

PAVLOVA SERVICE IN PAHIATUA

Story Wayne Munro Photos Gerald Shacklock



Brian Murdoch backs his Hino up to a farm shed near Woodville, where a load of calves awaits



IT'S A FUNNY COMPARISON TO MAKE – BUT THEN, this Brian Murdoch fella is a bit of a character... with a hard-case way of putting things.

He's explaining how, in livestock cartage, the welfare of the animals you transport is paramount.

First comes the obvious – how it wouldn't be a good look to deliver stock to the saleyards looking "shitty" and stressed from their truck ride.

And then.....the unexpected – likening his approach to the difference between a creamy meringue and a stale old bit of cake!

"Nobody minds buying a pavlova that's nicely creamed and with strawberries, you know," says the boss of Murdoch Transport as he steers his 700 Series Hino through the Manawatu Gorge.

"But they don't like buying a bloody old dried-up old sponge, do they?"

That, he reckons, is exactly how it is with livestock – it comes down to getting animals to the sales in good nick. Or to the works, for that matter. Or to the farmer who's just bought 'em.

Care of the stock is *THE* critical factor in Murdoch Transport's success, he says again: "Oh shit yes. Yep, yep – that's it. Every job you do, you've gotta do it the best you can – doesn't matter how big or how small it is."

Like the calves we've just delivered to the Feilding saleyards: Not really a full truckload, but he was happy to give them a roomy, comfortable ride over to the sale in his Hino rather than squeezing them onto one of his smaller trucks.

"Don't jam them on....spread them out," says Brian: "Quite often, if I end up with a great big, huge load to go to a sale or something, I'll lighten that off – send the little truck just to take the pressure off."

And another Murdoch rule: "Make sure your gear's clean on the

inside of your crates.....100% clean. If they do end up with shit on them...the shit didn't come off our crates!"

Pahiatua born and bred – and with 33 years' experience now in carting livestock – Brian Murdoch knows his business. And he knows (and likes) the local farmers who provide a large part of that work.

"They're good people, you know. I try my hardest to look after them. The animals are their income and if their animals arrive at the saleyards and they're clean and in a good state, they'll get good money for them. If they arrive crappy and horrible, they'll get crappy and horrible money for them."

In a heavily-populated Wairarapa stock transport scene Brian concedes "we're not the cheapest by any means – we're probably one of the dearest."

But his clients, he says, are "more than happy" to pay a fair price for making sure their animals "arrive in good order."

Well....mostly they are. He reckons he recently lost a little job he'd been doing for years – carting calves to the saleyards – because an opposition company offered to do it for \$3 a head less and he wouldn't drop his price.

He reckons he saw them arrive at the sale: "The opposition had jammed them into their pens. I'd put 40 in the truck – but you can fit 60.

"They looked absolutely shit – and she got paid shit money for them. Would have cost her somewhere around \$20 per calf."

Hopefully, he says with a laugh, over all these years driving stock trucks he's learnt how to do the job properly: "I'd like to think so – yeah."

A part of that is learning to accept responsibility if anything goes wrong: "I just take the blame eh. Yep, even if it's down to a shonky loading race or whatever, it doesn't matter – shut up, accept it, pay for it. I've seen guys lose customers, arguing over a \$30 sheep."



Fiona and Brian Murdoch and the fleet that's been their life for 11 years now

The payback, he says, is the steady growth of the business he and wife Fiona started 11 years ago – starting out with just one truck and trailer unit....

And, one by one, adding another three and a half trucks to meet demand – even though he’s always stayed focused on the immediate Pahiatua area. The half, by the way, comes about because he has an old International 3070, which he regards as a “toy” – but it does still work when needed.

He measures the success of the business by the number of valued clients who entrust him with their animals. He’s clearly very proud, for instance, that when Feilding-based Farmers Transport was contracted “a little while ago” to cart 11,000 head of cattle to Napier for a huge live export shipment, he was one of only two outsiders asked by FT to help out.

He was tickled pink that FT (who he does occasionally swap work with), rated him good enough for the task: “I was quite privileged,” he says.

Interestingly, Brian didn’t start out in livestock – nor even in trucking – despite the fact that his Dad, Graeme, drove trucks for Pahiatua’s Gleeson Transport for most of his working life....

And despite the 57-year-old Brian’s declaration that “I always loved trucks.”

He duly got his HT licence as soon as he turned 18 – but by then he’d already started an engineering apprenticeship. He worked as a fitter/turner for about five years, helping build cowsheds, gates, farm bridges.

“And then, yeah I decided that....sittin’ in a workshop,

breathing-in fumes wasn’t for me.

“No, no – I didn’t like being inside. The boss knew that and the last two years I did 70% outside work. But I still couldn’t wait to get me arse into a truck.”

When he visited a mate working for Waimiha Transport, in the King Country, he was offered a driving job as well: “I was like a rocket seat on rails – I handed my notice in and three weeks later I was working in Waimiha.”

He started out in a “brand-spanking-new” D Series Ford convertible stock/bulk truck, with a 10-speed Roadranger. Then, after six months and 60,000kms, he switched to a 3070 Inter.

After two years in the King Country, he returned home to a job driving a D Series Ford livestock unit for Gleeson Transport.

He loved the job – setting up a stint of more than 20 years working for the company, broken only by a two-year spell when he and wife Fiona worked in Aussie.

Maybe the die was cast six months after he started with Gleesons, when a new T-Line International was added to the fleet: “It sat in the yard for a while – no-one to drive it. All the other drivers were arguing and squabbling amongst themselves over it and the boss came out to me one day and said ‘Brian, there’s your new truck mate. Start drivin’ it.’

“So the new kid on the block got the new truck – much to their disappointment. But hey, if you wanted to work, you got rewarded there....they’d always find work for you.”

To the extent, he reckons, he saw more of owners Paul and Maurice Gleeson “than I did of my family – you know, Mum and Dad.”



MURDOCH TRANSPORT LTD PAHIATUA

Main picture: The Murdoch Isuzu in the midst of a silage harvest near Palmerston North

Right: Brian's first truck – a Waimiha Transport D Series Ford



Life, he says, was: “Go to work. Get up at half past five, six o'clock and go to work by seven. Work through till anywhere between nine, 10, 11, 12 o'clock at night. Home, have a shower, scoff your tea, into bed. And out of bed...go back to work again. And that's how it was.

“I think the best stint I did was three months without a day off. And they were all 14, 15-hour days too. It was different times.”

Brian misses the camaraderie of being a truck driver in the old days: “There was always hay to cart and wool to cart and you learnt to work with each other. Now nobody helps you any more, you know.

“We were doing hay one night in a big paddock south of Pahiatua and the boss called up on the radio and said ‘there's 2500 bales of hay in that paddock Brian – and you and your gang better get started.’ Our bottom lips nearly hit the ground! We thought ‘f***! We're gonna be here for a while then!’

“Well, it was about three hours and it was finished:
The other trucks – your mates – started coming. They'd finished (their other

jobs) and they got in there. We ended up with seven trucks – and we made the pub before 10 o'clock!

“Bill Smith might have dropped a few bales or hit a gate post or something. And there'd be a big shout on the Friday night.”

When Brian and Fiona headed for Western Australia in the mid-1990s, he found some of that same camaraderie there – in the Outback: “It sort of can bite you, Australia. You can get the bug – in the bush. They're good people out there.”

While Fiona worked in roadhouses, he drove roadtrains – double and triple tipper units carting export grain to the port in Geraldton for about a year...

And then moving to Townsville, where he drove a mix of fuel tanker, flatdeck and curtainsider roadtrains up to the Gulf of Carpentaria and “into the bush.”

They returned to Pahiatua when Fiona was due to have their son Campbell.

Brian continued to enjoy his time at Gleesons, but around 2000 started seriously thinking about getting into business on his own account.





Left & bottom left: Hay and livestock were important loads right from early on in Brian's 20-years-plus with Gleeson Transport

Below: Waimiha Inter was Brian's second truck



"You know, when I was about 40, I thought 'if I don't do something for myself, I'll miss the boat.' You run out of drive as you get older. When you're younger you're driven – and debt drives you as well."

He mentioned it to the Gleesons – and reckons they were keen to consider a sale, so they began to negotiate a deal to buy the business: "But it just went on....we spent three years trying to take it over."

Finally, in 2003, a deal was agreed, Brian says: "I think it was nine trucks – and we were gonna lease the yard and the office block for four or five years.

"We had the money okayed from the bank – all to go through in the afternoon." All it needed was the vendors' signoff.

But it didn't happen....and a bitterly disappointed Brian pulled the pin: "We said 'nah, that's it. She's all over.' Yeah.

"Didn't know what I was gonna do – no idea." He served out a month's notice, then went to work for Farmers Transport in Feilding for a few weeks – "then I just decided, 'right, I'm buying me own truck.'"

He started in February 2004, with a five-year-old 8x4 380hp Hino FY and a secondhand trailer.

The startup coincided with a rainstorm that resulted in huge flooding and serious slips that closed dozens of roads in the Pahiatua district, including the Manawatu Gorge – the main link

between the Manawatu and Wairarapa/Hawke's Bay. Damage to a bridge also closed one of the two alternative routes – over the Saddle Road.

It was all potentially seriously disruptive for the new business, which aimed to do both bulk tipping and livestock work. But the floods also coincided with construction of the Te Apiti Wind Farm atop the Ruahine Ranges, just north of the Manawatu Gorge.

When the project managers "screamed out for tipping trucks" Brian quickly acquired a tipper trailer to go behind his convertible Hino: "So I spent seven months up there....carting metal up and down the hill. And yeah – that really set us up."

Even after that, he says, "the flood created that much work around here I never worried about the livestock: We had enough tipping work to do – we were flat-out, 14 hours a day six days a week."

Soon though – inevitably, given his years in livestock – "we started doing a few livestock jobs. The phone started ringing...and I guess it's just word of mouth."

Brian insists it wasn't a matter of him going-after the work he used to do for Gleesons, where he says, "I knew I did a good job. People asked for me to do their jobs."

But, he adds: "I've never, ever rung up any of their customers and asked for work, you know. They rung me."

The "hard part," he reckons, was knowing how to price jobs:

“Yeah I did stuff up a few jobs (price-wise),” he says.

“Even to this day I work it out on an hourly rate *AND* a kilometre rate – and then see which is best for everyone. I think a lot of our pricing...we probably don’t get paid as much as the job is really worth. We charge what we think the cockey should be paying.”

Later on he confesses that the biggest challenge in running his own business has been “maintaining a profit” – sometimes a very modest one... “and one year, I ran at a loss.

“It was just that my pricing was too cheap. At the end of the day, you can do as good a job as you like, but if you don’t price it properly, you’re buggered. You’re working like shit – and you’ve gone backwards!

“See you’re flat out – haven’t got time to work out if we were making any money or not!”

Now he does a daily calculation “up here,” he reckons, with a tap on his head – a bit of mental arithmetic to make sure he’s staying on the right side of the ledger: “You know, you’ve got a rough idea how far you’ve been, how much you’ve made. What your turnover is, what your expenses are.”

Pretty early on in the Murdoch Transport evolution, a four-wheeler Mitsi was bought – to consolidate loads for the Hino and do small jobs.

But it was 2008 before the Murdochs dared add a second heavy truck and trailer unit: Finding the right driver was the biggest issue, Brian explains.

“That was a big step – to go to two (big) trucks. Like, when you’re flat-out with one, the biggest problem was finding someone to help me.”

He had been relying on getting other carriers in the area to help.

That came with problems of its own: “You’ve got to remember they’re busy as well.”

And then “one farmer...said to me one day: ‘Brian if you send that XXXX (another operator’s) truck back here again I’ll find someone else to do my work.’

“And that was a wakeup call. He just wanted a Murdoch Transport truck – he didn’t want anyone else. I thought ‘shit, this can’t carry on. They’re good customers – one of our best customers. We can’t lose them.’ ”

So he bought a five-year-old, 400hp Isuzu, and another secondhand trailer – both convertible.

And within a year he replaced the old Hino with a brand-new 700 Series FY 8x4 – another convertible unit, with secondhand (but refurbished) Total stock crates and a secondhand Domett Fruehauf trailer: “They’re the best trailers – little bit heavy. But never crack, never break. They’re simple.”

That first brand-new truck was a big milestone – “shit yeah!” Funnily enough though, he reckons, “it might sound stupid, but we actually lost a bit of work because of it. I think a lot of people thought ‘shit you’re doing too well – making too much money!’ ”

He bought the old Inter in Southland two years ago. The 1980 model, with its 903 Cummins engine, is “my toy: Got a 15-speed Roadranger, a stack up the back: A real man’s truck,” he reckons.

It still “has to pay its way too – a load of gravel here and there. Bit of hay, bit of baleage.”

A local farmer who’s semi-retired is entrusted with it whenever there’s a need: “He loves driving it – and he’s the only one I really let drive it. He looks after it.”

Now there’s also a brand-new 500 Series Hino FE 4x2, with a



Above left: Tough as he reckons the livestock cartage scene is, Brian clearly loves it

Above right: Fiona's been fighting a losing battle to defend her garden against the steadily-expanding yard behind the Murdochs' house



Although the Murdoch trucks do roam as far afield as Taranaki, Wellington and the Waikato, most of their work comes from the area around Pahiatua

5.5-metre Jackson Enterprises tipping deck, aluminium dropsides and an existing crate – a replacement for the 10-year-old Mitsi four-wheeler.

The 260hp runabout was bought for a new driver joining the Murdoch operation – Brian and Fiona’s son Campbell, now 18 and a ready-made inhouse (partial) solution to the driver shortage.

He’s already proven himself very capable, Brian says proudly – having driven trucks around the yard and the Murdoch farmlet for 10 years or more. If all goes to plan Brian’s considering adding another big truck and trailer unit later in 2015 – once Campbell’s earned his Class 4 licence.

The next unit will almost certainly be a Hino – a clear favourite for Brian, even though, as he sums up, “they’re not the most powerful trucks on the road. But they do good for what we want to do with them – you know, we don’t do Auckland-Wellington linehaul stuff.”

More importantly, as far as Brian’s concerned, Hino’s national parts distribution centre is in Palmerston North: “The maximum time we’ve waited for parts for our Hinos is 20 minutes!”

In comparison, he says, when a U-bolt broke on the Isuzu, it took three days for a replacement: “It was \$500 when it came – and three days’ production down the gurgler.”

The work is pretty much confined to the bottom third of the North Island – and much of it’s focused on the Wairarapa and Manawatu. There are also deliveries to works in Wanganui, Taranaki, the Waikato and Wellington.

On the day *New Zealand Truck & Driver* visits, the type of work the Murdoch trucks are doing is typical, albeit without as much of it as usual: Brian’s got a load of calves over to the Feilding

sale, part-timer Bruce Todd has done some local livestock work in the new Hino 4x2 – and then, with the crate taken off, does some flatdeck work, carting the bagged calf feed that’s stored in the Murdoch yard.

Bruce, now 73, had retired from his job as the dispatcher with Gleeson Transport when Brian offered him the part-time job.

Isuzu driver Daniel Walls starts late to clean his truck and trailer after a late finish last night and then swaps the crates for high-sided silage bins, ready for an afternoon job near Palmerston North.

Although he’d never done livestock before, after years of bulk linehaul work – with lots of time away from home – the 38-year-old took the job with Murdochs a year ago, primarily because it guaranteed him nights at home...and because he lives about 100-metres from the yard.

He’s “a good little fella,” says Brian approvingly: “He’s coming along good. He’s learning.”

Greg Jensen’s a local mechanic/engineer who’s been working part-time at the yard in recent weeks, “tidying-up a few jobs,” as Brian puts it, adding: “We start off in the winter-time with a great, long list of jobs that we’re gonna do in our spare time. Well, your spare time never comes. So it doesn’t happen.”

Another local mechanic is contracted to service the trucks at the yard, which is out the back of Brian and Fiona’s modest house, on an eight-acre farmlet just outside Pahiatua.

Fiona’s recently finished a 16-year stint working part-time in the bottleshop in Pahiatua to hold the fort at home – adding phone calls and manning the R/T to the accounts and paperwork she’s done for years.



Left, top & bottom: Brian misses the camaraderie of the old days with Gleeson Transport – especially during the likes of the hay season

Above: Part-timer Bruce Todd readies the new 500 Series Hino for a load of calves

Main picture: Like the other Murdoch trucks, the new Hino four-wheeler is a convertible unit – here about to deliver a load of bagged calf feed

“We’re getting too busy now” for her not to be involved fulltime, Brian says: “It gets quite hard doing this (he’s driving as we talk) – and doing the phone. People expect you to answer that thing and be happy and cheerful all the time.”

He confesses a little ruefully that he hung-up on a customer yesterday: “I was at the Masterton saleyards – trying to chase lambs out and it was pissing down with rain. And he said ‘how come you’re not happy and cheerful Brian....’ ”

So at stressful times like that he’ll switch the phone over to Fiona: “She can call me up on the radio when she needs to.”

She’s also been learning how to work the stock sales – seeing what customers are buying and putting together loads bound for the Pahiatua area. She’s been doing some small sales and, Brian reckons, “she’s pretty well got that sussed out.”

In any spare time, she’ll be able to tend her much-loved vege and flower gardens – despite their size having been slowly eroded over the years by the expanding yard.

Says Brian, standing in the middle of the gravel yard, with its workshop and storage shed, loading ramp and stockpile of race lime: “This was all paddock. Added a little bit here – a little bit there.

We thought we’d build a turnaround, and then a shed, and then a bigger shed, and then more yard...and you get less and less green grass.”

The growth of the yard, of course, reflects the steady growth of the Murdoch Transport business – and, within that, a steady trend towards more and more livestock work.

“We own two tip trucks (convertible units) and there were just five days last year when we both had our sides on at the same time. So both of us had the crates on just about all the year around.

“It’s a niche market type of thing – like anybody can take a load of fertiliser or a load of metal somewhere and tip it off – and you know, if it turns to custard, well you’re off out of it.

“And at the end of the day, anyone can chase sheep into a crate and chase ‘em out. But it’s





Brian and Fiona's son Campbell was virtually born into trucking: He was driving trucks around the yard at eight (*above*)...was recruited by his Dad to come up with the colour scheme for the company's first Hino (*bottom left*) when he was still at primary school...and has started working fulltime for the family business – helping out in the yard until he gets his licence



making sure they get there in one piece. Getting in and out of these places.”

The extra that it takes to be a good livestock driver, he believes, is already obvious in son Campbell. Seeing him “coming on – working alongside each other,” is probably his biggest pleasure from the business so far, he reckons: “He’s just starting. But watching him grow....well, some of the drivers we’ve had, he could outdrive them.

“We sent him over to a sale one day with one of the drivers and it was Campbell who got all the stock out of the yards and loaded the thing!”

On the road too stock call for extra attention: “Pretty much anyone can drive a truck down the highway. Keeping them standing up in the back? Yeah I always drive with the window down, so you can hear them. You can’t hear the whole truck and trailer load, but you can hear the front ones generally – or the top deck ones.

“You get a feel for it. You can tell – you might not hear them, but the trailer wiggles around or something and you know something’s not quite right.”

Then it’s a matter of pulling up to have a look, maybe giving the animals a rest break – and, if necessary, finding a yard to offload

them.....then reloading.

“We cart up to Horotiu and, you know, it’s all very well getting in and driving straight through – but don’t forget the stock. You don’t like walking around for five or six hours – you like to stop, even just to stand still. Stock are no different.

“Stop for 10 minutes. You’ve gotta have a break anyway. Just park there – let the cattle have a rest.”

Campbell contributed to the Murdoch Transport success long before he started to work for his Mum and Dad: When they bought their first truck he was a primary school student, “mad on trucks,” Brian recalls.

“And he said ‘what colour are we gonna paint it Dad?’ I said ‘well you get your truck books out and the trucks for sale in there – colour them in with your crayons. See what you come up with.’

“And he spent two or three days colouring them in. And I thought ‘oh well, yellow and red looks bloody quite good.’

“You know, when we’re driving around the countryside – well there could be a farmer up on top of that hill.....I can’t see him, but he could see us. If it was a white truck it could be five or six different companies going past. It’s amazing how many people do see you.”

Brian says they’ve avoided any big setbacks – with unexpected



Top: The Isuzu's bins have come off...and high-sided alloy bins are going on, ready for a silage job

Lower, left & right: During a two-year spell in Australia, Brian drove double and triple roadtrains – fuel units, curtainsiders and flatdecks in Queensland and bulk grain tippers in WA

major expenses, for instance: “You’ve gotta stay on top of your maintenance....you’ve gotta keep good rubber on your truck, you’ve gotta grease it. Grease is the cheapest form of maintenance you can possibly get.

“Fix things before they break. Hino had a run of these things doing their turbos. Now, turbos don’t blow up in the back corner of the yard or in the workshop – they blow up when you’re right up the back of the Makuri Range (halfway between Pahiatua and the coast) or you’re running late for the sale, or whatever.

“You’ve got a load of livestock on and so somebody’s gotta come and rescue you, trans-ship your load....

“I didn’t want to go down that street. So drove it into Truck Stops’ workshop one Friday afternoon, backed it out Saturday lunchtime – brand-new turbo installed. It was a lot cheaper to do it there than to do it on the side of the road.”

Brian says that the 11 years in business are best summed-up as “tough,” particularly given the number of livestock carriers in the region, making it a highly competitive environment – maybe even “the hardest one you could possibly get.

“There’s always someone nibbling away at your back door.

Transport’s a bloody hard game, you know.”

Adding to the challenges there was, of course, the closure of the Manawatu Gorge for a year after a giant slip took out the highway in August 2011. That “cost us a lot of money” – but at least it was the same for everyone in the area. It meant taking one of the steep, windy roads over the Ruahine or Taranaki Ranges.

“Awww geez....it was the tyre wear, brake linings, fuel use, the extra half-hour to get across the hill to the Manawatu.

“The tyre wear went from 45,000-50,000 Ks out of the drivers... down to 25,000 Ks. I don’t know how you price that! I put my rates up by 5% – but I don’t know if that was enough.

“It became the norm driving over those hills for 12 months and when they opened the Gorge, holy shit – was it so easy!”

Brian Murdoch says that the company has a five-star Operator Safety Rating – something he’s very proud of. And there is a payoff, with minimal delays with CVIU checks: “Yeah they’ve got a list of the good ones and the bad ones and if there’s a bad one coming down the road and one of us – they’ll pull the bad one in.

“I try to keep things on the right side of the ledger all the time. We keep it pretty right. We’ve always run big stickers.”



Far left: Daniel Walls is a late convert to livestock cartage, reckons he's now getting over being scared of the cattle kicking him
Left: After early years spent getting covered in DDT super and timber tanalising residue, at 73 Bruce Todd finds driving trucks part-time a pleasure
Above: Greg Jensen's doing the odd-jobs Brian hasn't had a chance to get to yet
Main pic: The 34-year-old Inter is still called on to do a bit of work when needed

The out-of-area trips are one-way carts: "No backloads – just head for home quick as you can, because while you're away you can just about guarantee one of your good customers will ring up with a job."

Ask how much bigger he wants Murdoch Transport to get and he's quick to say: "Not much more." Maybe, he says, an extra two big trucks...and another little one.

But, he indicates that it's largely a hypothetical question – given the driver shortage: "It's hard to find drivers, when you can go and drive a milktanker for \$35 an hour. The livestock industry can't justify paying that.

"That is 100% *THE* big stumbling block – right there. We could add more trucks right now. But the drivers are not out there. They don't exist."

The usually cheery Brian has been sounding a bit negative – but quickly bounces back: "This is a great life. We never do the same thing two days in a row. We do livestock, yes. But today we're going to the Feilding sale. We'll be back there tomorrow. Tomorrow we've got farm shifts to go up to Castle Hill. You know we're doing silage today and there's some race metal to cart.

"Every time that phone rings you never know who's ringing. It can be minute to minute (the work situation changes that fast).

Yesterday was just a pretty cruisy sort of a day – and then we were both balls-out by the end of the day, you know.

"Maybe the guys who've got a contract carting point A to point B...that might be good: They know every day of the week they're going to do that contract, they're going to get paid certain revenue...but sometimes those contracts finish as quick as they start."

Whereas, although the majority of the company's work is now in livestock cartage, it is split between many customers – the biggest of them AFFCO and Taylor Preston.

Brian says he's never been tempted to diversify beyond livestock and bulk cartage and when you ask how long he'll keep on doing this, he reckons: "Oh, I don't know – probably till the day I die I 'spose!

"Hopefully Campbell will take over the day to day running in five or six years or something. Pay me something to retire and I'll drive the little truck.

And, finally, a classic Brian sum-up: "Nah, I dunno if you'd ever have enough of this game. Once you've got it it's there – in your blood. It's like a good marriage – you find a good woman and you stay there don't you – for life really. You chop and change all the time you never get the best of anything really. **T&D**

