

# Olly Ohlson — after school's out

**The strange thing about Olly Ohlson is that he's not strange to most of us.**

He has been on television only 18 months. His face is so familiar, yet most seldom see his television programmes. The kids watch "After School" after school. "You and Your Child" screens on mornings and afternoons.

Still, most people know him — or think they do, for Olly Ohlson is a different fellow to know. He has few friends, prefers his own and his family's company.

He is immensely popular with children and adults alike, and worries about being over-exposed through constant requests for interviews.

He was a smash hit on Telethon and fills speaking engagements up and down the country. Yet he has none of the hype of many television personalities; he has no trouble keeping his ego under control long enough to impress the interviewer, because he is not that kind of man.

In fact, it's difficult to know what kind of man he is.

There's a reserve about him which does not lend itself easily to brief encounters; nor does it sit readily with the warm, easily-relating television Ohlson. This is not to suggest that he suffers from some kind of television schizophrenia. They both spring from the same personality. It's the way he operates.

Olly Ohlson was born in Te Whaiti, in the eastern Bay of Plenty, the youngest of 19 children. He only ever met 14 of them — the others had died by the time he was old enough to remember.

The Ohlson came from a Norwegian heritage; Olly came from teachers' college, much later. His given name is Te Hata.

His father was Jack Te Tuhi Ohlson, his mother Menepeke Potatau; she could trace her line directly to King Potatau.

Young Olly had an ambiguous upbringing. His older brothers and sisters were steeped in things Maori. Their parents talked to them predominantly in Maori.

When Olly arrived, his mother's attitude began to change. She could see the village life breaking up. People had to move out of the area to find work, mainly in forestry in Minginui.

His father was basically Ringatu in his philosophy; the young Ohlson used to sit on his shoulders as he began the day with meditation and prayer to the



god Io.

In the evenings he and his mother prayed together: "Dad in the morning, mum in the evening."

Olly sees it as similar to Christianity, "without the hang-up of sin," a learning process in which you stumbled but you picked yourself up again.

His father died when Olly was 10, the victim of a blow on the chest with a steel pin as a bridge labourer.

His mother's attitude changed further. From that time she spoke scarcely a word of Maori, talking to her children in broken English. She made sure he did his homework. Until then he hadn't been allowed to read books. "You might get too much brains," his mother would say. "Too much brains are not good for you."

Now, she wanted Olly to read. She wanted her husband's tama potiki to succeed.

The family shuttled between Te Whaiti and Rotorua, then Minginui. Back in Te Whaiti, the family home was demolished, by order. Olly remembers plastering its walls with flour and water on old English "Daily Mirrors". In Minginui Olly's brother Fred took his father's place at the head of the house-

hold. To get a mill house, someone had to work at the mill, and Fred was it.

Olly lived there until he was 19, the longest time he ever spent in one house. There, life took a fateful turn. At first, there were no shops in Minginui; when a butcher's shop came, it was regarded as ridiculous. After all, there were pigs and deer to be had for the hunting.

Nevertheless, the town's lifestyle began to change. People began to use them, although they didn't understand the booking up system; when they got the account they were puzzled. Ohlson remembers first failing to come to grips with the concept then rebelling against it; he and a few local kids began stealing from shops.

Inevitably, they were caught. Part of the punishment was a boarding school, St Stephens: "The best thing that happened to me."

Initially, he was puzzled: "There were a lot of brown-skinned people who were not Maoris. They couldn't speak Maori. They were brown pakehas." But his English improved, and other things too. He'd never had sheets, or even underpants. When he first put them on, he wore them back to front. He had clothes of his own, too — as No 19 he'd