GIRL POWER

Teamwork: (from left) Talsy, Madeline and Jaklan Watts with their mates (from left) Motto, Mieka, Marley and Indie and Tippy at the front. Pictures: Zoe Phillips

Madeline Watts has turned her back on convention and now knows just where she's headed. **Natalee Ward** reports

IN 2008, Madeline Watts faced the same problem thousands of Year 12 students face at the end of the year.

"I did really well at school and was under pressure to use the score I got to do something, but I just didn't know what," says Madeline, whose VCE score placed her in the top 7 per cent of students. "At school, we were all taught that if you don't go to uni you are a loser. The teachers don't do it deliberately, but we were all fed the same thing - if you don't have that degree, you can't do anything.

"I didn't want to end up a nobody, so I started uni, but I realised it wasn't for me. I learnt that you don't have to go to uni. There are other options out there."

That option has turned out to be garlic.

In 2009, Madeline was living at home with her parents, Chris, a civil engineer and Christine, a children's book author, and her younger sisters, Talsy, now 18, and Jaklan, now 16, on their 15-hectare property at Eagle Point near Bairnsdale in East Gippsland.

"I started a Bachelor of Ecological Agriculture through Charles Sturt University, which was the most alternative agriculture degree available, but it was still too mainstream for what I believed in," she says.

After finishing the first year of her degree, Madeline signed up as a Wwoofer – a Willing Worker On Organic Farms. She headed to King Island where she worked on a garlic farm.

"I was always thinking, 'what am I going to do?' and when I saw the garlic I thought, 'I could do this'."

Madeline returned to the family farm with a plan.

"We are really into self-sufficiency, we eat all organic food and most of what we eat we produce ourselves, so basically the garlic was just an extension of that."

Madeline and her family planted their first commercial crop last year.

"We had to source seed which proved to be a big problem," Madeline says. "I wasn't prepared to buy conventional seed. It had to be certified organic or from producers I knew and trusted."

Madeline bought seed from the King Island farm where she worked, as well as from Tasmania and closer to home at Bruthen. She bought 80kg of seed and planted it on about 1000 square metres.

"I had to do a crash-course in growing garlic," she

CONTINUED PAGE 28