



George Hanlon – a racing legend



By Robert Windmill (AAP)

George Hanlon was one of Australia's most respected trainers who will be remembered for crafting some of the nation's finest stayers.

Hanlon, who died aged 92, was at times vague, but was incredibly astute and lived his life for his horses.

An undisputed legend of the turf, some still argue he was the best.

Judging on runners to winners he was in a league of his own.

He never had big numbers, averaging just 15 horses at a time over more than 60 years, yet his success can be measured against the largest stables such as Bart Cummings, Tommy Smith, Colin Hayes, Lee Freedman and John Hawkes.

All are members of the Australian Racing Hall Of Fame which Hanlon proudly joined in 2002.

Hanlon trained winners of more than 100 stakes races with his last Group One win coming in 2001 when Mr Prudent won the Sydney Cup.

Earlier that season, Diatribe won the 200 Caulfield Cup to complete Hanlon's trophy cabinet, which also features three Melbourne Cups and a Cox Plate.

George Hanlon was born in July 1917, the sixth of 12 children, and spent his early days at Willunga, near McLaren Vale, where he learned to ride at the age of five and found a job delivering groceries on his pony.

His destiny was sealed as a 12-year-old when the family moved 40km north to Adelaide and he saw Phar Lap win the Elders Stakes and the King's Plate at Morphettville in May 1930.

Cummings, who has trained 12 Melbourne Cup winners, described Hanlon as his "greatest opponent in distance races".

Both had the same teacher early on - Cummings' father, Jim - who trained many top horses including 1950 Melbourne Cup winner Comic Court.

Much of George's time was soon spent working as a stablehand and on August 1, 1946 he was granted an owner-trainer's permit in South Australia.

With just one horse in his stable Hanlon had instant success, winning his first race with Lourdes at Port Pirie the following month.

Just as sometimes he came across as a vague, and at other times evasive, George was always a deep thinker.

The truth was that his plans were always changing, almost hourly, as he plotted his next move.

Early on George learned that attention to detail was important when a stable plunge on Lourdes at Ballarat went horribly wrong in August 1948.

In his anticipation of a big win he left the lead bag off the horse who duly won easily but weighed in light and was disqualified.

George was both shattered and broke but backed his ability as a trainer and the following year established a bank for his move to Melbourne when Lourdes scored at Oakbank.

Such was George's focus on his horses he was often absent-minded.

On occasions he simply forgot he had a runner in a race and left jockeys waiting with saddles until he showed up.

Then there was infamous plane switch where George was booked to go to Tasmania where he had a horse running in the Launceston Cup only to find himself on a plane to Canberra.

On another occasion George triggered a police alert when he mistakenly drove the wrong car from the Epsom training track.

"It looked like my car ... but I think everyone understood when they knew it was me," George said.

George Hanlon celebrates his Melbourne Cup win with Black Knight.

George trained for 35 years at his Correct Lodge stables at Epsom but he realised a dream to have his own training set-up when he moved to Leopold, near Geelong, in the mid-1980s.

Drawing on what he had seen at Newmarket in England, he mapped out gallops on his 40ha property and in his own inimitable style followed his horses in a four-wheel drive jeep, shouting instructions to the riders while monitoring his speedo.

For George the challenge was to "make" a horse and in his time he made some of the best including Taras Bulba, Gnapur, Prince Salieri, Our Pompeii, Bobalex, Royal Snack, Mr. Prudent, Our Sophia, Marjoleo and Bellition.

Often they were pick-ups from other stables and many of Hanlon's peers agree that had he had access to more royally-bred stock his record would have been even better.

Every horse, he maintained, was different and each had a tailored training program to suit the individual.

In 1951 Scobie Breasley rode George's first city winner, Anglo.

But it was Correct who underlined his guile as a trainer, transforming the horse from a dual Newmarket Hcp winner (1960-61) into a Werribee Cup winner in 1961 and then becoming his first of an amazing 47 Melbourne Cup runners from 1961 to 2002.

Nearly every year GM Hanlon had a runner in the big race, an outstanding achievement considering his small stable numbers.

In 1965 George had just five horses in work and three of them ran in the Melbourne Cup,

But what should have been one his best days at the races turned out to be one of his worst with the race favourite Matloch breaking a knee and falling while stablemates Algalon and Pleasanton got hopelessly caught up in the backwash.

In 1972 Hanlon had four runners in the Cup and won it for the first time with Piping Lane. Arwon scored in 1978 and Black Knight in 1984. Hanlon also finished second with Vansittart (1970), Noble Comment (1982 and third in 1983) and Mr. Prudent (2002).

Perth business magnate Robert Holmes a Court owned Black Knight who was one of many big race winners George trained for him.

None however was better than Family Of Man.

He came along not long after Taras Bulba captured the AJC's Australasian Champion Stakes, the Rosehill Guineas and AJC Derby, among other races, before being transferred to Tommy Smith.

In March 1975 Family of Man won the House of Windsor Stakes (1400m) and George, in a career highlight, was introduced to Queen Elizabeth II who presented the trophy at Flemington.

Family Of Man went on to win 21 races in all including the 1977 Cox Plate, the WATC Australian Derby, two WATC Marlboro 50,000s, a Caulfield Stakes, a Mackinnon Stakes and a George Adams Handicap.

Hanlon rated Lawman, also owned by Holmes a Court, second only to Family Of Man.

He won a Group One Doncaster and was an unlucky second to Kingston Town in the 1982 Cox Plate.

Boardwalk Angel was also another good winner for Hanlon and Holmes a Court, providing the trainer with his second of four Group One Goodwood Handicaps in 1989.

George didn't like getting beaten and when Taksan defeated Arwon in a surprise photo-finish result in the 1978 Caulfield Cup he was bitterly disappointed.

A well-meaning pressman tried to console him, explaining he could still win the Melbourne Cup.

"Do you think I didn't want to win the Caulfield Cup," George fired back. "An egg in the frying pan is worth two birds in the air."

Among Hanlon's most important wins was the 1982 Australian Cup with Kip. The victory drew special attention as the horse started at \$41 after being beaten easily at his previous run when fancied.

Asked to explain the form reversal George, as usual, adjusted his collar, pushed up his hat and then drew an analogy with former champion AFL full forward Doug Wade.

"One week Doug Wade comes out and kicks no goals and the next week he kicks six goals. Horses are only human."

On another occasion then chief steward Pat Lalor called George in and asked what he thought of the poor ride of an apprentice on one of his horses.

"Pat, Pat," George started as he often repeated himself.

"Don't ask me. Don't ask me. You licensed him. You gave him a licence, not me."

George was renowned for his discerning eye which he cast his over all his horses, looking for that tell-tale sign that might just give him an edge next start.

"Every time I see a racehorse I raise my hat," he used to say.

Lee Freedman, who followed Hanlon's example and developed his own training complex at Rye, said Hanlon was inspirational.

"George has always placed his horses en route to the big ones. They always seemed to end up in the right races with no weight on their backs. He's very astute."

Indeed, George was a class act.

As one veteran pressman once wrote: "When they made George Hanlon they broke the mould."

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