



Racing reminiscences

Today's turmoil in the horse racing industry brings into focus the colour, history and intensity of one of the country's most important icons

DENNIS COLEMAN

With equine flu throwing a spanner in the works of Spring 2007 race meetings around the country, particularly in NSW, the industry has been jittery. In late August horse racing came to a standstill in NSW and there was even talk of the Melbourne Cup being under threat.

I spoke to Louise Zaccharia who was raised 'in the saddle' as daughter of 1980s owner-trainer of many thoroughbreds, Andrew Russell-Price. She scoffed at this gravity-defying possibility. 'If they have to go ahead with camels they will do it just to keep the Cup alive' she stated emphatically. 'It would be unthinkable for the Victorians or anyone in Australia to cancel the Melbourne Cup, up there with Christmas and Anzac Day as a day of national significance to most Australians.'

In South Australia, a nostalgic race meet to be held at historic Cheltenham, in its last throes as a horse-racing venue, was cancelled. An expected crowd of 5,000 was denied the chance of seeing local champion mare Miss Finland, who raced at Flemington the following week.

On the flip side, greyhound racing received a fillip, as punters transferred from equine to canine competition. The following week racing resumed at the Balaklava Cup, 90 minutes north of Adelaide,

and was a raging success with a 16,000-strong crowd. Spruced up race-goers charged ahead for the fashion stakes, almost with a Melbourne Cup optimism.

It's almost a dead cert that camels won't need to be trotted out for this day when the nation stops for two minutes, transfixed by the pounding of hooves over the finish line. Equine flu will be a well-documented and long remembered glitch but not the first the racing industry has had to weather. Since the introduction of the TAB and the rapacious expansion of pokies into clubs and pubs, the horse tracks themselves have had to work harder to lure crowds to their meetings. Having a father who worked for many years as a bookie's clerk as a weekend job, I teased out a few more details of those years before much of the automation of the industry.

'It was pandemonium out there,' says Brian Coleman, reflecting on his various roles as a bookie's clerk and bagman among others. 'It was always a frenetic pace with the

bookie always on the lookout for competing odds – adjusting the betting board accordingly by hand, the bagman calling the odds and taking the money and the clerk recording all this at a frantic rate on the sheets with five or six columns. The name of the horse, ticket number, amount wagered, the odds and the amount possible for pay out were the main items accounted.'

Odds were calculated by hand in this cauldron of intense activity. In many instances, especially when betting was also being conducted on Victorian races (other states were not in the betting 'orbit' at the time), bets were often being taken and winnings paid simultaneously, certainly not an atmosphere for the mathematically challenged!

Then there were the 'nodding punters' who stood well back from the betting ring and just gestured by hand what they would lay on various horses. It would be a safe bet to imagine that an open palm did not represent a 'fiver' but one with several zeros attached.

Incidentally, the Melbourne betting was always operated on the reverse side of the South Australian boards, facing out from the ring. As a further complication, South Australia was alone for many years following post-decimal '66 in having decimalised



odds on the boards, as the early 70s example featured shows.

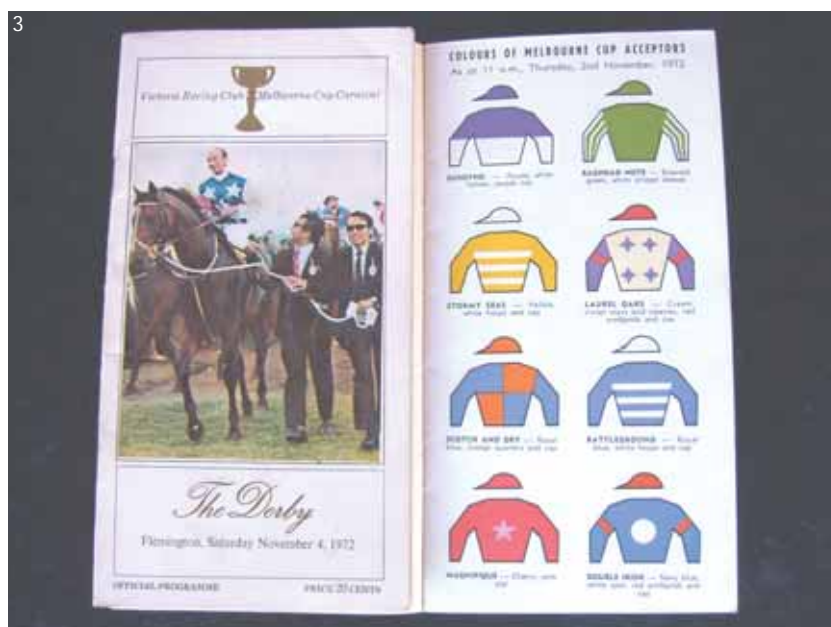
Brian also worked at Victoria Park, Cheltenham and Morphettville – the 'Big Three' of the SAJC tracks. On Friday nights, he worked at the Trots at Wayville and later, Globe Derby – which when built in the 70s, had the brightest lights in the Southern Hemisphere.

Another venue on Brian Coleman's part-time work circuit was Oakbank. The Oakbank Easter Picnic Race is still revered as the 'greatest picnic race on Earth', with many veterans attending for over half a century. It attracts interstaters who often peg

out their favourite camping spot or caravan alongside diehard locals, for whom in some instances it almost has a 'spiritual' tradition.

Oakbank, run by the Onkaparinga Racing Club in the picturesque Adelaide Hills, evokes memories for hundreds of thousands, as it does for me. The huge lines of traffic snarling up the freeway (pre-70s it snaked for hours up the narrow, winding Adelaide to Melbourne Highway), the fashion, the 'Tally-Ho' clad buglers heralding the races, the sideshows, and the thousands who spread their mats out car-side and doled out chicken and salad while quaffing a champagne or two.

Above all, it was the mayhem and madness of the betting ring whether it be the flat, derby, grandstand or the rails (members' area). The almost poetic names of some of the bookies my father worked for – Dan Moriarty, Silky Jones, Bill Joyce, Reg McFarlane and Jack Crosby, all with hats and tweedy jackets, astride a stool adjusting the betting board, are vividly ingrained in my memory.



- 1 Racing programs
- 2 First day of the mobile starting gates, 26 February 1955
- 3 1972 Melbourne Cup program



Pumping Water from Morphetville Straight

For us it was a tribal occasion, with all of our large extended family making their way there for the Saturday and Easter Monday events. The Great Eastern Steeplechase almost had a Melbourne Cup feel about it, especially with the added bonus of the 'fallen log' and other racing hurdles, which warranted a walk up the hill to prime oneself for a better view for the biggest five-minute drawcard of the weekend.

An added sense of belonging and source of pride for us was having a father who was actually part of the action, as well as my uncle, Max Woodhouse, who worked for other bookmakers. His son, Brett, has been involved in numerous thoroughbred syndicates and later became manager of the Clare 'Valley of the Vines' Cup, another great tradition combining a whole town-based gourmet weekend with the glamour and excitement of horse racing.

Reportedly, my grandmother's father, an architect and builder born in nearby Woodside, made a significant contribution to the design of the Oakbank grandstand and the Victoria Park Stand on the fringes of the Adelaide Eastern Parklands, now a hot spot of controversy over plans to build an additional concrete multi-

storied stand as part of the car racing circuit as well as horse racing.

My grandmother would often waft away from the 'tribal' picnic area to have a flutter on a quinella in the Stand or the Members area, later enlivening us with all sorts of tales. In her stylish wide-brimmed hat, pre-ordered dresses from Millers (Miller Andersons) of Hindley Street, gloves and fashionable jewellery, perhaps no-one ever dared ask this lady to display her pass. No doubt this also played out on her annual pilgrimage to the Melbourne Cup. My grandfather – kitted out with pipe, tie and jacket – was happier on the flat.

As anyone who attended races in the pre-computer era would know, much of the electrically charged bazaar-auction style atmosphere has disappeared. Brett Woodhouse shared his insights from three decades with the racing industry.

'Bookies are mostly electronic these days and don't even write out the betting tickets any more, which is sad. Generally, as it is so easy to watch races from the comfort of your home and bet on-line, or go to the local pub and have a few bets, the punters have gradually been disappearing from race courses.

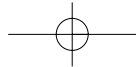


Most clubs can gather a great crowd on carnival days and have concentrated marketing campaigns targeting the 21-35 year old singles, which works for big events, but not on an ongoing basis. People have so much choice these days so they don't attend each week.

The dress standards at regular meetings have certainly been relaxed over the years. Clubs are just happy to get people to attend. During the carnivals and cup days most people seem to still make an effort in relation to the fashion stakes, and some are becoming increasingly creative.'

Without doubt, the Melbourne Cup is one of the great racing carnivals in the world. It brings the whole nation to a standstill on the second Tuesday in November. Melbourne Cup lunches and sweeps are a

- 4 Attempts to drain the flooded Morphetville track in 1950s
- 5 Racing today. Brett Woodhouse (left) and racegoers at the Clare Cup
- 6 Showing how it was done before the electronic age – Huy Nguyen taking a punt with former bookie's clerk, Brian Coleman
- 7 'Riders Taking Part' in the George Adams Invitation Stakes, Morphetville, 11 October 1971
- 8 Souvenir memento of Birthday Cup, 11 June 1955. Won by 'Chatford', owner: Mr & Mrs R O Gurssansky, trainer S Tomison, rider: J Bourke



ritual in every corner of Australia, with all eyes transfixed on television screens at around 3 pm for the great race itself.

Colin Hayes of Lindsay Park, Angaston and Bart Cummings of South Australia have both contributed enormously to Cup wins as trainers and by way of stud and foaling. Among Colin Hayes' numerous winners were Beldale Ball and Dulcify. Countering criticism of his country stud at one stage, he replied, 'The horses suffer from boredom, as we do, and they like to see the birds and the trees. And the whole thing is based on kindness

and treating the animal right and getting it thinking right. And, well, you know, they've won 2,000-odd races from here, so, whether we're right or wrong – it's working.'

His son, David Hayes became number one trainer in Hong Kong and recently flew Miss Finland over from Adelaide to Melbourne due to the risk of land-borne contagion by equine flu. She is a hot favourite for this year's Cup.

Bart Cummings lists Red Handed,

Think Big (the winner Sir John Kerr so famously appeared to have dialogue with), Sainly and Rogan Josh among his eleven Melbourne Cup winners. The trophies are now on display at the Australian Racing Museum in Federation Square, Melbourne. Three-time winner Makybe Diva is also owned by a South Australian, tuna fisherman Tony Santic from Port Lincoln.

The final word belongs to the most noble and deified champion in Australia's history, Phar Lap, the horse which gave Australians inspiration in the Great Depression years. His saddle and bridle are displayed at the Australian Racing Museum in Federation Square, Melbourne, while Museum Victoria counts Phar Lap's mounted hide among its greatest treasures. His skeleton is in the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa, Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand.

8



Dennis Coleman is a writer and collector who contributes historical articles from his base in South Australia.

