

Virginia Osborne

1917–2007

Virginia Esther Osborne was one of the first women who registered as veterinary surgeons in NSW and was still a registered vet at 89. Her passion was mares' ovaries, on which she was an international authority. She demonstrated that the official calendar breeding season did not tally with the actual breeding season and her work led to a change in the starting date of the Standardbred, though not the Thoroughbred, breeding season in Australia.

Virginia was born in Emmaville, north of Glen Innes, the youngest child of Thomas Stanley Osborne, a teacher, and Ruby Evelyn Coates. She grew up with her sister, Valmai, and brother, Theodore, surrounded by nature and animals. The family moved to Blacktown for the children's education. After graduating from the University of Sydney in 1941, she was appointed a demonstrator in veterinary anatomy. She was an outstanding and popular teacher at the university for more than 40 years, if a touch theatrical and sometimes a little eccentric.

Osborne became internationally recognised in the 1960s with the publication of her work on the isolated genital tracts of 6763 mares – a huge study that revealed new information about the timing of ovulation. Mares are most likely to conceive during summer, when long daylight hours stimulate fertility, but convention dictates that they are mated from early September in Australia, so that their foals will be as mature as possible when they all officially turn one the following spring. She stated in 1966 that 'the breeding season is quite inappropriately placed relative to the functioning of dry mares'. In 1987 the Harness Racing

Authority changed its date for the Standardbred season to 1 September, although the official birthday for Thoroughbreds remains 1 August.

Virginia travelled widely for her work. 'Anything to declare?' a customs official in Britain is said to have asked. 'Only my ovaries', she replied, referring to a case full of equine reproductive tissue.

An associate professor when she retired from the university in 1982, she was awarded an honorary master of veterinary science in 1983 and she received the Belle Bruce Reid Medal for her achievements as a mentor and role model for female students; the Virginia Osborne Excellence Award for second-year equine anatomy students is presented annually.

When Virginia left Blacktown she moved to a property at Freemans Reach, Malniri Park, named after her great Standardbred stallion, which competed in an Inter-Dominion Championship in the 1950s. Osborne bred and raced Thoroughbreds and harness racehorses. Apart from 'Malniri', she had the gallopers 'Over the Moon' and 'Follow My Heart'. Her funeral service was held at Hawkesbury racetrack, in sight of the winning post.

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