

Daryl Douglas – a man in a hurry



By JOHN DUNNE

THE day I caught up with the nation's busiest reinsman, he was having a rare day away from the races, but not from the racetrack.

With the day's race meeting at Yarra Valley on the other side of town, Daryl Douglas was putting several members of his father's team through their paces at a sunbathed Bray Raceway in Ballarat.

Fit and able, in addition to being suspension-free, Douglas explained his sabbatical, as "it's not a track (Yarra Valley) where the guys I drive for race their horses".

Last season, 29-year-old Douglas went around more than 1500 times in registered races and estimates he was sidelined for the best part of three months due to suspension.

The legacy from Douglas' "go anywhere to drive" policy last year landed him in hot water with the law after losing his licence for speeding. While Douglas concedes he infringed, he considers himself a trifle unlucky to have been apprehended.

"I was doing a doubleheader – Kilmore to Mildura – and I underestimated the time and was flying through the other side of Charlton," Douglas recalled.

"I flew past a policeman in a divvy van, who was fiddling with a radar gun, so I thought I was gone and pulled over.

"Five minutes later, he came along and it was only later on that I found out what had happened.

"He told someone I knew that the radar gun was playing up and he was trying to get it to work and wasn't watching, when all of a sudden it registered 192 kilometres per hour.

"So he drove up the road for a short distance and found me waiting for him. If I hadn't pulled over, he would never have known."

It wasn't Douglas' first breach of laws on speeding, however. The magistrate made it known that he was on a two-year suspended sentence and, if he infringed again within that period, he was "going inside."

"I've got eight months left," Douglas said.

The fourth in line of Keith and Judy Douglas' six children, Daryl started jogging horses as a 12-year-old at his parent's Sebastopol property, but waited a further six years before applying for a licence to drive in races.

"I wasn't in any hurry to get a licence," Douglas said, conceding there was no other form of vocation on the horizon. "I had no idea what I was going to do."

Nevertheless, the path to following in his father's footsteps always beckoned. Several months after obtaining his licence, 18-year-old Douglas drove his first winner, Bad Land, at St Arnaud.

Douglas' motor car licence, these days a contentious issue, came in handy during his early days in establishing himself as a budding reinsman.

"If I drove old Jack Brogden to the races, then I was allowed to drive his horses," he said.

The Brogden-trained Navigator horses were consistent placegetters and, with the support of local trainer Bert Dunn (Lynden Skipper and Plenty Of Cash), Douglas began to come under notice.

It was a catch drive for Glen Tippet, though, that helped establish him in the sport.

"I used to knock around with a few guys who worked for Glen, and they nagged him into giving me a drive one night at Moonee Valley while he was in Sydney with Franco Tiger," he said, recalling the distinct lack of ceremony surrounding the occasion.

"Sharon Ward brought the horse down to the parade ring and asked if anyone had spoken to me about the horse and I said no, so she just said go and do your best," he said.

The horse finished second and Douglas found himself driving a team of Tippet's horses the following week at Terang.

"I drove two winners and a second and, before long, I was on horses such as McRandle and Twilight Warrior, who were both M0 class horses at the time," he said.

While Douglas was recognised as a competent reinsman, it wasn't until 1998 that he elevated himself into the elite status.

"Both Gavin (Lang) and Teddy (Demmler) copped long stretches at about the same time that 'Pecker' McCallum did his arm and Grant Campbell broke his leg," Douglas said.

"And there was hardly anyone left, so I started to pick up a lot of extra drives."

After notching up 80 wins during the 1997-98 season, Douglas smashed the century barrier, almost doubling his previous best, and then registered 151 wins the following season.

Douglas' meteoric rise in the country's driving ranks has continued unabated since that watershed 1998-99 season.

He followed up with 193 wins in '99-2000 before topping the 200 mark with 245 winners in 2000-2001.

His return of 252 wins last season placed him second to champion reinswoman Kerryn Gath on the national drivers' premiership.

Wearing the title as the most 'sought-after' driver in the land necessitates many hours in the car, which Douglas turns over on a regular basis. "Doing about 120,000 a year they tend to wear out pretty quickly," he said.

Along with a growing band of freelance reinsmen, Douglas' opportunities snowballed with the introduction of doubleheader meetings several years ago.

Douglas recalls fulfilling a remarkable 18 driving engagements in a day.

"I won the first four races at Stawell and had another book of drives at Geelong that night, but unfortunately there were no more winners," he said.

While Douglas has donned more silks than a Japanese doll, a considerable portion of his drives come from two stables – the Peter and Clayton Tonkin stable and his brother Glenn's team.

The connection with the Tonkin stable stems from the days when Clayton Tonkin pursued a career in the sulky and often sought advice from the emerging Douglas in the drivers' room.

When Tonkin retired to concentrate on training, he persuaded his father to employ Douglas as the operation's preferred driver.

Fate decreed that Douglas wasn't in the sulky for the Tonkin stable's biggest win when Paris Affair led throughout in the 1999 AG Hunter Cup.

"I had already been engaged to drive a horse for Paul Weidenbach in a lead-up race the week before and the Stewards wouldn't let me off to drive Paris Affair," Douglas said.

It's history now that Chris Alford picked up the drive, scoring in the lead-up, and repeating the dose a week later in the richest handicap race in this part of the world.

Along with his younger brother, Glenn, Douglas forms one of harness racing's most successful partnerships, with horses carrying the white and blue A visiting the winners' circle on a regular basis.

"It works out all right, because Glenn is not all that fussed about driving, and concentrates on the training," he said.

While Glenn's father-in-law and leviathan owner, Eric Anderson, hasn't often mixed in Grand Circuit circles since the days of the Glen Tippet-trained Franco Tiger, he has provided the Douglas brothers with a steady stream of country cup performers.

Horses such as Keyafella, Brigalow Bush, Bold Stefan and Our Pocket Liner could amply fill any mantelpiece with their share of spoils in the state's country cups.

Douglas ranks Off The Old's win in the 1999 Geelong Pacing Cup as one of his biggest thrills

in the sport, along with having the opportunity to partner Franco Tiger in four wins.

"He was near the end of his career when I got to drive him," Douglas said. "But you could tell that he had freakish ability. He had gate speed like few others, but in the twinkling of an eye, would drop the bit and relax when he got to the front and you had no idea how fast you were travelling."

For several years Douglas copped the jibes that he stored his earnings under the bath – the simple fact of the matter is he doesn't waste, or flaunt the financial trappings he now enjoys.

Last year, Douglas pocketed more than \$60,000 from driving fees alone and you could double that figure again for prizemoney percentages.

With the advice of his accountant, Douglas invests in property and shares, and was astute enough to buy 20 acres at Ross Creek, just minutes from the track in a growth corridor on the outskirts of Ballarat.

He's also realised it's cheaper to live at home, and shares a house with partner Tracey Collins on his parent's property.

And the three vices that have consumed many a colleague before him.

"Punting is a mug's game," decrees the non-smoking and teetotalling Douglas.

Douglas well remembers the last time he allowed alcohol to pass his lips.

"I was 18 and Glenn, David Murphy, and I headed out one night after the trots at Moonee Valley," he said.

"A few blokes paid me money I was owed and I ended up with about \$800 in my pocket. We stopped at a few pubs on the way home to Ballarat and then hit the nightclubs. I got home two days later without a cent on me."

Possessing a blueprint stature of the modern-day driver, the wiry Douglas tips the scales at 62 kilograms and comes from a family where horses and harness racing are a way of life – so he has a few things in his favour.

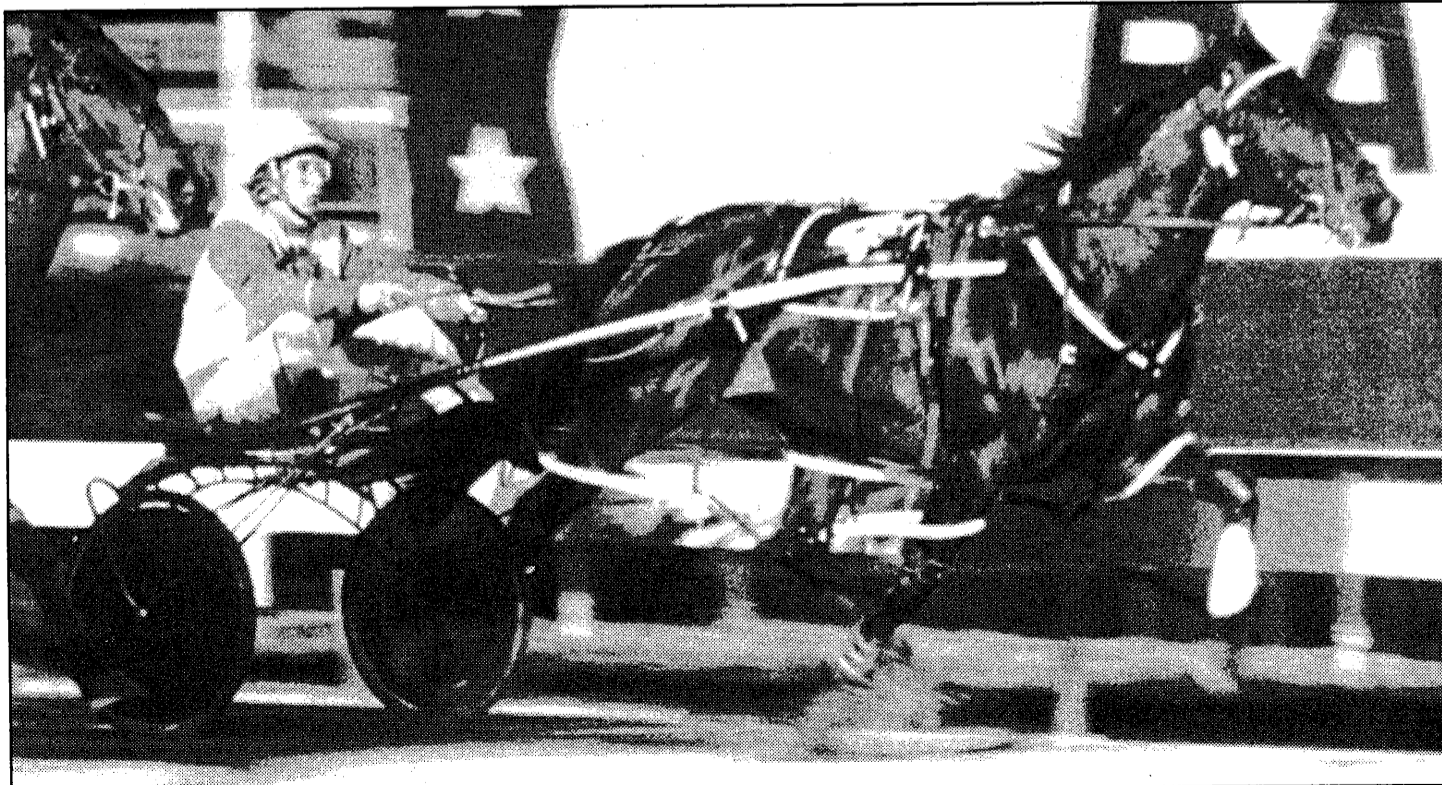
The overriding factor in Douglas' rapid rise to the top is simply that he can drive better than most. Not that you'll ever hear it from him.

In fact, the laid back Douglas gives the impression his success has arrived unannounced and without any great planning on his behalf.

"While I never thought to do anything else in life, I had no idea how far I would go in harness racing – at no stage did I think I would end up where I am," he said.

It's a similar mindset when Douglas heads out onto a racetrack 30 to 40 times a week.

"Pre-race plans often come unstuck," he said. "I never worry about it – I'll just see how the race unfolds and then decide what to do."



DARYL DOUGLAS and former top pacer Twilight Warrior combine for one of their numerous victories at Moonee Valley.