

Former chief steward opens

Collins says memories of fallen riders never leave



GO RACING
DARRYN NUFER

ON THIS day last year, Rockhampton's chief steward Luke Collins controlled his final race meeting, bringing the curtain down on a 10-year career.

As stewards are the police of racing – their job largely being to ensure licensees the likes of trainers, jockeys and strappers, play on the right side of the rules – it's not a popularity contest for them and bookies would have bet "London to a brick on" that not a tear was shed amongst these participants when Mr Collins hung up his binoculars.

Rather than be insulted, Mr Collins would have worn it as a badge of honour.

Licensees wouldn't have been disappointed because they knew all too well that Mr Collins was good at his job.

He'd honed his skills and craft with experience and he was renowned for his thoroughness – a real "Mr Meticulous" so to speak.

And when Mr Collins left Callaghan Park, where he had served with distinction for nine years of his stewarding life, there was little fanfare.

There were no stories in the newspaper, and the roving television cameras trackside on Rocky Cup Day 2018 were more interested in fun, fashion and fillies.

Can't blame them really, can you?

Mr Collins wouldn't have expected a media interview, but deep down he probably felt he deserved one.

Fast-forward 12 months to today, and *The Morning Bulletin* can bring you an exclusive insight into the life of a racing steward in a no-holds barred and very candid chat with Luke Collins.

What's your first memory of horse racing?

Dad would have the radio on and the form guide out and you know, wherever you were going, to the dump or wherever it may be, he'd pop into the TAB. I was a young fella, nine or 10 years old, and I used to sit there and watch all of the screens. I went to the races with Dad. I had an uncle who was a trainer. He had a little stable pony that I'd get on and ride around a bit. I'd feed his racehorses and clean up a box or two. I had plenty of trainers telling me that I didn't know what I was doing around a stable. Maybe I wasn't experienced necessarily, but I cleaned the boxes, I did feeds, I did waters.

Was there a moment that you knew you were hooked on racing?

It just happened over time. It's just like if you watch your favourite sport and you follow the players or a team. You



NEW CHALLENGE: Former racing chief steward Luke Collins left Rockhampton's Callaghan Park for a job as a lawyer with South Geldard Lawyers but reflects often. Photo: Jann Houley



Luke Collins (middle) with his dad Gary (left) and brother Nick at Moonee Valley racecourse to see Winx win her fourth Cox Plate. Photo: Contributed



The death of Rockhampton jockey Carly-Mae Pye had a significant impact on steward Luke Collins. Photo: Contributed

might have a particular trainer you like or a particular jockey you follow. I went and saw Schillaci in Brisbane, Rough Habit in Brisbane. I was at Toowoomba the day they turned the lights on for the first time for Toowoomba Cup night. I can see the horse that won the Cup in my mind. He was a bigger horse, Phillip Wolfgram might have ridden it, Michael Flanagan trained it, red colours. So you're there, you know. This is what attracts people to the races – the sights and the smells and the atmosphere of racing.

What was your best moment as a racing steward?

I can't pinpoint a greatest achievement or a greatest moment in racing during my stewarding career. I've worked at Magic Millions meetings (Gold Coast) and I've worked at Group 1 meetings in Brisbane, so they were highlights.

What was your worst moment?

(Jockey) Carly-Mae Pye's death (2014) was certainly a

difficult thing to overcome. Around that time every year it's on my mind, it might just be for the day, but those memories and those feelings will be with me for a long time. Look, she was a jockey and I was a stew-

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LUKE COLLINS

ard, but you were dealing with these people on a daily basis. On that particular day (of Carly-Mae's fatal fall) her and I had a discussion about a horse that she'd ridden out on earlier in the trials. I can remember the last meeting that she rode at was Emerald 100 Day, her and (fellow jockey) Tracy (O'Hara) standing at the placegetters stall before the last race, and what she said. You were interacting with these people. Any jockey who was riding under me, whether you've had good or bad experiences with them, I think because we're all

human it affects you when something really bad happens to them. You know, there was another race meeting at Warwick that I was at when I was only starting as a cadet (in 1996). I can't picture the jockey as clear

as day (Heidi McNeich), but I know that I weighed her out for that particular race. It was an innocuous incident. She just clipped heels and her horse blundered and she fell off, over its shoulder, and was killed. It wasn't a massive incident (in the race) but it's something I still remember.

I myself can still vividly see everything that happened that day (Carly-Mae's fall), how did it affect you?

It probably affected me more than I let on, Darryn, more than I let on. As you say you've got recollections. Being

a steward I've got a pretty good memory. I can remember who was where in the trial, I can see what happened to the horse, I can see who attended to Carly-Mae, I know what I did, I know how I did it, I know what happened after that, and to whom. They are very vivid memories that I think will stay with me for a long time, particularly around that time of year. Yeah, OK, it affected me, but it affected the racing community as a whole too. At the funeral it was standing room only, so that was the affect on the community.

It's obviously not your fault because accidents happen in racing, but how do you recover from a jockey being killed on your watch?

I must admit the Caulfield Cup meeting on the week of Carly-Mae's passing was probably equally as hard. From my point of view, there was a very tense feeling on that particular day. So I was happy to get to the end of the day – the end of what was an emotional day. Carly-Mae's going to be a pret-

ty big memory for a long time. And I'd known Carly-Mae for a fair period of time. From where she had been in her life to where she was, it was something for her to be proud of, particularly in racing. That just made her loss even more of a human story and... (pause) ... yeah, unfortunate. I just had to keep turning up at the races and doing my job. Others affected did the same thing. But I was mindful of the people stewards had to deal with and balanced that against the job stewards have to do.

Let's lighten the pace, do you have a favourite horse?

Winx. Being around horses for so long and then going to see her win her (record) fourth Cox Plate in the flesh, you could pick up her demeanour. She was special. You know if I was still working as a steward I would have been running a race meeting somewhere that day and I wouldn't have got that opportunity to be there and see that. I would have had to watch it on TV.

up about racing life and exit



OUR BOY: Dual Rockhampton Newmarket winner Our Boy Malachi was the best horse Luke Collins has seen.

Photo: Chris Ison ROK190614crace1

Best horse you ever saw as a steward?

Our Boy Malachi. There's another horse that always sits in my mind as well, one of Craig Smith's. This is going back when you had lower minimums (weights) and you had your weight-for-age races and Opens. He was a horse called Not A Fortune, a big chestnut horse with a blaze. Every time he went around he'd be carrying 62, 63, 64kg. He was one of those good old country horses that would just go around and win time and time again. But country cups are a bit different to winning Newmarkets and races at metropolitan meetings like Our Boy Malachi did. I remember one day I was at trackwork and I was walking down through the barns. I was standing outside this box and yard. It was just on sun-up and Our Boy Malachi walked out. And this is the thing that gets you about horses. You could see the sun behind him and you could see the 'steam coming off him'-type thing, after he'd worked on a cold morning. Those things stick in your mind. But it's a good memory to have.

Best jockey you ever saw?

A jockey who did strike me as a good jockey was Tommy Berry. He was such a polite bloke. I think I had conversations on the phone with him, and he was in contact with me because he had a plane delay out of Sydney. I'd seen him oth-

COLLINS' RACING CAREER

- 1996-97: Cadet steward, Toowoomba
- 2008: Steward, Brisbane & Townsville
- 2009-18: Steward, Rockhampton

er times too, he'd come in and shake all of the stewards' hands. It might be a bit different if you suspend the bloke after the last, he might not be shaking your hand, but he could ride and it was his demeanour as a jockey that sticks in my mind.

Why did you walk away from your racing career after 10 years?

Stewarding is a rewarding and satisfying job. You get to go to a race meeting and control it and that's not something that's easily done. I did get to a stage as a steward where I was disillusioned with the way stewards were perceived (under the Queensland Racing Integrity Commission), the way experienced stewards' opinions were dealt with (by QRIC) but at the same time I think I needed a new challenge as well. I think I'd done my best as a steward for Capricornia and Rockhampton. I still go to the races but it's a lot less stressful now. The change of careers for me came about because I had studied law while I was working as a

steward. I never had the ambition to go into practice but I did my degree, finished my diploma. I got admitted to the Supreme Court of Queensland and through the whole process I was fortunate enough to be involved with South Geldard Lawyers. I started working there in August 2018 as a lawyer, working under Vicki Jackson, doing residential and rural conveyancing, wills and power of attorneys, family law matters involving property settlements and parenting matters.

So you've never fallen out of love with racing?

No, I was more disillusioned with the processes around integrity. As much as I would have liked to have stayed and improved things, I thought the best idea was for me to take on another challenge and let someone else have a go. In my opinion, QRIC - the model - is workable, but it's gone a very government-orientated way and that's to the detriment of racing stewards and how they function.

What will Luke Collins be doing on Rocky Cup Day today? I wanted to do the Rocky Cup meeting last year and I wanted it to be my last race day as a steward because it's the big meeting with the good jockeys and the good horses. This year, I won't get a seat in any of the important areas so I'll probably be standing in the public bar downstairs with the punters.



Luke Collins rates Sydney jockey Tommy Berry as the best he has seen.