

# FEATURED MEMBER



CATHERINE HARPER

Our featured member for this issue is Catherine Harper. Catherine chats to Heather Vaile about growing up on a farm in South Australia, how playing competitive sport at an elite level helped her develop in other ways too, and why she decided to take on the AVA CVP accreditation program when she is already such a successful vet and business owner.



**If you've ever wondered whether it really is possible to have it all – successful career, loving family, and genuine professional development opportunities that help you to really thrive at work, look no further than Catherine Harper, a mixed practice vet and veterinary business owner from South Australia.**

Catherine grew up on a farm in the verdant Adelaide Hills region. It's east of the city of Adelaide and known for its natural splendour, abundant wildlife and popular wineries. Her parents ran Angora goats and Murray Grey cattle on about 200 acres of land, and they encouraged Catherine and her younger brother to make the most of the outdoor lifestyle.

"I guess it's why I am where I am today," she says. "I've wanted to be a vet since I could stand up and talk and some of my earliest memories are helping Mum and Dad in the yards, getting goats ready to go to shows. And just being out and about on the farm, helping with things ... I'm sure that contributed to me wanting to be a vet, and it was great. I very rarely spent any time inside when I was at home."

When she was around 10 or 11 years old, Catherine started to become very keen on sport, and her love of team sports in particular, meant frequent trips to Adelaide to train and compete.

"In terms of anything serious, it was softball from the beginning, but it was really softball and netball together until I was 16," she explains. "Ultimately, I had to make a decision which path I was going to follow in terms of performance. So, I couldn't play state netball and state softball simultaneously because of time commitments, so I chose softball at that point."

Catherine's parents were hugely supportive of her goals, both on the sporting field and in the classroom. Starting from year 6, she was enrolled in a private school in Adelaide, and she says: "I'm sure that academically that environment allowed me to thrive."

"I think in Australia sometimes there's that tall poppy syndrome. And if you're performing at a high standard then you kind of get pulled down a peg. That doesn't tend to happen, or it certainly wasn't happening, in the private school environment I was in. And so being able to perform and do really well and have that success certainly helped me to thrive and progress academically."

"Mum and Dad worked very, very hard to make that a possibility for my brother and I because certainly financially, it was a significant strain to be able to continue to put us through private school."

It was the best of both worlds for Catherine – a top education at a private school in Adelaide and the joy of being surrounded by nature and animals on the farm.



In terms of any special pets she remembers from the farm, she thinks back to Frankie, a silvery 'blue' Kelpie who joined the family when Catherine was about 10.

"He was meant to be a working dog, but he decided that I was much more fun and very much became bonded to me and hung out with me," she explains. "So, he was my first 'special dog' who spent a lot of time with us. But I adored spending time with all of the animals on the farm."

When she was in year 12, Catherine was selected to play in the Australian Under 19 World Championship women's softball team, culminating in a trip to China. She believes her competitive sporting experiences taught her a lot about self-discipline and focus.

"Getting to a point where you repeat something over and over again until you get good at it, that takes dedication, she says.

"It takes time. It takes sacrifice.

"The biggest fight I ever remember having with my parents as a teenager was when

I wanted to go to the Big Day Out with my friends. But we had a netball game on the same day, and my parents wouldn't let me go because I'd already committed to the team.

"So, I think it's those types of things that set you up for success. It's learning those skills of self-discipline, finding something you love, dedicating yourself to it and then continuing on until you achieve what you want to."

After completing her HSC in 1999, Catherine was offered a sports scholarship at the University of Louisville in Kentucky, so she moved to the US for a few years and completed a Bachelor of Science in Biology. The idea was to get her science degree first and then enrol in a vet school once she returned to Australia.

The overseas opportunity was a big move out of her comfort zone for her, but Catherine says that it was an excellent learning experience and not just in terms of academic achievement.



"You do have to be more resilient; Mum and Dad, they're not round the corner," she says. "You can't just pop home for tea. And Frankie, that special dog that I mentioned earlier, he actually died of a splenic tumour in the first six months that I was overseas. So, I never really got to say goodbye to him because I was overseas."

"But experiences like that absolutely help to build resilience and different skills that you just don't get when you still get to live at home. Independence, financial skills in terms of managing money, having a job while you're studying and also playing elite sport are all entwined together because essentially, you're a professional athlete. It's just that instead of them paying you money, they're paying for your university education. And there are significant expectations of you academically as well as on the sporting field."

"It teaches you a lot – and time management is part of that too," she adds.

On her return to Australia in 2008, Catherine was still very focused on her softball ambitions, but she also applied and was offered a place in the vet science course at Murdoch University.

She was delighted to receive the university offer on her first attempt, but she was also hoping to be part of Australia's women's softball team for the 2008 Summer Olympics, so the timing was a little tricky. To keep her options open, she decided to defer her veterinary studies for a year.

When she found out she had narrowly missed out on a spot in the Olympic team, she decided to play professional softball in Italy for a year instead.

Off she went to southern Europe, but a sporting accident soon derailed her plans. Catherine badly injured an arm in the second game of the season and she had to come home.

Unfortunately, the arm injury continued to cause her difficulties later on, and she struggled to get back into playing high-level softball in the years that followed.

Nevertheless, she still had her veterinary studies to look forward to, and once she began her university course in 2009, she threw herself into the experience.

Looking back on the vet science course today, Catherine says: "Being a general

practitioner now I don't think I appreciated how much of the course that they design at Murdoch for general practice.

"It really does set you up for success, and it's not something I've come across at the other universities. It's very practical. It teaches you how to do an ear swab, for example. And then how to treat otitis externa and that doesn't necessarily fit into a standard curriculum because it's not really medicine, it's not really surgery."

"And so, I think on reflection, the general practice course at Murdoch run by Dr Melinda Bell was excellent, and I think Murdoch was the first course to put into place, really focus on what was then called soft skills or, exposing you to what we now call 'human skills' and also exposing you to the very many pathways that vets can take."

Catherine also mentions that being a mature-age student and having those extra few years of life experience under her belt certainly benefitted her during her studies. She did very well in her subjects and even won a number of awards and scholarships along the way.

In the final year of the course, she also became the AVA's student president which allowed her to attend AVA conferences, meet and connect with other AVA members and learn more about the organisation through the AVA Policy Council.

In 2013, Catherine graduated with a Bachelor of Veterinary Science and Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine and Surgery with High Distinction.

## EARLY CAREER

Catherine had always wanted to be a mixed practice vet and she says she would have happily worked a cattle vet "in the middle of nowhere" once qualified.

However, in the third year of her course she met her now-husband Josh and he was living happily in Adelaide with no plans to move.

"So, when it came time to graduate, a compromise had to be made or I wasn't going to have a relationship anymore," she explains.

Catherine successfully applied for a job at a mixed practice in Nurioopta in South Australia's Barossa Valley. The practice was called PI Jones & Associates and the owner also had another veterinary business about 20 minutes away in the old mining town of Kapunda.

Working at PI Jones & Associates meant Catherine could still do mixed practice work and her partner could still work in Adelaide. But that wasn't the only great thing about it. She now realises just how lucky she was to have started her veterinary career in such a supportive environment.







"I was very fortunate in that my boss Pete Jones had employed several other young females before me and so I didn't experience that unhelpful attitude going out onto farms of: 'You're a woman or you're a girl! Like what would you know?'"

"I guess a couple of female vets before me had paved the way for me, which was lovely. So, I was very accepted and encouraged."

"One of the memories that stands out hugely in my mind is there was an absolutely wonderful dairy farmer who lived not far from the clinic, who we did work for, and he was just forever cheering you on and positive. And I had a calving out there after hours that did not go to plan for anybody, and he was just incredibly supportive throughout that."

"I think to have not only your work team, but the farming community be so behind you and supportive of the fact that you are learning was fantastic. It was probably the only the second time I've done one and all the rest of it, and for those people to acknowledge the persistence and the resilience, that you need to keep going and get to an outcome was lovely. So that really stood out."

"Also, just the joy of actually getting to do on veterinary work was a thrill for me. As I said, I'd wanted to be a vet since I was four basically, and here I was a long time later, 20 odd years later, actually getting to do it and make a difference and make relationships with people. That was pretty cool."

Catherine was also soon to discover that Pete, who was around 60 at the time, was looking to retire in the not-too-distant future.

Just two years into her career at PI Jones & Associates, he decided it was the right time for him to hang up his stethoscope, and he encouraged his bright young protege to make the leap into practice ownership.

"Buying a business had always been on the radar, but not as quickly as this," Catherine says. "But sometimes you just have to take the opportunities when they're in front of you."

Fortunately, while still enrolled in her veterinary course at Murdoch, Catherine had also participated in a program called Master Class which allowed her to complete four MBA subjects in addition to her veterinary subject course load. In doing so, she was able to earn a postgraduate certificate in

business administration at the same time as her veterinary degree.

She goes on to mention that she also ran the veterinary students' business group at university for three years and that these additional experiences were useful, along with "lots of listening" and "just keeping your eyes open for business development opportunities" in her new role as the practice owner.

Fast forward eight years and the business, now called Barossa Veterinary Service (BVS), has achieved 20% year on year growth for each year that she's owned it, and during that time, she has also tripled the size of the team.

Yet modestly, she says there's no particular secret to her success.

"It's just offering good quality veterinary care with consistently good service. We renamed the business to include 'Veterinary Service' and now our tagline if you like is: 'Serving the community and its animals' and that's what we've aimed to do and continue to do. And there's a need there. We have the staff and we've been able to meet that need in an area that is growing and developing."



Catherine has also found her memberships of the AVA, ASAV and Veterinary Business Group (VBG) SIGs very helpful, and she likes that she can attend AVA conferences at discounted rates.

Her leadership skills have not gone unnoticed, and Barossa Veterinary Service was honoured as the VBG Veterinary Business of the Year in 2022.

Catherine is also the current president of the AVA's South Australia Division.

## TAKING ON THE AVA CVP PROGRAM

This year Catherine aims to be the first vet to be accredited as an AVA Chartered Veterinary Practitioner (AVA CVP).

When asked why she decided to study the AVA CVP accreditation program when she is already such a successful vet and practice owner, she says: "I was just approaching 10 years of being a vet and thinking, I've done a lot of business development, but not necessarily a whole lot of direct clinical education.

"And I wanted to make sure that I'm able to lead the team and continue to build the business that's functioning as best a level as we can in the GP clinical environment. So, I guess my options really sat at membership [from the Australian and New Zealand College of Veterinary Scientists], doing a master's or enrolling in this new program."

The AVA CVP program was the closest match to the type of practical CPD that she was after, and she shares some of her thoughts about it.

"I think having a pathway that will show I'm not 'just' a GP, I'm a GP who works hard at practising at the highest level and remaining as current with knowledge that I can in a general practice setting.

"It's a really great thing for the profession so that once you get to 10 years out, you don't stagnate and you've got an option to go, well, I can do this, and this is going to recognise all that hard work.

"It also gives you that next level of status that I think so many of us need because performing at a high level – that's what we've been doing our whole lives. We're high achievers with high levels of recognition and high levels of knowledge, and this this is a way that we can demonstrate that commitment to excellence in a general sphere."

Catherine also likes that the AVA CVP accreditation program is flexible enough that it can be done as a busy working parent, and as the mother of two small children, this was important to her.

"In terms of benefits, it has really brought forth a lot of perspectives or knowledge that you have learnt before but whose import has been lost in the hectic nature of GP practice and the transition from new grad to confident vet," she adds. "Reconsidering this knowledge and seeing where it is applicable in practice, particularly in a leadership position, has been hugely significant for me.

"I also think the clinical component of the program did a great job of focusing on what is *new* on certain topics and not just reviewing pathophysiology and telling you what you can learn from a textbook."

As for her favourite parts of the program overall, Catherine says, "I guess there's two that stand out to me.

"We've just finished our module on antimicrobial resistance and stewardship in the Understanding Our Role in Society course. And there are some really great practical things in there that are really easy to implement in your clinic and that will make a difference. That was great and you can't help thinking: Why are we not shouting this from the rooftops for everybody? Because they're so simple, but really good things to do. So, I thoroughly enjoyed that.

"And then the other part we did way back at the beginning, during the first eight weeks of the Veterinary Personal and Professional Effectiveness course. You work on a personal wellbeing plan with Dr Cheryl Fry. It was excellent!

"Probably a lot of us will have done self-development training in the past or done some thinking about meditation or ways to be well. But Cheryl's course takes you step by step through a lot of really, really well-structured ways of doing it and things to think about.

"And she discusses how you can be making sure you're looking after yourself as a professional. She also shows you how doing so is helping your family, helping your team at work, helping your extended family or friends – and she explains what that needs to look like in practice.

"The first eight weeks of the course were brilliant."

On the subject of mental health, Catherine wholeheartedly believes that part of staying mentally well includes having fun at work and having regular conversations within the team about how everyone is doing.

"At BVS we wear 'fun scrubs' every Friday and we all contribute a gold coin for a charity voted on each month," she says. "It's our visual reminder to check in with each other and it's also an incredible way to start a conversation with our clients about why we do it."

## THE ROAD AHEAD

Catherine's veterinary and business achievements to date are so impressive, it's hard to believe she's done it all in just over 10 years. So, has she reached a sweet spot or happy place in her career now? Or is there still more that she wants to achieve at BVS and perhaps even beyond it?

"I think we recognise that we don't want to get too much bigger," she replies.

"We are in the process of building a new hospital in Nuriootpa, which will be significantly bigger than where we are now, but we do need the space. And so, I think for me that's probably where the contentment with Barosa Vet Service will come.

"But I do recognise that there will be something more. Beyond this, I just don't necessarily know what it looks like yet. I'm very passionate about keeping veterinary care in rural settings and figuring out how I can best contribute to helping to make that sustainable."

She mentions that BVS has just recently been named the state winner of Telstra, Best of Business Awards in the category of 'Building communities' and they will now progress to the national competition.

In 2023, BVS was also a finalist in the Australian Small Business Champion Awards and a state finalist in the Telstra Best of Business Awards in the category of 'Accelerating Women.'

And earlier this year, Catherine's entrepreneurial skills and expertise in managing organisational change were recognised in South Australia's 40 Under 40 Awards. She was also honoured with the 'First Among Equals' award at the awards night, recognising her as the finalist who best embodies the 40 Under 40 Awards.

While she is delighted that the BVS has become such a hugely successful veterinary business, she emphasises that it's not all been down to her.

"I get an immense amount of support from my husband," she says warmly. "I think one of the things we've done really well in business ownership is to find the right person to help us at the right time, and we've met some hugely generous people who've helped us through our journey in those right moments when we've needed them.

"That has allowed us to get where we need to be. I have a wonderful team who work hard every day to make BVS what it is. This is by no means just me. So sure, I lead it, and I ask them to come on this crazy journey with me. But it's them that make it possible day in, day out, and I'm very humbled and thankful to have the opportunity to work with them all the time." 🐾