losing track of time, Mum then glanced back to see the flats underwater. Frantic, she dropped her spade and sprinted down the hill, rushing through knee-deep water to get to the tent and letting out a sigh of relief when she found Amanda still asleep in her cot as it bobbed about in the rising floodwaters. Vicki and I were at school at the time, and that afternoon we were packed off to stay with friends until everything had had time to air and dry out.

At times, overwhelmed by the mud, the thick green mould growing on the walls of the tent and the bitter cold of that winter, Mum would cry, unsure how to cope with the ongoing reality of our new life. We young girls, however, were oblivious. Our days were spent at school and in the afternoons we would ride the ponies we gradually acquired or go exploring and then bathe in the river to get clean. A borrowed caravan did eventually ease some of the discomfort. In August, satisfied that our parents could keep up with the mortgage payments, their new bank extended the loan by another \$10,000. Mum and Dad used the



TOP
Me aged three years,
holding my pet lamb.

BOTTOM
The tents at Alcoba
Street under
floodwater during
the winter of 1995.



money to build the framing and roof of an 80-square-metre dwelling, a home that would take more than six years to finish as money permitted. It was a functional building with no interior cladding or insulation and the rooms were divided using bookshelves and furniture.

Throughout, we girls rarely noticed our lack of money or worldly possessions and were always busy. We were brought up without a television and learnt to appreciate the world around us. Instead of relying on a PlayStation or cartoons for amusement, we had challenges to see who could cross the river the most times without getting wet (me), how many novels we could read in a day (three), who could climb the tallest tree (Amanda), or who could scale the highest limestone outcrop at the neighbouring property (Vicki). It was only when we were cooped up indoors on rainy days that we became fidgety and bored, and Mum and Dad would chase us outside to have mud fights or stomp through puddles.

A favourite pastime was reading, and we spent many of our evenings lost in the pages of books. We favoured Enid Blyton the most and got tangled up in the adventures of the Faraway Tree, the Wishing-Chair and the Famous Five. Of course, anything about horses was also on our preferred reading list and famous equines like Black Beauty, Flicka, National Velvet and Misty increased our love of horses.

Some weekends, we would invite horsey friends over and spend the weekend sleeping under the stars, cooking our own meals on a campfire and telling stories well into the night. Potatoes wrapped in tin foil and cans of spaghetti heated in cast-iron pots became a staple diet at these sleepouts. During the days we would play 'capture the flag' on horseback and ride to the corner dairy to buy ice creams.

The three of us were very close — barring the odd epic fight — and many times we would set out by ourselves, three musketeers in search of adventure. Without technology to stifle our imagination, we could keep ourselves entertained outside for hours, and were often to be found scaling waterfalls, building huts, stacking hay or hand-feeding our latest collection of animals. We were rarely supervised but looked out for each other when disasters happened on a number of occasions.



TOP

The 80-square-metre dwelling our family called home for over ten years.

MIDDLE

Sitting in my flying car made from leaves and a chillybin after watching the movie *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

BOTTOM

Vicki with our pet budgies, one of the many types of birds found in our aviary.



Once I fell out of a tree and landed in front of three raging bulls — we had been waving red flags in front of them only minutes before darting up the tree trunk. Vicki threw acorns at the bulls to keep them distracted while I dashed for the nearest fence. Another time, I fell into the flooded river and was swept downstream. Vicki and Amanda ran ahead and held out branches for me to grab as I sped past in the raging waters.

Our childhood was filled with many such misadventures and accidents, but nothing serious ever happened and we never minded the odd bruise or coming home with cuts and scrapes. We often had riding accidents, too, but always brushed off the dirt and hopped straight back on. We firmly believed the saying that it took 100 falls to make a good rider and kept count of who had fallen off the most. Vicki had the most impressive record, with seven falls off an 11.2-hand pony in two days. Most of our riding was bareback and barefoot, and I'm sure we shed a few tears when ponies stepped on our toes. The only time we wore shoes was at school, and even that was questionable; at lunch-time we would leave our sandals in the classroom and go outside to play rugby and softball. One time when we were sorting through second-hand timber to build our new tack shed, I stepped on a rusty nail and it went straight into my foot. The puncture wasn't serious, though, and after Mum washed it out with salty water I was soon outside again, clambering through the woodpile and sorting timber.



Amanda ready to ride.



TOP

Vicki and Bella competed at their first show bareback because our parents couldn't afford to buy a saddle. They won seven ribbons.

BOTTOM

Me riding Starlight, the lease mare, in 1996.

CHAPTER 2

First Ponies

By the time Vicki was seven years old, she had almost outgrown Samson. Word got out that Riding for the Disabled was selling a 13.2-hand grey mare for \$200 because she was a little too 'forward' for their purposes. Bella proved to be an ideal pony, but the simple little saddle we had for Samson didn't fit her and Vicki had to ride bareback for the first six months because we couldn't afford another one. The balance and feel she gained in those early days stood her in good stead later, and today bareback riding is still an important part of her training.

Eventually Mum came across a 15-inch Indian saddle and won it at auction for \$100. Vicki's riding quickly escalated and she began constructing small obstacles from buckets and branches she found lying around the property. Realising that his daughter was determined to teach her pony to jump but unable to afford poles and stands for her, Dad felled trees for Vicki and Bella to train over and in her spare time Vicki began teaching Amanda and me how to ride without a lead rein. Once we had the basics established, we joined the local Pony Club. With three little girls and only two ponies, one of the instructors leased us a pretty black mare called Starlight and I quickly caught up to Vicki, riding confidently off the lead rein and jumping small fences.

In the 1990s Pony Club was a friendly and inclusive environment for like-minded kids and their parents, and we quickly made friends. Evening rallies became a weekly occurrence and we worked through