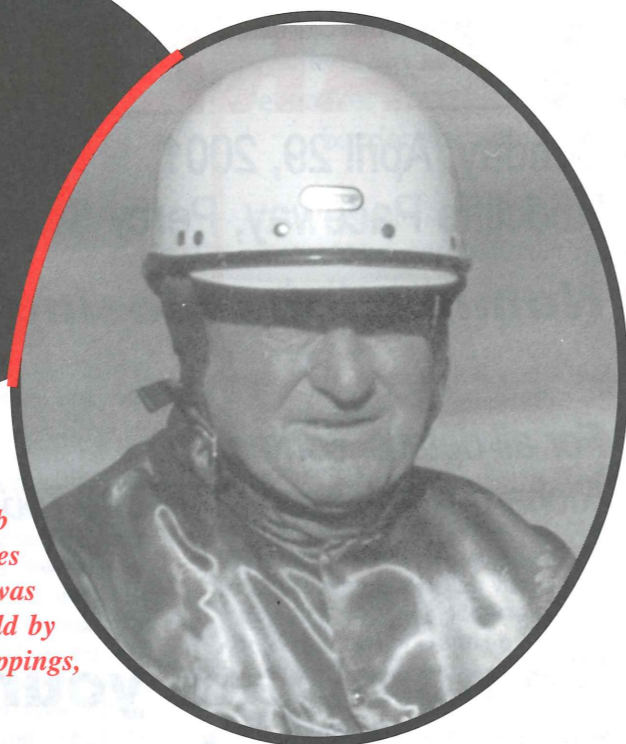


"Uncle" Bobby HUNTER

Like no other

Interview by Felicity Bryant



ON AN ORDINARY evening in November, I was treated to what I knew would be an extraordinary tale. I'd known Bob Hunter for only a short while, and heard his grandious tales many times before, but nothing had prepared me for what I was to share. It was the entire tale of "Uncle" Bob Hunter, told by Bob himself and backed up by photos, videos, books, newsclippings, memorabilia and scribble notes to rival a specialist archive.

A lot of Bob's stories are the sort that can't be printed - at least, not in an official harness racing publication! The best I can do is describe a lot of Bob's life, his associations, and experiences as colourful.

Bob Hunter's seen and done almost all one man can in this sport, and watching him talk about it is like nothing else. There's a real glint in his eye as he recounts every tale. His words overlap each other as quickly as he thinks of them, but he tells each adventure with the same fervour you'd expect from this man who's treasured every horse, every person, and every minute he's known.

THESE DAYS, Bob's work revolves around only one horse, and most of his time is spent fighting poor health than racing, but his stories have lost none of their appeal.

Now 63 years old, Bob Hunter can't recall exactly how harness racing became known to him, but his competitive nature comes from a long involvement in sports. As a boy, he was an exceptional athlete and had several state titles to his credit.

A student at Brisbane State High School, Bob excelled in the GPS (Greater Public School) sports competitions. "I was a good runner as a kid," he says proudly, but his talents extended much further than the running track. For most of his school life, Bob was a member of the football, cricket and athletics teams - not to mention one of four members of the

undefeated premiership tennis team of 1954 - the first ever at State High for over 20 years.

"We almost didn't win that title," Bob remembers. "The final round against Nudgee [College] was close. I was the last player and was losing. I just couldn't make the right shots because my mum had bought me a new pair of running shoes. I had only ever played in old shoes that were all worn out, so half way through the match, I asked the umpire if I could take my shoes off. I played the rest of the game barefoot and won. The Nudgee supporters all cried foul afterwards, but it was a fair win."

During his time playing tennis, Bob was fortunate to face the likes of Rod Laver - "his team would beat us in doubles all the time" - and once played a premiership game umpired by Ken Rosewall. "I made it onto the free list

with Dunlop [the major Australian tennis promoter] and might have been a professional tennis player, but my mum made me stay at school."

In 1957, Bob and his wife Beverly were married. He worked a few months as a bank teller, was conscripted into the Royal Australian Navy, and eventually went to work at the Petrie Paper Mill where he remained for over 20 years. Somewhere in between all of that, he also fell in love with harness racing.

"I can't remember exactly how I got started in it, but I do know Don Chicken was the man who introduced me [to harness racing]. Don was probably the first studmaster in Queensland, and we somehow crossed paths. I remember him telling me I might be good at driving - he was probably trying to sucker me in to help him out at the time - but I listened to him and gave it a go."

Before he knew it, Bob was a regular face around the showground tracks, and had inadvertently made some acquaintances that would last the rest of his life.

Rod Hill is one name from the early days Bob had a lot to do with. "Rod has always been a caller, and was always being asked by radio stations and papers for form reports and tips. I remember one time an announcer asked him a question about track sur-

Bob Hunter cont.

faces - what was the surface like on the track at one of the show circuits. Rod's reply was that he didn't have a clue, but call Bobby Hunter, because he's fallen out on most of them!"

Keith "Chika" Charlwood remains Bob's greatest friend from the old days. Chika was one of the many trainers who came across the border in the 1960s. Bob met him during one of these trips from New South Wales, and so began an association that lasted almost 20 years on the track.

"They were the men who made a real difference to racing up here, Sydney trainers like Chika and Les Bastin. I drove Chika's horses for 18 years," Bob says. "I was never sacked, and we never had a fight. He and his wife Marge have, and always will be great mates of mine and Bev's."

"We traveled all over with the horses, Chika and I. Back then, there were races everywhere, all the time. You got to know everyone up and down the coast. Eddie and Skinny Baumann, the Coy brothers, Merv Wanless, Merv Reinke, Noel Croghan, Kanga Smith - it was one big family."

And like a family, they all looked out for each other as well. Bob was the man behind the first major support appeal launched in Queensland harness racing. "Chika [Charlwood], Les [Bastin], Sammy Zammit, Rod Hill, Noel Croghan and I with a few others had started the Drivers Association out at Redcliffe," Bob remembers, "and when Alex Brumbridge was killed in a race, we organised an appeal for his widow, Beryl." Beryl was related to the Dux family - "the brothers Mark and Michael were just little boys then," remembers Bob - and Alex's accident shook everyone.

Brumbridge was the first driver to ever be killed in a race accident at Albion Park. He was catapulted from his sully into a track sign during a pile up and fatally wounded. With the help of the other drivers and donations from just about everyone, Bob raised several thousand dollars for Beryl Brumbridge. "Kids were giving us 20 and 50 cents each week, everybody chipped in."

Now well and truly entrenched in harness racing, a few years later Bob and others from the Drivers Association joined the likes of Rod Lyons from the Rocklea Guild and helped write the constitution for what would eventually be Queensland's Breeders, Owners, Trainers and Reinspersons Association (BOTRA). He finished his time on BOTRA's

committee a few years later, but didn't stop pushing to improve harness racing.

The same team that looked out for Beryl Brumbridge laid the first plans for night racing at Albion Park in the 1960s. "Dave Nicholson was the Speaker of Parliament at the time," Bob recalls, "and his son worked with me at the Paper Mill. That's how we got an audience with Nicholson - Sammy Zammit, Rod Hill, Noel Croghan and I. The gallops had just shut up at Albion Park and the place was empty. It was the perfect opportunity for trotting."

"We had our meeting with Nicholson, I remember Sammy Zammit meeting me before we went in. We'd had a lot of meetings together, these fellows and I, and I had this old briefcase I used to keep all the records for the Trainers and Drivers Association in, those sort of things. It was a really beat up old thing and before our meeting with Nicholson, Zammit shows me this new case he'd bought. He thought my old one just wasn't good enough for that sort of meeting - we were there to convince him the trots deserved Albion Park and we had to look the part!

"After that, it was guys like Kevin Seymour who took over - they knew how to finish the deal off, we just got the foot in the door, so to speak."

Bob's charitable nature continued to shine, as did his larrikin ways and he gained local recognition as one of the main fundraisers for Redcliffe's public swimming pool. "One of the guys nominated me for a fun run because they knew I'd been a good runner as a kid," Bob says. "It was 16 kilometres, and for extra entertainment, they made me run it dragging a gig behind me, with my son sitting in the seat brandishing a whip. I had to skoll a beer every few

kilometres as well! We raised a good sum of money for the pool though, and that's something I can be proud of."

By the early 1970s, Bob had left the Petrie Paper Mill and shared his time with a host of good horses. "My daughter Vicky and I had a fairly big team in work for quite a few years, and I was still driving for other trainers as well."

"The toughest horse we had was Scottish Key. He was dual gaited, and in 1975 he won nine pacing races, three in a row at the Sunshine Coast show circuit before heading to Harold Park and winning there as well."

The best horses in Bob's mind, though, were the "Goombungees" - horses Bob trained and drove himself in the 1980s, all brandishing the Goombungee name.

"Goombungee is a small town outside of Toowoomba, a really nice place. That's where the Rolfe brothers were from, and one day I was visiting Athol Rolfe - I'd gotten to know his brother Ashley quite well around the tracks, they had horses like Copper Dust and Great Chase. On this day, I was out with Athol on their property to look at some of their horses and decided whichever one emerged from the scrub first, I would take home with me. That was Goombungee Lad."

Goombungee Lad was one of the best horses Bob's been associated with. He won 14 races at Redcliffe - "that was a record at the time for wins on the one track" - with his biggest win being against Hollywood James, a visiting Sydney horse from the Moon stable. He traveled north with Bob for several seasons, with Bob's favourite win being aboard him on the old Maryborough circuit. "That was a good track, Maryborough, and always a pleasure to visit."

His least impressive performance, however, was at Albion Park shortly after the new complex was opened. Bob was slapped with a five meeting

BELOW: Bob (second from right) was one of a field of drivers recently selected by Rod Hill for a legends invitational event at Marburg



Bob Hunter cont.

BELOW: Bob Hunter does one of his driving tricks at the Redcliffe track.



suspension after setting a slow pace and causing what the Telegraph newspaper reported as the "noisiest punter's demonstration ever staged at Albion Park."

"Those were the days of big, regular crowds, full of grandstand drivers," Bob jokes.

The suspension was to be only a mild setback however, compared to what the Hunters would experience a few years later with another Goombungee horse.

Goombungee Lass raced a handful of seasons at Albion Park and Redcliffe for Bob. Watching her race videos, you hear some familiar names: the mare Bindy's Hope, now dam of Callon Lee and Bindy Lee, or Tarport Sally, dam of Thomas Nitro and Jacky Boy. These, and at least four more mares from the 1980s who have since gone on to leave incredible breeding legacies. Goombungee Lass beat these horses on several occasions, and the Hunters had plans to breed with her.

"We had her in foal and left her at the stud to be looked after, but Vicky decided closer to the time that she'd like to bring her home to birth. It was only when we tried to collect her that we discovered she had died." The studmaster had gone on holidays and left a neighbour to mind the property. "Lassy" had gotten tangled in a fence and was there for several days before she was found. I think our whole family cried for about a week when we found out. That just broke our hearts."

And that's one thing it's easy to forget with Bob Hunter. It's hard to imagine he's ever had a sad moment, because Bob's always been the clown

of the racetrack, a definite entertainer. In his early days on the show circuits, he was not only a good race driver, but a great trickster and performer.

"I've always been a clown, it's a great feeling being able to make people laugh," he says. "It was easy then, because the shows were like the Olympics - one big party that never seemed to end. Everyone stayed there with their horses, there were always big bands, race car demonstrations, all sorts of entertainment that you didn't get to see anywhere else. It was like a circus."

Bob lays claim to being the first to walk the shafts of a gig or stand in the seat and steer a horse by holding the reins in his teeth. These tricks were his specialties.

"I started my tricks as part of the shows between races, to keep the crowds entertained," he says. "They were always popular, although I think there were as many people cheering for me to fall out as there were for me to finish!" And fall out he did, too, on several occasions. "One time I was doing the Johnny Cash trick [walking the shafts and steering], but I was using one of Chika's gigs and instead of stepping onto the shafts I tried to jump up on them. I missed my footing and fell straight through the middle!"

Bob's clowning reputation eventually became so strong, there were times it was hard for audiences to tell when he was performing and when he was actually racing.

"I remember one time at one of the bigger shows, Merv Reinke's wife had badgered me all morning about doing my tricks. She was worried I'd hurt

myself and was convincing me to not do them this year. I agreed with her, and swore not to joke about. She only half believed me, but headed off to the other stalls and left Merv and me with the other boys to race the horses.

I was driving a few that day, and happened to be caught in a fall with one of them. The wheels on my gig were completely flattened, and my horse got such a fright, it bolted around the track. I was still sitting in the seat, but right on the ground and being dragged around the track at top speed! Mrs Reinke must have seen only the last bits of this from the stands and gave me a good talking to. She was convinced I was doing a new trick and no one could make her believe it had been because of a fall!

Perhaps if a catcher like Donny Ross had been there then, I might not have got in that trouble," Bob continues. "He is the best course clerk I've ever seen, a real horseman, but unfortunately for me, he was nowhere near the track then. Maybe if he had been then Mrs Reinke might have had reason to doubt me too!"

"It was always in good spirits, though," Bob quickly points out, "all the jokes and tricks. We had a lot of good times with the Reinkes," Bob remembers, "travelling around with Wondais Mate. Everyone had fun when he was racing, he was an incredible horse all over Queensland."

When asked what he thinks the younger trainers and drivers are missing out on, Bob's answer comes easily. "I've seen most of the trainers and drivers of today move through the ranks, and even had something to do with educating a lot of them.

"The Phelan brothers are one's I've always followed - young Rodney drove his first winner aboard a horse of mine at Rocklea, and I was one of the first to convince Ryan to try his hand at television. Then there were the Weidemann sisters, Scott Kunde, young Johnny Kann and John Niemann - they were always around as kids and all learning the ropes when I was driving winners.

"Some of them might remember something of what it was like in the earlier days, but the really young ones today, the junior drivers and newcomers probably have no way of knowing. Going to the races was so different then. The young guys today don't get the same experiences. They don't know what it's like to have a crowd cheering right next to them, or relive a race on a video where half the crowd is screaming out your horse's name. We have tapes like that with Goombungee Lad, you can hear

Bob Hunter cont.

everyone cheering for him. There was a lot more emotion in the sport. It was a really different feeling to today."

"There were so many different characters you got to meet in the earlier days, too. There was always someone telling a good story.

"I remember one time travelling out west, it might have been around Gatton but I'm not sure; there was an old fellow who always seemed to hook up with Chika and me, a bit of a bagman but totally harmless, always clean. This one year, we were flooded in at the show for over three days and had to just camp there and wait it out. During that time, one of the boys kept a record of the stories the bagman told us - 'he'd been in this jail at this time, he'd been to this city in this time, he'd done this and he'd done that' - and when we added it all up, it had to be that this old drifter was at least 127 years old! Looking back now, it's funny the stories that seem to stick in your mind. I'm lucky to have those sorts of memories."

Today, Bob's keeping his hands warm in harness racing with one little star. Achates (pronounced a-ka-tez), has been a thorn in the side of several race callers, but a real blessing to Bob and his family.

"My sister owns his dam, Hobby's Dream. She won 23 races, including one at Harold Park, and when Achates was born, we knew from the beginning there was something special about him, but it wasn't easy to get him going. Something went amiss with him early on, at one start at the Gold Coast I couldn't get him to catch the mobile, and we found out after a few tests that he had a severe liver virus.

"I'd been working him at Stewart Dickson's place and swimming him in the dam there, which at that stage had a bit of an algae problem. Apparently, he'd got a dose of algae poisoning, but once we found out what was wrong, he came good in a few days and there's been no stopping him since."

Bob and Achates traveled north earlier this year and made a real name for themselves in Mackay and Rockhampton. "He took a lot of the local trainers by surprise," Bob recalls, "and it was a good opportunity for me to train him to race. I've always had a bit of luck in Mackay and Rocky, and this time round I was able to place Achates in a variety of races, letting him lead, holding him back in midfield and sprint home, he matured a lot in that time."

Achates won three races in a row during his northern visit, and Bob's

now got some high ambitions for the three year old. "Secretly, I'd like to see him beat Buster Grooves," Bob jokes, "he has the potential for it, but realistically, I'd like to take him to Melbourne in the new year and test him out down there."

For the time being, though, Achates is following Bob's lead and having a well-earned rest from racing. His Melbourne trip is very much up in the air. Shortly after returning from Mackay, Bob was diagnosed with cancer and has spent the past two months undergoing daily treatments. "There's not much the doctors can do," he says matter-of-factly. "They can't operate on me, so our plans are to try and reduce the tumor through treatments and give me a bit more time."

It sounds like an all too familiar tale these days, and one that's really shaken Bob's family and friends, but to most of them, it's a battle he's capable of fighting. "He's a bit of a sentimental old fellow these days, but my mate Chika Charlwood's convinced I'm not done yet," Bob jokes. "He reckons he's seen me through at least seven scrapes when I should have been a goner, so I must have at least two lives left!

"Chika's always been a great mate to me," Bob says. "There just aren't the words to describe it all."

And whilst Chika Charlwood and his family are Bob's biggest supporters from the early days, current trainer Stewart Dickson means the same to Bob today. "I'd known Stewart from around the tracks when he was starting out," Bob remembers. "It was about 27 years ago that we started working together. I had collected a horse and was heading home with him, but needed to stop off on the way and Stewart's house was the first one on our way home."

That accidental visit started what was to become a daily ritual for Bob and Bev Hunter. "Over the years, we raced several horses with the Dicksons, and raced against each other just as often. We've seen each other's families grow up.

"It's been a real privilege for me, the times I've spent with Stewart and Lorraine [Dickson]. Working at their stables and just visiting for a few hours every day is always a pleasure; their home is always a happy one, everyone there is so generous and cooperative. Stewart's personality hasn't changed since the first time I

met him, and I think you'd have to have something wrong with you if you couldn't get along with them. They're just good, decent people."

But, as his wife Bev is quick to point out: "There's been so many good families we've met through harness racing. For our family especially, it's always been a good time. In our big days of racing, everyone you met was a deep down, basic, good person. No one ever had much money, racing was just something to enjoy for all the family; every meeting and every show just seemed like a big family party."

Today, as Bob plans his Melbourne assault with Achates in between his treatment, it's easy to see why so many people are rooting for him to win. In the middle of his biggest battle yet, Bob's still doing what he can for the sport he loves.

He shared a handful of passes to the Australian Pacing Championship at Albion Park in October with the nurses at Redcliffe Hospital, all of whom went and enjoyed every minute.

It was a simple gesture, but one typical of Bob Hunter: the clown of the tracks who shares his joys with everyone he meets, and wishes them the same successes. He's a once in a lifetime character.



The Hunter family would like to extend a special "thank you"

to everyone who's sent their well wishes to Bob.

The expressions of kindness have been overwhelming and are greatly appreciated by Bob and Beverly.