

WHIPS!

Drivers call for stricter control

By MARSHALL DOBSON

Is harness racing being slowly whipped to death?

The industry suffers from a perception problem, which concerns whip use.

Even today's leading drivers believe that there should be more control over the use of 'the persuader.'

Today's whips, made of a

pliable material, are more humane than those of yesterday - whalebone and fibreglass; these narrower, shorter, 'swish' whips don't mark as much as those of yesterday.

The whips might have changed, but their style of use has not.

Drivers continue to flail their charges with gay abandon; stewards, who have the power to act, in the main, do not.

The worst part is that the 'slather-and-flack' brigade continue to do so even when their horses have no chance of earning a cheque, let alone winning.

Champion Victorian-based reinsman Gavin Lang is acknowledged by many people to be the best driver in Australia.

Lang recently drove six winners at the provincial meeting at Stawell, and was hardly forced to use the 'waddy' on any of them.

Harness racing is beamed nationally into our lounge rooms, where those new to the industry are forced to see often wanton displays of whip use.

Sure, the stewards are there to protect the horses, but how many drivers have been charged for excessive whip use?

Old-timers will tell you that certain horses, and certain breeds, won't 'go' without a tickle-up.

The 'next generation' might be just as vehement, however, telling you that they won't stand to see horses punished.

And it's the 'next generation' which will be most vital to harness racing, if it is going to be considered as an industry, and not a sport.

And, on that subject, what sport is there in seeing a defenceless animal battered?

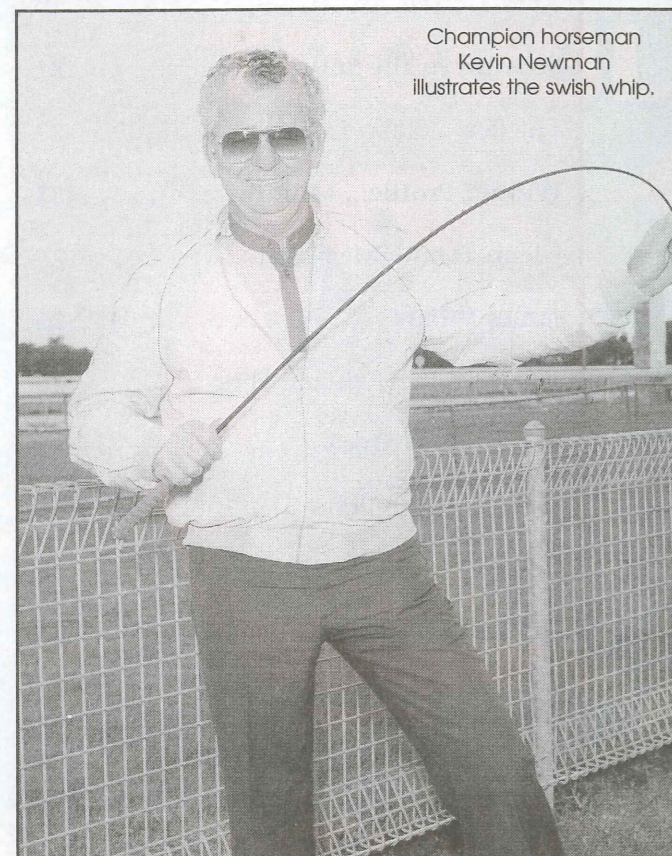
Sure, the catch-cry will be that horses have a thick hide, and that they can stand a belting up the home straight, and that the stewards are there to protect them.

But I ask you this: when harness racing started all those years ago, what if drivers didn't have whips then?

How do you think the public perception would be today if all of a sudden whips were allowed?

South Australia has been the first State to lessen the impact by covering horses' rumps with their saddlecloth.

Which other State will follow suit, or go one better?



Champion horseman Kevin Newman illustrates the swish whip.



WHIP USE: WHAT THE DRIVERS SAY

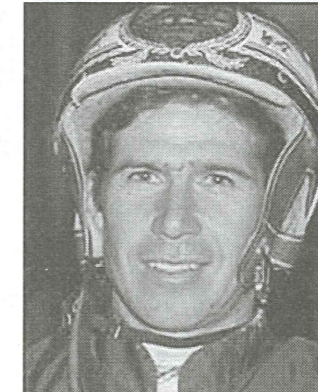
KERRYN GATH



"I would like to see whips retained, but their use limited. I like the South Australian idea. Some horses will not go forward straight without the whip."

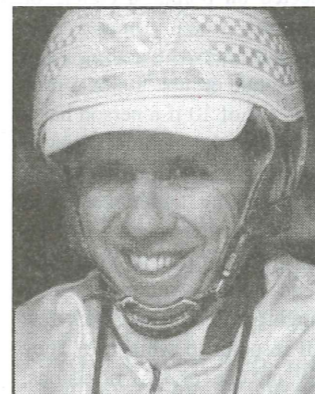
more than is presently the case. The numbers over the rump which we use here are an improvement; they definitely protect horses and give the public a better perception."

GREG BENNETT



"I don't mind giving them a couple, but I don't overdo it...when they're beaten, they're beaten. Once they're struggling, they're struggling. I think it should be policed even more, especially on beaten horses. What's the use of keeping at 'em when they're beaten."

LINDSAY HARPER



"Whips are an over-rated commodity. I think the whip is the last resort; most genuine horses give you what they've got. It's more a frustration thing."

BRIAN HANCOCK



"When I was in Europe you're allowed to hit them with the whip provided the hand didn't leave the rein. You couldn't hit any more than 12 times during the race. The first day of the World Championship the Canadian, the Belgian, the Australian (me), the Kiwi (Tony Herlihy) and the American were all fined. You get used to driving without whips. It taught me to count down the back

GEOFF WEBSTER



"I think the stewards should police the drivers' use of the whip

straight to leave something in reserve for the home straight! Our breed doesn't need it like the old breed used to, either."

MATTHEW NEILSON

"Whip use is too prevalent. A lot of drivers over-use the whip. You need it in certain cases. I use it in almost every race."

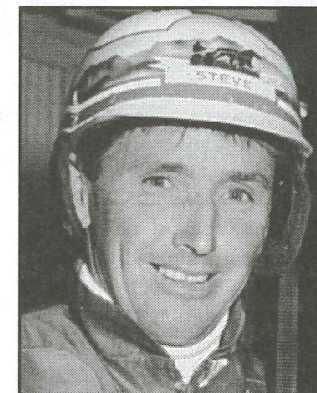
JOHN CALDOW



"We've got to have whips; you

couldn't satisfy the punters if you didn't. It's a little overdone at the moment, although the stewards, particularly in Victoria, are on to it."

STEVE TURNBULL



"I don't like to see horses being flogged; it isn't necessary, especially when they can't finish in the money. I'm not a great whip user, and use it mainly as a persuader."

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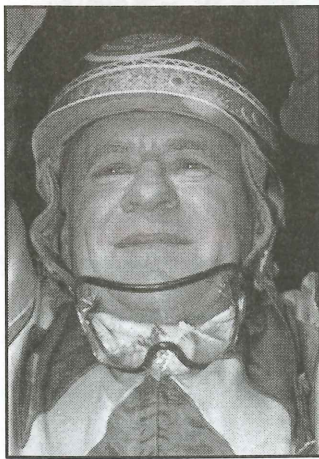
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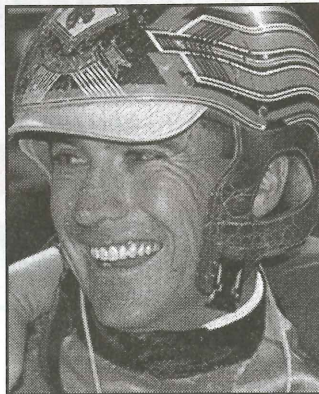
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BRIAN GATH

"It's essential in racing; you must have a whip, but that whip use must be properly-policed. Some horses don't need any encouragement, but others do. The trouble will be if they ban all whips, two or three drivers, like Gavin Lang and Chris Alford, will have that much advantage over the others, that it won't be funny. New rules could be brought in for the use of whips. They're talking about new whips for two-year-olds, but many of these babies won't go up to the gate, for example, without a slap on the bum to get 'em to shape up. They get broken-in to obey the whip."

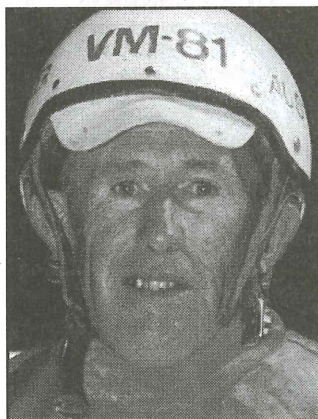
DARREN HANCOCK

"I don't think many horses need it. Many drivers over-use the whip."

CHRIS ALFORD

"It would be the wrong thing to

do to take them away altogether. The European idea is preferred - keeping your hand on the rein at all times, so you can only flick 'em. It's different with jockeys, they can give them a heel-up, but we can't. There's a definite need for it, but maybe not so much of it."

DARRELL ALEXANDER

"Excessive whip use is no good, but whips are a necessary tool. We need them, but they need a bit of control. Some people use to excess when horses are beaten. Used in the right way they are an asset."

GAVIN LANG

"Whips should not be banned. I think that the rules are there

and in place for the stewards to use; it's up to them to be more strict on the way they are used. There's probably ways that they can make us use them, for example, not being allowed to take your hand off the rein. Every now and then it's the same old story, there's only a few drivers who don't look good most of the time, which makes it hard for everyone else. In this day and age with animal cruelty and the RSPCA people will tend to look at whip use as an issue. You only need a couple of bad cases, which they'll always bring up, which looks bad for everyone else. Seldom do you see nowadays professional drivers punish their horses. Stewards are entitled to clamp down on horses back in the ruck, but in Victoria, where fields are selected on points, a couple of positions can make the difference between getting a run next week or not. I think nine times out of 10 if a person has a love for the animal they'll respect it as such and resort to not punishing the horse. Good horses don't need to be punished, and it hurts you to hit a bad horse - you're basically flogging a dead horse; very few will respond to whip use. They may on one or two occasions, but not continually."

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What do you think of whip use? Write to The Editor, c/-The Australian Standardbred, PO Box 121, Brisbane Markets, Queensland, 4106, fax (07) 3875 1344 or email getapen@eis.net.au. A subscription, or \$100 worth of Hair Testing Laboratory products, for each letter published.

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