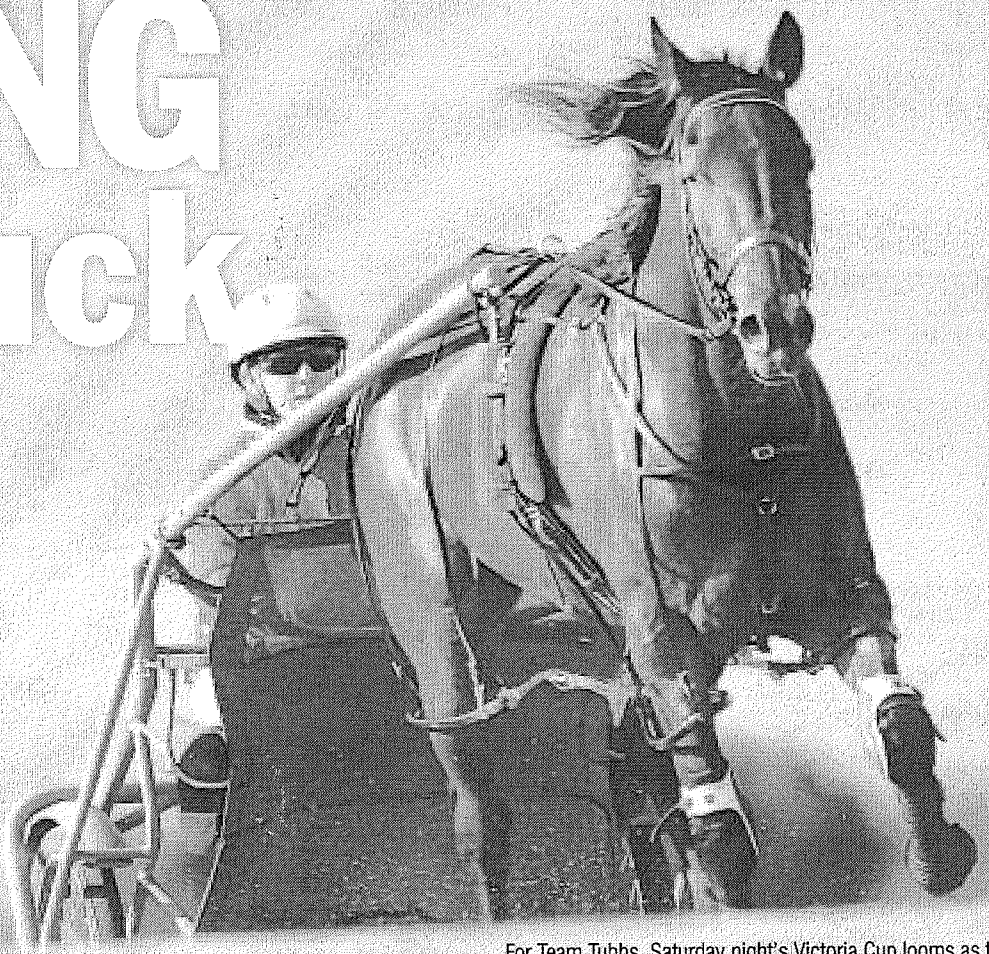


RACING

F B 1 2 3 C M K DHS 18-DEC-2008 PAGE 104 FIRST

MAJORING in good luck



For Team Tubbs, Saturday night's Victoria Cup looms as the biggest racing challenge yet. But if trainer Alan Tubbs' luck holds, Melpark Major, with daughter Amy in the sulky, will be right in the mix. Pictures: DARREN McNAMARA

THERE have been lots of flukes in the death-defying life of Alan Tubbs.

For instance, if Tubbs was instead Alan Bubbs, he may not be the trainer of Australia's next great pacer, Saturday night's Victoria Cup favourite Melpark Major.

At the trots horses are stabled alphabetically, according to the trainer's surname. Tubbs isn't far from Smith, which is lucky for Tubbs, and probably also for Smith. More on that later.

When Tubbs turned 50, family and friends put on a big turn because it was a big deal.

Tubbs was never expected to make it to 30, let alone 50. He never expected to train a champion because, for Tubbs, the clock has always been ticking.

"I was aiming at 50. No one else was, but I had bigger targets than anybody else," he said.

Tubbs, now a fit 52, was born with dodgy kidneys. His first transplant failed dismally. He spent years on dialysis; six hours at a time, three nights a week.

If the power went out at home, kids Amy and Jess would take it in turns to crank up the old man's kidney machine by hand.

"There's this cute story when Jess was in primary school, where she told the class she thought all dads were hooked up to machines," Tubbs said.

What neither daughter realised, either, was that they were

MATT STEWART

both miracles. Doctors told Alan and Kate Tubbs they'd probably never have kids, not with Alan's problems.

Sixteen years ago he had a second kidney transplant. It was make or break and also a little eerie. The deceased donor was a 23-year-old schoolteacher called Kate. The irony was that Tubbs' wife Kate, 33 at the time, was also a schoolteacher.

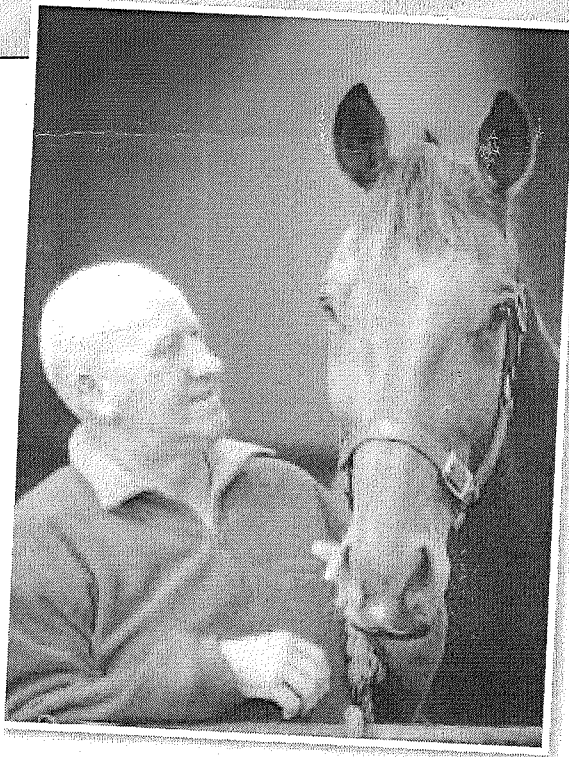
Donor Kate's family is aware of Tubbs' second chance at life, of his greatly improved health, of his two miracle daughters.

They are aware that Tubbs, a servant to the relentless sport of harness racing, has been presented with the horse of his dreams.

"I haven't been unlucky; unlucky is a kid with cancer, a kid drowning in a pool or hitting a tree on a motor bike. My life has been full of good luck, then this horse capable of being on the Grand Circuit strolls in," he said.

Tubbs had been a hobby trainer in harness heartland, Bacchus Marsh, and an odd-jobs man — stud manager, stock feed supplier — until he took the plunge 20 years ago.

Kate always backed her man and her daughters, working tirelessly to finance the fledgling stable — "trainers don't make money," Alan said — before later accepting A-grade



student Amy's decision to ditch uni for dad's pacers.

Amy, who has driven more than 400 winners, was well on her way when Melpark Major came along.

Tubbs received the erratic giant because of his renowned skills, and because he was known to Melpark Major's elderly millionaire owner, hobby trainer-driver Don Smith.

Tubbs may never have met Smith if not for the A-to-Z

stabling system at the trots. "I'm always stabled with the Tonkins, the Simons, Sugars and Smiths. I don't know anyone called Abbott. They're another barn away," Tubbs said. "So I'd start talking between races to this Don Smith. I'd give him some advice, something that might help one of his horses, lend him some gear, stuff like that."

Smith had a home-bred horse, Melpark Major. It had

stacks of ability but would do stupid things in his races, such as charge forward, get uptight.

"Any trainer who saw him thought, 'Gee, this horse has got some raw ability'," Tubbs said.

In June 2007 Smith rang Tubbs out of the blue. He gave Tubbs a challenge: Find out if this horse is as good as everyone reckons.

Early on, the dumb giant charged around and refused to settle. He had ability but no brain. Amy had done the pony club circuit as a kid and was a solid equestrian. "One day I said to her, you'll have to ride him," Tubbs said.

Amy cantered, galloped and calmed Melpark Major and within a month he was ready to be hopped.

Fast forward 18 months and Melpark Major is not just tractable, but also the next big thing. He has won 16 of 23 for the father and daughter team and proved with a remarkable second in the Miracle Mile last month, when nabbed late by Divisive after a daring dash at the 1200m, that he is a genuine Grand Circuit horse.

The added bonus is Amy. For Tubbs, it's the perfect package: the dream horse and the miracle daughter.

He never doubted Amy, even when she just started out. Owners have been told bluntly that Amy is the stable driver. Like it or lump it. Most stuck solid.

"Dad was great. Once he realised I wasn't going to go out there and be a complete moron, he spoke to all the owners," Amy said.

It's an interesting, at times volatile, relationship. Dad is

always right, so is Amy. But they are in synch.

"Our instincts are the same. As soon as I think she should make her run in a race, she pulls out and makes her run," Tubbs said. "And I trust her. I've been around a long time and that's not always the case with drivers."

There have been heart-in-mouth moments, such as the spectacular fall at Bendigo where Amy was catapulted through the air, landing on her face. She lay on the track unconscious with a broken nose.

"I'm aware of the risks she takes with her life, but for me there's nothing like watching Amy drive a horse. She looks like she belongs there," he said.

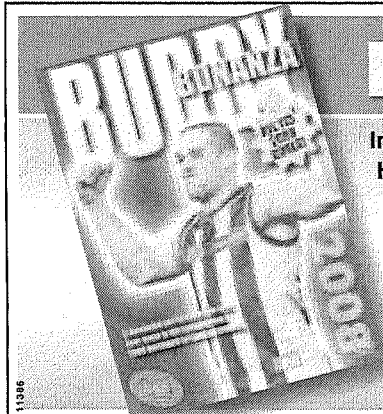
For Team Tubbs the Victoria Cup is the biggest racing challenge yet. Melpark Major was not expected to win the Miracle Mile from his bad gate and wasn't hunted.

But from gate one on Saturday night Amy will be in everyone's sights.

"I don't get nervous because Dad's behind me no matter what, so is the owner, Don Smith. As long as I give it my best shot," she said.

For two minutes after the Miracle Mile, Tubbs was bitterly disappointed. He found a quiet spot at Harold Park, bit his lip, took a deep breath and then calmed down.

These Grand Circuit races are big deals, training a champion good enough to contest them is a rare, fleeting honour. But Tubbs, the survivor, knows that there are more important things, such as simply being there.



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