



Flogging an old horse!

By Ian M. Johnston

Yes, I am fully aware that this epistle will disappoint many of my hitherto fans, who possibly thought I wasn't a bad sort of a bloke. To them, my image may well be irreversibly tarnished. How could he write such nonsense, I hear them complaining! He must be past it!

Well, they may be right. On the other hand maybe, just maybe, there will be those who will applaud my unyielding views.

So what am I raving on about?

Vintage tractor pulls – that's what!

And therein lies my problem. The vast majority of folk who flock to vintage tractor pulls think they are great! Logically therefore they will be unhappy with my opposing convictions.

I harbour a warm regard for the wonderful old idiosyncratic tractors that served us so well in days long gone. Accordingly I cringe when I see them abused at competitive tractor pulls. Frequently I observe them driven in a manner that, when they were brand new, would have had an operator sacked on the spot and ordered off the property by a rightfully outraged farmer.

And here they are in their Autumn years being flogged mercilessly, simply to provide entertainment for the uninitiated and a perverse kudos to their uncaring hoon drivers. (A bit over the top? Probably. But I am in one of my Grumpy Old Men moods).

Every weekend, legions of tractor enthusiasts joyfully head off to a vintage tractor rally, of which there are numerous all around Australia. An increasingly popular segment of these events is the vintage tractor pulls. For those who have not wit-

nessed one of these unfortunate episodes, permit me to set the scene.

Old tired tractors, of all shapes and sizes, are dragged from their places of retirement and prepared for battle.

A LITTLE BIT OF TAMPERING

Firstly, pressure in tyres is reduced to an iniquitous seven or eight psi, just enough to prevent the tyres from slipping on the rims but providing a ludicrous near flat profile in order to obtain maximum adhesion.

Next, an assortment of cast iron counterweights are attached to the rear wheels and/or axles. There is a limit to how many can be physically fitted, so I know of some owners who deviously replace the sheet metal of the cockpit floor with three inch cast plate. The luckless tractor will likely weigh twice its original weight, the significance being – the extra ballast will provide additional traction by reducing or eliminating wheel slip.

Now it is the engine's turn. A tractor's petrol/kero engine, designed to run smoothly all day at a maximum 1800 leisurely revs per minute, has its governor doctored and now screams at well over 2000 revs. Larger jets are fitted to the carburettor to aid this punishing result.



I have no argument with this beautifully turned out stock standard Fordson E27N. The driver never overtaxed his faithful old tractor. (Photo IMJ)



A John Deere AR with grossly heavy concrete counterweights attached to the rear wheels. (Photo IMJ)

Old diesel powered tractors have their engines similarly abused. Fuel pumps are indelicately metamorphosed so that indecent amounts of diesel are squirted into each cylinder via transfigured injectors.

The vintage Lanz Bulldogs, with their single cylinder two-stroke crude-oil burning engines, are particular favourites among the tractor pull fraternity. It is a simple task to increase the fuel volume from the pump to the atomiser and fiddle with the governor, the result being clouds of putridity accompanied by flames, belching forth from their chimneys. Spectacular in the extreme for the spectators, but with the likely result of causing acid rain to fall upon New Zealand and a buoyant market for the manufacturers of hearing aids for deaf tractor drivers!

Upon arriving at a rally site, these hapless tractors await their turn to be hitched to a specially constructed mobile torture machine, in the form of a weighted sledge with wheels at the rear and skids at the front. The idea is for the tractor to drag the sledge along a track, usually of around 70 metres in length. As the tractor proceeds, the concrete weights on the sledge progressively move from the rear to the front of the contraption, thus creating an escalating load (or drawbar pull) requirement, increasing as the tractor advances along the course.

The tractors are separated into horse power classifications. Those which can haul the sledge the furthest distance, take out the honours in their class. But even here there can be surreptitious trickery.

The ratings are supposed to be based



This poor old Chamberlain has been repowered with a doctored 100 hp engine and fitted with dual rears. (Photo IMJ)



The old Lanz Bulldog is really copping it! Note the flexing of the tyres as it struggles to obtain adhesion. (Photo IMJ)



A Marshall 12-20, of which only 200 were ever produced, is being severely stressed. This is a shame as these are very rare historic tractors and as such should be treated with respect and not subjected to the tribulations of tractor pulls. (Photo F. Muscat)

on brake horse power, yet frequently the lesser drawbar horse powers are submitted by an owner in an endeavour to have his tractor rated in a lower class. If the scrutineers are not awake, this gives him an unfair advantage in that class.

In addition to the crowd appeal of the single cylinder Bulldogs and Field Marshalls, a Chamberlain Super 90 with its ear piercing two stroke GM 371 diesel engine always attracts a hearty response. A Super 90, even without any doctoring, is seldom outperformed. Other vintage muscle machines include the Fiat 80R, the Oliver Super 99 and the Marshall MP6 with its six cylinder Leyland diesel.

There is no doubt, the crowds delight in these spectacles. Lots of smoke and howling engines, with tractors being brought to their knees or rearing dangerously, as they are flogged without mercy by their operators. But the spectators cheer, as did the Romans in the Colosseum when slaves were thrown to the lions.

Further, there is a definite danger factor associated with these tractor pulls. For example, safety officers are supposed to observe the proceedings diligently and immediately stop a tractor that lifts its front



An International McCormick WD6 is fitted with axle weights which extend wider than the rear wheels. At some tractor pulls this would be disallowed. (Photo M. Pettit)



Photo shows a stock standard Lanz Bulldog performing during a twilight tractor pull. This was a well organised event with the safety officer (with the green flag) carefully observing that the tractor front wheels remained in contact with the ground. Two additional safety officers are keeping a careful eye on the proceedings. Full marks to the organisers. (Photo IMJ)

wheels off the track, which is a prelude to rearing with the possibility of tipping over backwards. Sadly, I have not infrequently observed safety officers yarning away with each other instead of focusing on the performance of a tractor. A serious accident involving a tractor during a tractor pull would have far reaching consequences, particularly in the indeterminate area of insurance.

In addition, I am appalled when, at some rallies, spectators are permitted to line up within a few metres of the tractor pull course in order to shout their encouragements and obtain a close-up view. Anyone who has experienced a tractor tyre blowing out or (worse) an overtaxed engine disintegrating, must share my very real concern about the lack of safety and understanding exhibited by the safety officers, for permitting such close proximity of the crowd.

Having got all that off my chest, and despite everything, I am privileged to have umpteen bushy tailed friends throughout Australia who are devotee tractor pullers. Hopefully this friendship is not now in the past tense.



This Lanz Bulldog is equipped with standard cast iron rims. What is not noticeable is the fact that the sheet metal floor of the cockpit has been replaced with three inch cast steel. (Photo C. Galbraith)



This old McCormick is equipped with steel wheels and lugs. People often mistakenly assume that these lugged wheels will obtain greater traction than if fitted with pneumatic tyres. Nebraska Tractor Test figures prove that in fact the pneumatics obtain a greater grip of the ground. (Photo IMJ)

NOTHING PERSONAL

Come on fellas. I wasn't being personal. If pressed I would even confess that not all tractor pullers are inconsiderate of their machines. Putting a reasonable load on an unadulterated faithful old tractor for a short time – is OK, well sort of!

But I remain one of the minority who find tractor pulls pointless and without relevance to the true vintage tractor enthusiast. It is often pointed out to me that tractors are only heaps of nuts and bolts and therefore have no feeling – so why not stress them to their maximum? I suppose I cannot argue with that logic.

But heck, to me an old tractor is like an old horse. It should be treated with respect and indeed gratitude. Never flog an old horse!

Editor's note: Ian chooses to use pre-metric measurements in his articles as they are symbolic of the classic tractor era. ■

IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR QUIZ

Question: This is indeed a strange looking tractor engine. Can you identify the make of tractor to which it belongs?

Clue: The tractor is European.

Degree of difficulty: If you don't know – phone a friend – who will not be able to help you anyway!

Answer: See page 48.

