

RACING

FEATURE

Moonee Valley

MAGIC

OPENING NIGHT, 1976

IF the Royal Melbourne Showgrounds were the halcyon, formative days of harness racing then Moonee Valley was its entertaining, colourful and sometimes controversial teenage years.

While the sport lost some of its intimacy and charm with the move from the tiny Showgrounds circuit, Moonee Valley was much more conducive to fair racing for the sport's equine and human stars.

Colleague Tim Habel, chief harness writer for *The Sun* at the time, said Moonee Valley's opening night of harness racing — October 30, 1976 — immediately highlighted the benefits of the new, bigger track.

"Markovina's swooping win from last on the home turn for the genius of the sulky, Brian Gath, was a signal of the changing face of the sport from the tight confines of the Showgrounds where it was almost impossible to do that," he said.

Moonee Valley's 33-year stint as Victoria's home of harness racing is over.

Last year's opening of Melton's Tabcorp Park — a bigger and more spacious

Adam Hamilton

track than Moonee Valley — means the Valley will host its last harness meeting on Saturday night.

Harness Racing Victoria has shown the track the respect it so richly deserves by making the sport's showcase meeting, the Hunter Cup, the farewell card.

As well as the \$400,000 Group 1 BIG6 Hunter Cup, fans will also see our best trotters in the \$250,000 Group 1 Inter Dominion trotting final and the sport's stars of the future in the \$250,000 Group 1 Victoria Derby final.

But for most racing fans, Saturday night will be a time to reminisce. A chance to reflect on the great performances, magic moments and controversial chapters Moonee Valley has hosted.

To give the Valley the send-off it deserves, I spoken to Habel and another two former *The Herald* or *The Sun* chief harness writers — Adrian Dunn and Neale Donnelley — to help recall 10 of the most memorable chapters at the track.

VIN KNIGHT'S ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Date: February 20, 1988

Race: Victoria Cup

Neale Donnelley, a close friend of the late Knight tells the story. "Bag Limit was the horse. He'd run last as favourite the week before, but the race was too short for him and they found a hoof abscess after it. In the Victoria Cup he sat in the death and outstayed a terrific field. Bag Limit was a great horse and Vinnie hated the crowd booing the horse after the win. At the presentation he said, 'All youse booing have got your heads up your arse.' They booed louder and, as only Vinnie could, he stood tall and started moving his fingers like he was conducting an orchestra."

AND THAT MAKES 22

Date: July 10, 1999

Race: Australian Derby

Courage Under Fire, or the "Mighty Mouse", is the greatest three-year-old the sport has seen. Moonee Valley was home to one of the highs but also the lowest point of his career. The high came when he stretched his unbeaten run to 22 races in the 1999 Australian Derby. The low came six months later when, as favourite, he ran into the mobile starting gate and lost all chance in the Inter Dominion final.

VIN KNIGHT

WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST WIN AND BEST MEMORY FROM MOONEE VALLEY?

BLOG WITH ADAM HAMILTON FROM 1PM TODAY

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THE START OF IT ALL

Date: October 30, 1976
Race: Opening night

A thumping crowd of 27,420 racing fans turned out for the dawn or a new era. Bryan Martin, who called the meeting for 3UZ, counted 98 bookmakers and fondly recalled Super Tempest, driven by Hughie Jardine, win the first race. "The great trotter Touch Merchant won the trot, but the highlight was Markovina's swooping win over a great field, including Paleface Adios and Pure Steel, in the Inaugural Cup," he said.

PURE STEEL'S TOUGHEST WIN

Date: February 18, 1978
Race: Hunter Cup

There was no better-named horse than Pure Steel, or "Steele" to his fans. Many say his crushing of rival champion Rip Van Winkle in the '78 Hunter Cup was the greatest staying performance of his amazing career. "They ran a world record at the time and Rip Van Winkle was never the same again," Donnelley said.

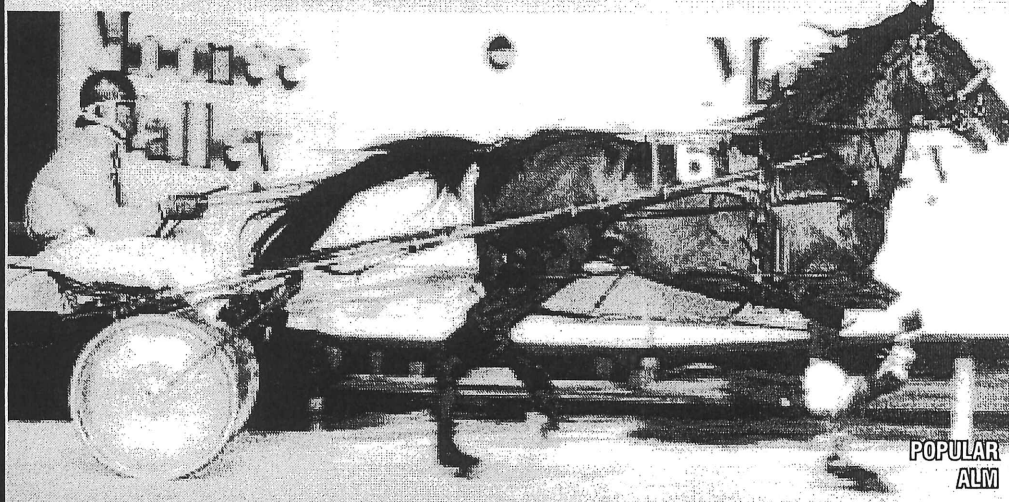
OPENING NIGHT, 1976



POPPY'S COMEBACK

Date: October 20, 1984
Race: Italian Cup

Most say Popular Alm is not just the greatest horse to race at the Valley, but the greatest Australian harness racing has seen. After breaking a leg and having screws inserted, he returned from about 18 months out for the Italian Cup. "The knockers said he couldn't win and the bookies gave \$3.20, but he went straight to the front and did what he always did – won easily," Donnelley said. "Vinnie (Knight) couldn't help himself and went for home down the back straight with a huge lead. Peter Donegan's call was fantastic. Down the back straight he said, 'Will the screws hold together?'. Then, as Poppy hit the line, he boomed, 'Welcome back, Poppy, you've done it again!'"



MAORI'S IDOL'S DEFEAT

Date: March 11, 1978
Race: Inter Dominion Trotting Final

Habel, a passionate thoroughbred man these days, still rates Maori's Idol the "most dominant horse, thoroughbred or harness, I've seen". So you can imagine the shock on Habel's face – and Donnelley and Dunn for that matter – when Maori's Idol's 24-race winning streak controversially came to an end on the biggest stage, the Inter Dominion final. The champ got a mile back and Hall of Fame racecaller Bill Collins urged driver Bryan Healy to make a move. "C'mon son, you better get going," is how Donnelley recalled it. "I've never seen a horse make up more ground to run third. It was a case of huge pilot (driver) error."

BRIAN GATH AND SHAKAMAKER

HOMETOWN HERO

Date: February 12, 2000
Race: Inter Dominion Pacing Final

It was the first \$1 million Inter Dominion final and the flashy, brilliant local Shakamaker stormed down the outside to win. It was an all Victorian finish with Breenys Fella second.

LOCAL BEATS VINTAGE FIELD

Date: February 4, 1995
Race: Victoria Cup

The moment another local hero Golden Reign graduated from top horse to champion. He downed a vintage field including proven champions Master Musician, Blossom Lady, Sinbad Bay, Desperate Comment and Chokin. A couple of months later he won the Christchurch Inter Dominion.

BREAKING THE CLOCK

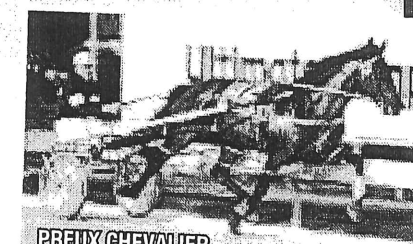
Date: May 13, 1983
Race: Time-trial record

Popular Alm again, this time at the prime of his career. He raced the clock over a mile in a record-breaking 1min 53.2sec. "It was his 17th run in a long campaign and just amazing on a windy night when it only seven degrees," Donnelley said. "No doubt he was the best horse in the world at the time."

THE "FROG'S" INTER DOMINION

Date: March 9, 1985
Race: Inter Dominion Pacing Final

Still the biggest modern-day crowd Moonee Valley has seen – all the great Cox Plates included. "The official crowd was about 38,000, but they closed the gates and then another 3000 cars arrived and parked on the steeple grass and they weren't counted. The true crowd would have been at least 43,000," Donnelley said. They were treated to a night of champions and high-drama. WA star Preux Chevalier was hot favourite for the pacing final, but had a pre-race health scare with colic. He was cleared to run



minutes before the race and still won it, beating subsequent Inter Dominion winner Village Kid. Mighty trotting mare Scotch Notch thrilled the locals when she turned the tables on arch rival Sir Castleton in the trotting final. "They were the days when harness racing had real clout," Habel recalled.