

FIT AS A FARMER

What began as a couple of Yorke Peninsula farmers heading to the gym a few mornings a week has turned into a national movement to address farmers' fitness, thanks to Ben Wundersitz's energy and ideas.

STORY GABRIELLE HALL

Sunrise spills over Ben and Belinda Wundersitz's cropping property, Anna Binna, near Maitland on South Australia's Yorke Peninsula. Inside, Ben grabs a quick bite and heads out the door, before driving the 7km to the gym in town, as he does twice a week.

He eases into the kerb on the street across from the pub, where evenings might once have been spent catching up with mates. These mornings, Ben ('Wundy' to his mates) has swapped his work boots for sneakers, heading to the gym to meet some mates on a treadmill. It is now part of how he approaches life.

As one of the founding members of the not-for-profit Fat Farmers, Ben is focused on looking after what he says is his most important asset – himself and his family – and he is keen to encourage other rural Australians to do the same. Fat Farmers is a light-hearted name with some serious goals, but you certainly do not have to be fat, a farmer, or male to be involved.

"It started out with just three farmers who decided we needed to get a bit fitter," Ben says. "I was in my 40s and had stopped playing footy. I'd go along to watch my kids play, have a hamburger and a couple of beers on the sidelines. With the pressures of work, and fast food, things started to catch up. Belinda said I'd started snoring, so I went to the GP thinking I had sleep apnoea – but it turned out I just needed to lose a bit of weight."

He headed to the gym where he soon realised the benefits were wide-reaching. It was a simple, but powerful shift for the fifth-generation farmer.

"Fourteen years ago, blokes going to the gym in a country town just wasn't the done thing," Ben says. "It was just me and two mates, but we quickly felt the

difference. Within weeks there was less puffing at work, I stopped snoring, and being cardio-fit made every day easier. You start eating better, and the link between physical activity and mental health becomes clear. Every time I'd exercise, I don't know if it's the endorphins or what it is, but I'd just have a good day at work."

Keen to share the feeling, the trio started texting other local farmers to join them. Interest was slow at first, so they changed tack, organising a morning event with muscle cars parked out front and a sausage sizzle on the footpath outside the gym.

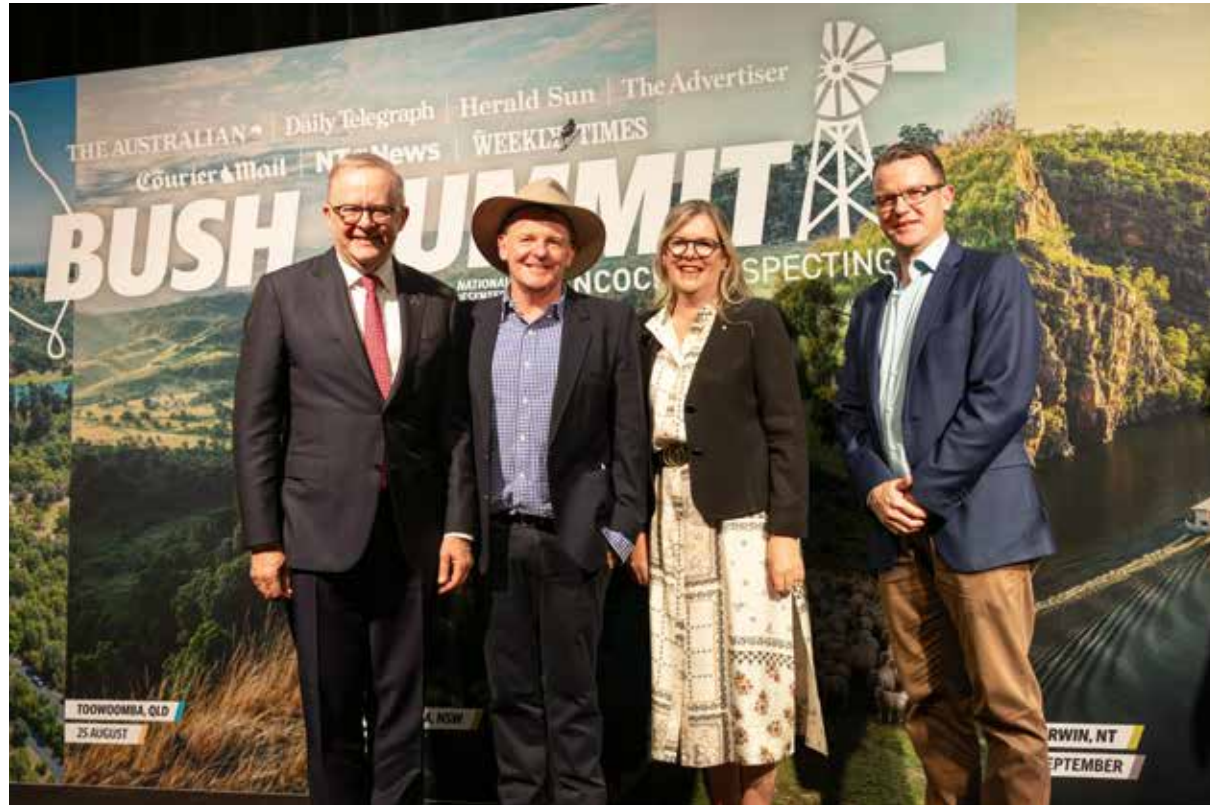
"All of a sudden we had 20 or 30 blokes come down to the gym," Ben says. "It is hard to change what you're doing, and particularly with males there was a bit of a stigma around going to a gym, so it takes a bit of courage I suppose to get involved. In our little town, we went from no males really at the gym, to about 40 regularly attending."

Momentum continued building, some other like-minded people understood their passion and got on board, and Fat Farmers was born. In gyms and on footy ovals, on walking trails and at the annual City-Bay Fun Run in Adelaide, Fat Farmers groups are up and running across the country. The mission is clear: to inspire and encourage rural communities to improve their health and wellbeing through physical activity.

"It's just really good fun, there's always a bit of banter and bullshit," Ben says. "So often in the country the only time we really catch up is at a social event, usually with alcohol involved at a barbecue or whatever, but when you're exercising with people you just connect on a different level. You talk about different stuff, and at my age, whether that's health issues like prostate or a sore knee or back, or maybe it's things going on in our >

Ben 'Wundy' Wundersitz trains on his Yorke Peninsula property Anna Binna. Photo by Robert Lang.





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Ben after being crowned Inaugural Bush Champion and Ag Champion at the 2025 Bush Summit with Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Herald & Weekly Times chairman Penny Fowler and Peter O'Sullivan, director, Group Communications, Woolworths Group; Ben at the Maitland gym; Ben and Belinda with children Charlotte and Charles; the Health Hub offers skin checks at an event at Taillem Bend.

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life or family, it could be something on the farm like succession or drought, or someone you know is crook, and all of a sudden you've got this connection with this whole group of people that know you and can support you at a completely different level."

By 2012, Fat Farmers was incorporated and started attracting sponsors. It partnered with the Hospital Research Foundation in 2024 and, more recently, joined forces with Active Farmers, with shared goals. While there's now a whole team behind Fat Farmers, much of its momentum still traces back to Ben's energy and ideas.

At home, Ben and Belinda have built a highly regarded farming operation, known not only for its innovation, but also for their approach to their staff, many of whom are long-term employees. Recognition has followed, with Ben named SA Grain Producer of the Year 2025, along with overall Bush Champion and Ag Champion at last year's inaugural Bush Champions awards.

Fat Farmers chief executive officer Richard Sheppy has seen first-hand the impact that Ben and Fat Farmers are having on rural communities. "In 2018 I weighed 117kg and wasn't leading a very healthy lifestyle, so Fat Farmers really aligns with

me," he says. "From three guys going to the gym in Maitland in 2012, it's grown to more than 85 groups – including Active Farmers – across the country and the flow-on has been huge."

He describes Ben as a "humble bloke with a heart for people and a heart for the bush", and he is helping shift attitudes in rural communities, breaking down the stigma of healthy living and mental health. Ben becomes emotional recounting a conversation with one country bloke's wife, who says Fat Farmers saved her husband's life. Richard says everywhere they go, they hear similar stories.

"I was only talking to someone recently who told me he had been battling depression for years, and since starting Fat Farmers, he's become part of a community he wouldn't have been involved in previously," he says. "He told me that driving home from a session one day, he felt an overwhelming sense of happiness, something he hadn't felt for years. Those are the stories that make us understand what we're doing and why we're doing it."

Not one to rest on his laurels, Ben has extended his ideas beyond fitness groups. His plan to add health checks to Fat Farmers' agenda was hard for the board to reject, as his passion and foresight are contagious. "I'd seen the Breast Screen bus come to Maitland

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BodySync gym owner George Davies (third from the left at front), Ben and other Fat Farmers relax after their morning workout.

and talking to a few people they said, 'my wife got a call back to follow up' and I thought well that's great," Ben says. "Then at the Yorke Peninsula Field Days I saw Rabobank had a big truck that they take around as a social platform, and I thought wouldn't it be great to combine the two? So I started looking through the auctions and eventually, after a couple of years searching, I found an ex-dental trailer in Brisbane. It was exactly what I had in mind, with two surgeries and a patient waiting area, so I bought it."

With a prime mover on loan from Hardi Australia, the Fat Farmers health hub is now on the road, moving around to major rural events. The group is currently looking for sponsorship partners to come on board to help it remain sustainable. "My vision is really just to keep people alive," Ben says. "Do skin checks, and bloods for things like cholesterol and diabetes, PSA for prostate, blood pressure and those types of things."

Richard adds that the impact of the mobile health hub is already clear. At one of its most recent outings, Fat Farmers partnered with the Rosemary Bryant Foundation, offering free skin checks. "We facilitated more than 150 checks that would have cost about \$300 each in Adelaide, plus time and fuel, so providing that free to the community is significant," he says. "We will see it change lives. It will save lives."

Ben is already thinking about what comes next. Utilising the mental health-trained GPs and nurses who service the mobile hub, he believes Fat Farmers can fill another void in rural areas by adding more trucks to the fleet and providing mobile support during times of disaster whether that be drought, fire or flood.

This down-to-earth farmer would tell you he is just an ordinary Australian, but speak to anyone who knows him, or spend five minutes having a chat, and you soon realise he is anything but. For him, the goal is clear and it extends far beyond the farm gate.

"We seem to struggle as rural people to prioritise ourselves, and it just blows my mind that we service all our machinery, we service the LandCruiser, the HiLux, the tractor, but when it comes to ourselves, we're always too busy," he says. "It's not getting any easier to get an appointment at the local doctor or health centre, so I just thought if we have a mobile health hub at industry events, field days, and have health checks in the towns where we have fitness groups then we're not only keeping people fit, but we're keeping them healthy as well."

"We've done some amazing things in agriculture and it's been a great industry for me, but if you can leave rural Australia better than when you found it, I don't think it gets much better than that."