

An inspirational life in the shearing shed

Case Study

garinga djimbayang

Noelly owns a thriving shearing business in Echuca and says shearing is a rewarding career for anyone who's prepared to work hard.

Noelly Atkinson has lived his life on Yorta Yorta Country in Echuca. His pop was a Yorta Yorta man and his nan a Wemba Wemba woman.

Noelly recently took over Atkinson Shearing, which was originally started by his grandfather. "Me Pops's name is Noel, and Dad was Noel, and I'm the third Noel. So, I felt like I had to be a shearer. My oldest boy is Noelly, too."

Fifteen years ago, Noelly came to work for his uncle Clint Atkinson who had taken over the business from Pop. He says he never thought he'd end up owning the business. "I was just his main shearer for 15 years and now I'm the boss. I was a bit nervous, but it's all been going well. It's been a good, good ride."

A proud family legacy

Today, Noelly has about 15 shearers, rouseabouts and wool classers on the books. Ranging in age from 18 to 65, some of Noelly's team share the Atkinson name.

"I have a good crew that I'm very proud of. I've got a bit of family that work for me as well, which is always good. It's good looking after them."

With over 20 years of experience working in the sheds, Noelly says becoming business owner and manager of a team has been a learning curve.

"I've been shearing for 21 years and I'm still learning different things. So, forever learning."

The operation of a shearing business

Atkinson Shearing is well known locally and in demand throughout the shearing season. When the call comes through, Noelly puts together a team and sends them out to the sheds. Sometimes he has two teams working on different properties. The work takes his team as far south as Flinders on the Mornington Peninsula and north to the red dirt country of Hay, in NSW.

According to the needs of the contracting farmer, Noelly's teams are made up of workers suited to each job. The sheds they work at have between four and seven shearing stands depending on the farm, making it a substantial operation.

Noelly can shear up to 150 large sheep a day, or over 200 lambs, and sets that as his body's limit. Shearing is known for being one of the most physical and mentally challenging jobs in the world and requires endurance.





"A lot of the old blokes used to say, you're not a gun shearer until after about six years of shearing. You can't just walk in and shear a sheep. It doesn't work like that. You've got to build up your body and there's a million little things to learn."

First steps to a shearing career

A good option to getting started in shearing is to pick up some work as a rouseabout. Noelly explains rouseabouts are "basically like a shearer's labourer. They've got to clean the wool out of the way of the shearer and throw it on the table where other 'rouses' skirt the wool."

Skirting is the process that trims and tidies up the fleeces, removing dirt, burrs and stained wool before it's passed on to the wool classers to be sorted and then pressed into bales. Classed and sorted bales are then sent to city markets. While being a rouseabout is a fast-paced job, it helps newcomers get accustomed to the movements in the shed.

Noelly says, *"When you move up to shearing, you get paid per sheep. So, if you're a hard worker, the more money you make. It's got me a long way. I've built two houses as a shearer."*

Supporting mob and building futures

Teaching the next generation is something Noelly is passionate about.

Noelly supports his new rouseabouts who want to learn to shear by sending them to shearing school which is generally a one-two week course held around the State in a variety of locations. And after the shearing school, he'll bring a professional shearing trainer to the shed to continue supervision of the skills they're developing to make "the right blows."

Noelly says that some shearers travel the world to work, with shearing skills in demand in countries like New Zealand and even as far as the USA.

Facing the future with confidence

Noelly loves the life he's chosen in the sheds and is proud to continue the family tradition. *"A lot of people respect you because you're a hard worker, and one of the hardest things in the world to do is shearing. And just being around the boys and mates and cousins, all my workers: I love them all. It's a proud feeling when we leave a shed and the farmer's happy as."*

Noelly hopes that one or more of his three young sons might one day join the family business. *"My family is my biggest motivation and if they can show me they want to work hard, at least I can give them something to work towards. That would make me very proud."*

For more about Atkinson Shearing, visit **Atkinson Shearing** on Facebook, or for details about working as a shearer, visit **scaa.org.au**

For more about First Nations peoples' connection to agriculture, visit **agriculture.vic.gov.au/garinga-djimbyang**

