

Harnessing the track to success

While our region might be better known for its thoroughbred racehorse industry, it's also home to Victoria's top harness racing trainer as CHALPAT SONTI found out when he visited David Aiken at his property near Avenel.

"We always seem to have a good one, but this year's just been ridiculous," Avenel harness racing trainer David Aiken.

To say David Aiken has just had a good year is something of an understatement.

The Avenel-based harness racing trainer recently took out the Victorian metropolitan trainers premiership, his 40 wins doubling the number of his nearest rival and the \$1.1 million stake money almost doing likewise.

Aiken was also the second-leading trainer for wins statewide, with 134, his horses winning \$1.6 million. He also won two races interstate.

But it was at Group One level, the elite of the sport, that Aiken's charges really fired. The two-year-old trotter of the year Eljaykay Phoenix was the headline act, creating history by becoming the first horse to win the "triple crown" of his age group (see story below). For good measure the son of Sundon was driven by Aiken's son Josh, in his first season as a reinsman.

Then there was budding superstar Lennytheshark, the former NSW Derby winner who returned late in the season to claim the Vicbred Super Series Final, with stable mate Wolfpack (also see story below) fourth. Aiken also won Vicbred finals with Eljaykay Phoenix and four-year-old trotter Spidergirl, adding the Breeders Crown with both for good measure.

Another square gaiter, My High Expectations, supplied via high-profile politician Clive Palmer, won the Australasian Trotters



Workout: David Aiken brings two-year-old Set To Rock off the track on his Avenel property.

Championship and is rightly ranked one of the best aged trotters in the nation.

With 22 feature race wins this season alone, it's easy to see why the Aiken stable is the talk of the sport.

But the man himself has been there done that before.

The 55-year-old was born and raised in Sydney, with harness racing in his blood. His father George was head auctioneer at yearling sales in a company started by David's grandfather, while the other grandfather was also involved in the sport.

Aiken then went further afield to learn the trade, first at age 16 to Christchurch in New Zealand, perhaps the spiritual home of the sport in the Southern Hemisphere, then to the birthplace of harness racing, the United States, where he learned to shoe horses.

After a stint working at stables in Sydney, and another stint in the US, Aiken started training at 21. That was in 1981 at stables at suburban Bankstown.

He was soon successful and those with long memories might remember the likes of Insutcha, Franco Glen, Jay Bee's Fella, Weona Brave and the topline US import Ultra Jet, runner-up in the 1994 Interdominion Grand Final. He also set NSW training and driving win records.

But there had to be more for Aiken, wife Colleen and their young family.

"The prize money wasn't that

great in Sydney at the time," he said.

"I won three trainer and driver premierships at Harold Park but we weren't getting far. Bankstown was becoming (increasingly urbanised) and we needed a change of lifestyle. Our kids were the right age (eight, five and three) and it was the right time to move."

So why Avenel, where he shifted to in 1996?

"It was the change of lifestyle really but the prize money was also better down here. When we came down I was going to take it easy for a while."

And that Aiken did, before expanding his team about three or four years ago to between 12 and 20. But the size has doubled again this year to about 40 on his 16 ha property.

His owners are a widespread lot, the Carmichael family from Bendigo, various others around the Shepparton area, Eljaykay Phoenix's owners from Finley and of course, the larger-than-life Palmer.

Not that he can shed much light on Palmer as a horse owner.

"I've trained for him for more than five years but I've never met him or spoken to him," Aiken said.

"I go through his managers."

Palmer has invested millions in harness racing, through his Cold Mountain Stud enterprise in Queensland, but has latterly leased many of his team out. That



Top blood: David Aiken with one of his stable stars originally supplied by Clive Palmer — top trotter My High Expectations.

Pictures: Chalpat Sonti

included several to Aiken and the latter's clients, including My High Expectations, and he still has five on the property.

"He's still involved but he leased more than 100 out and whoever was training them had first option," Aiken said.

Aiken's best horse in recent years has probably been the iron performer Karlsruhe, who won 21 and was unfortunate to be racing in a golden era of free-for-allers. He made the 2008 Interdominion final, where he finished midfield behind the immortal Blacks A Fake, in the great horse's third of four wins in the nation's greatest harness race.

Wartime Sweetheart and Smudge Bromac, with more than 20 wins each, have also been good performers as have Fifteenletters

and Kilmore Cup winner Cocos Dream.

Aside from metropolitan racing at Melton, Aiken focuses mainly on local tracks such as Shepparton, Kilmore and Bendigo.

Lennytheshark looks capable of going beyond any of his previous pacers, while what can you say about Eljaykay Phoenix?

"Twelve months ago he was just another horse coming through," Aiken said.

"The improvement has been unbelievable."

And we shouldn't forget the true secret to success with any racing stable — the staff. Aside from David and Josh Aiken there is long-time employee and former trainer-driver Kevin Murray, Lisa Bartley whose sister Bec is a trainer-driver and Ivan Antolos.

Josh's taken no short cuts to sporting success

By Chalpat Sonti

Josh Aiken has known a fair bit of sporting success in his 21 years.

He was a member of the all-conquering Tabilk under-16 football sides, made the step up to under-18s and seniors with Avenel the same year, headed off to try his luck with Shepparton Bears in the GVFL and captained that club to an under-18 flag a couple of years ago.

But when harness racing is in your blood as much as it is with the Aiken family (see separate story on this page), it was bound to come calling. For Aiken, who was studying equine science at Charles Sturt University, it was a matter of timing.

"I wasn't going to do it then a few people said I was mad if I didn't because Dad had a good team," he said.

"That made it a bit easier but I still found it pretty tough. It's something I've always wanted to do but I just did a few other things first."

Fifty wins from 234 drives and more than \$444 000 in stake money is good going by any standards, let alone a first season, and to top it off Aiken tasted repeated success at the sport's highest level.

He partnered Eljaykay Phoenix to a history-making

triple crown for two-year-old trotters, winning the Redwood Classic, Vicbred Sires Stakes and Breeders Crown.

"I was lucky to drive him because most people starting off don't really get to drive horses like him," he said.

With an increasing profile, and being associated with a leading stable, comes outside pressure, but Aiken has looked to ease some of that.

"I've just been trying to pick up more outside drives for other trainers and this season (which in harness racing starts on September 1) more of my wins have been for outside trainers, which is good if I can keep building on that."

Aiken's aims as a driver are to win the two "big ones" of the sport, the Interdominion final and the Miracle Mile.

His dad also couldn't be happier with the way his son has gone. "He's had a very satisfying season," David said.

"We were hoping for moderate success with Josh but he's mixed it pretty good (in big races) and hasn't looked out of place."

"The owners have been unbelievable too, with Eljaykay Phoenix when he first started racing they knew (Josh) had done a lot of work with him and they stuck by him."

"Josh was suspended one day



Champ: Part-owners Trevor "Butch" Canobie and Josh Aiken with Wolfpack, who was the Shepparton horse of the year for 2013-14. Picture: Chalpat Sonti

and Gavin Lang drove him to win but the owners had a lot of faith and put Josh back on. Other owners then saw he could handle the pressure and they were happy to put him on.

"When he was playing footy, he was never intimidated either and he always played in the midfield so he was always in among it."

■ Josh Aiken has also tasted

success as an owner, and what a horse to do it with.

Wolfpack, a horse bought from Wagga Wagga, from where he had won three races, came to the Aiken stable last year.

Looking to syndicate him out, the Aikens didn't have to look far. Josh's old dual premiership football coach at Tabilk (and later at Avenel), Trevor "Butch" Cano-

bie, got a call to see if he was interested.

Canobie, who hadn't raced a standardbred before, was keen and along with wife Leanne, he roped in some old cricket mates — Avenel's Danny Miller and Tony, Rick and Dean Moore from Nagambie. Xavier and Phil Stevenson from Shepparton were also in.

And Wolfpack has been a novice owner's dream. He won seven races on country tracks — including being crowned Shepparton horse of the year for his performances there — and ran fourth to superstar stablemate Lennytheshark in the Vicbred Super Series Final, a Group One race.

And recently Wolfpack broke through for his first city win at Melton, his 11th overall. At his 50th start on Friday night at Melton, he finished a brave second in a 1:54.9 mile rate.

For Canobie, it has not only been a great ride but an introduction to a different world.

"I just love it here now," he said at the stables.

"I love helping out, I drive the truck for them and have got my stable licence. It's a fun place to be, you appreciate how much work these guys put in every single day. They leave no stone unturned in their preparation. There's no short cuts."