

# It's all sweet for Sugars



ROSS SUGARS does his best juggling act as Greg and Kylie fight over who gets to hold the Kilmore Cup won by Popular Port in 1987.

By JOHN DUNNE

**JOHN JUSTICE led the charge in the mid 1990s and brother Lance followed several years later.**

Last month, Ross Sugars completed the exodus east of three of the biggest names in South Australian harness racing when he settled in Terang on the property made famous by the great Gammalite.

Is there anyone left, save for leading horseman Geoff Webster, who has steadfastly resisted the temptation to pack it in in South Australia and throw a line in the biggest harness racing pond in the land?

As news filters back across the border that Webster recently put off a long-time worker, perhaps he, too, is heavily weighing up his options.

Sugars this week revealed the lure of the big V first surfaced 25 years ago.

"It's always been in the back of my mind, but it's hard to leave the place where you were brought up," he said.

The Sugars family, Ross along with his wife Kerry and emerging junior drivers, daughter Kylie, and son Greg, sat down and took stock 12 months ago after yet another successful season on the track.

"We were still churning out the winners, but the business was running at a loss," Sugars declared.

In the preceding five years, the family's harness racing business had steadily eaten away at a lifetime of savings.

"All the money was used up," Sugars said.

The first seeds of the biggest gamble of his career sprouted three months ago when Sugars campaigned the pacer Shoeshine in Victoria and accepted the invitation to drop in for a cup of tea and chat on the way home from staunch family friend Leo O'Connor.

"Leo was getting on and he put it to me to make the move to his property at Terang," he said.

The irrepressible O'Connor was convincing enough to send Sugar on his way back to Adelaide with departure plans already in place.

"Leo was building a new three-bedroom home in the township and said it would be ready for us by the time we arrived," Sugars said.

True to his word, O'Connor's builders put the finishing touches on the new abode two days before the Sugars family settled in Terang where they lease the stables and property that Gammalite called home.

In the ensuing months since the defining chat with O'Connor, the magnitude of the upheaval weighed heavily on Sugars' mind and wasn't eased by the well-meaning remarks of his colleagues.

Brave, bold and courageous were the adjectives thrown around by his mates on and around the racetracks of South Australia.

"They were sad to see us go, but they all understood the reasons why," Sugars said.

Foremost at the top of the list was Sugars, the parent, and his concern for the future of his children in the industry they were born into.

"Greg saw the writing on the wall when he returned home from America that there was a future in Victoria that doesn't exist in South Australia," he said.

"Both he and Kylie are just starting out in the sport and there is no way known they can make a living out of it in South Australia - no matter how good they are."

Sugar points out that no harness racing administrator in his home state made any effort to entice him to stay and tough it out.

"I think deep down they know the future isn't bright," he said.

A long serving BOTRA committeeman and past president and vice president, Sugars is well versed to make comment on the deteriorating state of affairs back home.

The death warrant he believes was signed by the state government amid a watershed decision to sell off the South Australian TAB to UniTAB a couple of years ago.

"They sold it for \$40 million in a quick-fire fix to get some money into the treasury coffers and yet the TAB was making \$40 million a year," he said. "It was the nail in the coffin."

While Sugars forges a new career in Victoria, the bleak outlook facing his former colleagues saddens him.

"In time to come, it will become purely a hobby sport with no room for the professional horsemen," he said.

The situation that arises today bears little resemblance to the days when Sugars and his father Len mixed it with the country's elite performers as they rolled out a succession of classic winning pacers.

A son of Garry Rowan named Blue Rowan dominated the juvenile classics during the mid-1970s before crossing the border and saluting on four consecutive occasions at Moonee Valley.

Murdock Miss was a Grand Circuit winning mare, claiming the 1981 South Australia Pacing Cup at the expense of Romantic Chris and Single Again, and held the title as the best of her sex for several years in Adelaide.

Sugars ranks the 1987 Kilmore Pacing Cup winner Popular Port as the best horse to have worn the stable's colours.

"He made it at Grand Circuit level by winning the Kilmore Pacing Cup and finished runner-up in the Treuer Memorial behind Village Kid," he said.

While Popular Port may hold the mantle as the pick of the bunch, Sugars became well known in Victoria through his association with onetime cult figure Pappy McCoy, who was a multiple winner in both states.

At two, 'Pappy' took out the Breeders' Plate, BOTRA Pace, the Golden Nursery, Sapling Stakes and Sires' Final in South Australia, while his spoils in Victoria that season included the Edgar Tatlow Memorial.

Sugars has driven more than 2500 winners in a career spanning more than three decades and holds a record 13 consecutive state drivers' premierships from 1975 until 1987.

The genes have been passed on to the next generation though Kylie and Greg, the latter enjoying a successful stint with the John and Maree Caldwell stable.

"The Caldows have been lifelong friends stemming from Dad's great friendship with Jack (Caldow) until his death in 2001," Sugars said.

Greg Sugars has caught the eye of several astute judges through his ability to finish among the money on moderate performers - a point not lost on his father.

"I sometimes think it takes more skill to finish third on a longshot than to drive a short-priced winner," he said.

While Sugars is naturally reluctant to extol the emerging talents of his son, current mentor John Caldwell is willing to discuss the 19-year-old's latent talent.

"There is no doubt that horses run for Greg," Caldwell said. "You cannot help but be impressed by his willingness to do the work, which stems from his upbringing and he's going to give himself every chance to succeed."

The degree of trepidation and apprehension that enveloped Ross Sugars' mind in the lead-up to the move was minimised within days of the move.

If Sugars had doubts about his small team measuring up to the toughest competition in the land, he need not have worried.

The horses barely had time to acquaint themselves with their new surroundings when they were making themselves at home in the winners' stall across the road at Dalvui Raceway in Terang.

Three days after arriving, the Sugars stable took a team of four horses in its Victorian debut and returned home with four cheques.

Three-year-old filly Penny Park and colt Wils Scooter both saluted for Greg, while Heartsaflynn filled a place and the trotter Bruckurk was a close fourth in the opening event.

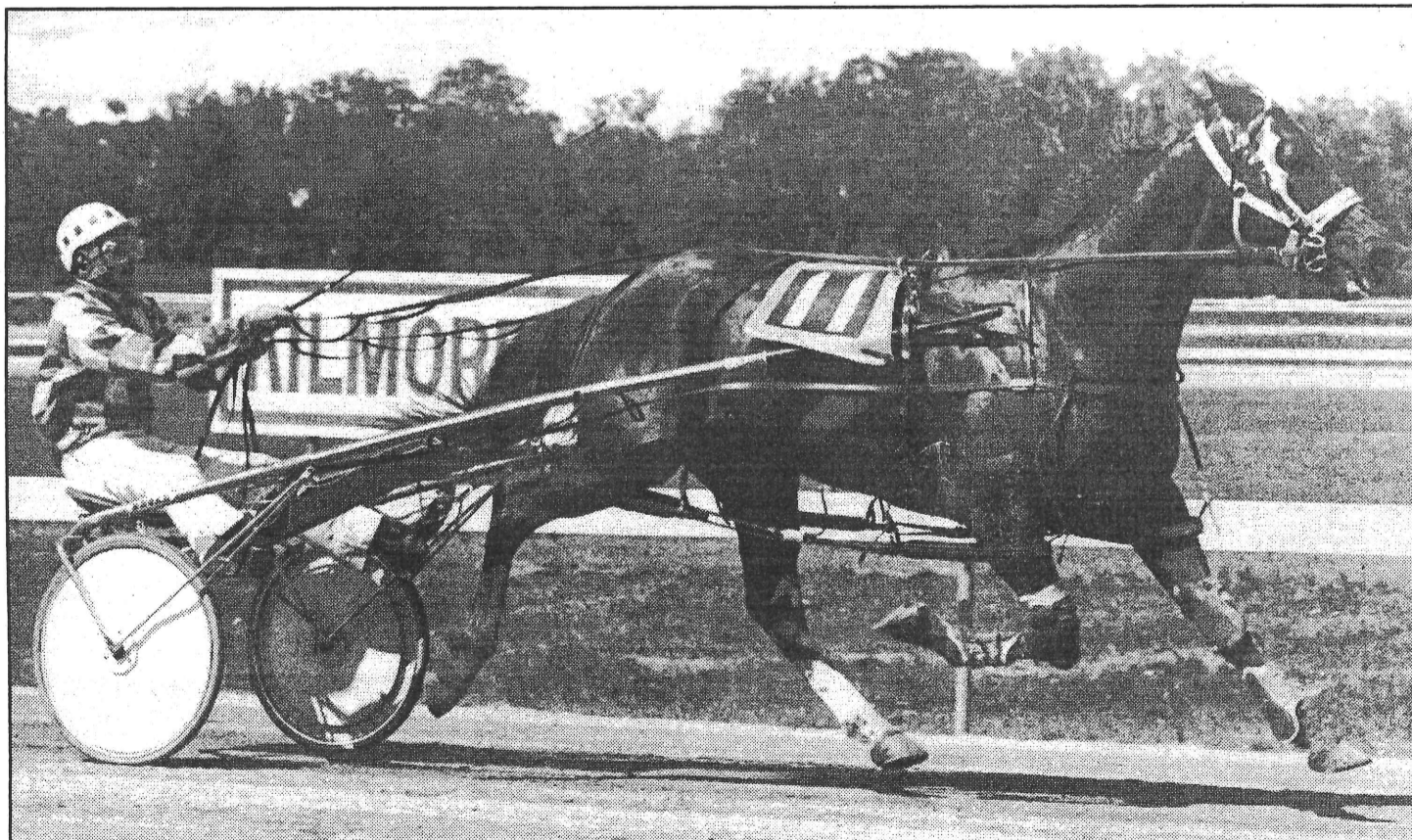
Sugars concedes he was pleasantly surprised with a winning double first up, but is quietly confident his team will be competitive.

"Wils Scooter has won going 1:59 after sitting in the 'death,' while Penny Park can run two minutes and sprint home when sat up in the field," he said.

Sugars' cause for optimism was further enhanced a couple of weeks later when he returned home from Hamilton with another successful double after Wils Scooter continued on his winning way and the trotter Dondo took out the opening event.

Son Greg piloted Wils Scooter and, later that night at Geelong, completed a big day when he steered home an inaugural double for Bacchus Marsh trainer Greg Carr with Miss Tina and Serenas A Hit.

"It's all a new adventure for us and we will give it our best shot over the next 12 months and see what happens," Ross declared.



POPULAR PORT proved too strong for his rivals when he recorded an effortless win in the 1987 Kilmore Pacing Cup.