

## HARNESS RACING

Sokyola provides a happy ending for jinxed trainer

## JUSTICE AT LAST



**Matt STEWART**

A WEEK before the *Seabiscuit* movie hit our cinemas during the spring racing carnival, SBS screened a documentary on the horse that omitted the Hollywood fantasy touch.

Except for one part. It's the bit when the wily, old trainer Tom Smith first set eyes on his champion.

Seabiscuit, a raggy-looking thing who hadn't won a race in 30-odd starts, walked past Smith at the track one morning. The horse, who according to the narrator never cast a glance at anyone, stopped, blinked and gawked at Smith.

Gushing, the narrator whispered: Smith looked into Seabiscuit's eyes. Seabiscuit looked back. Smith knew he'd found his champion.

For non-racing folk who went all misty, this guff was believable.

For people who have lived the racing rollercoaster, this eyes-met-across-the-running-rail story was utter fantasy.

No horse has ever winked his way into a stable, especially not a broken-down maiden. Smith ended up with Seabiscuit because the horse, understandably, was bloody cheap.

Racing fairytale stories are about as common as horses with wings, although leading harness racing trainer Lance Justice might argue differently.

If Sokyola isn't a fairytale horse, he's darn close. He's been the perfect horse, at the perfect time, for Justice.

Three years ago, Justice, 45, decided to leave Adelaide, where he'd been champion trainer/driver for 15 straight seasons, and set up shop in the big smoke.

His younger brother John, who had made the move to Melbourne four years earlier, had been a runaway success, highlighted by Shakamaker's 2000 Inter Dominion victory in Melbourne a month before Lance packed his bags.

Justice knew he needed a great horse to justify the move.

"I've known blokes who have trained for 50 years. None of them has had a great horse. They're almost impossible to find," Justice said.

A mate in New Zealand told Justice of a youngster who'd won a couple of trials at Invercargill, at the bottom of the South Island.

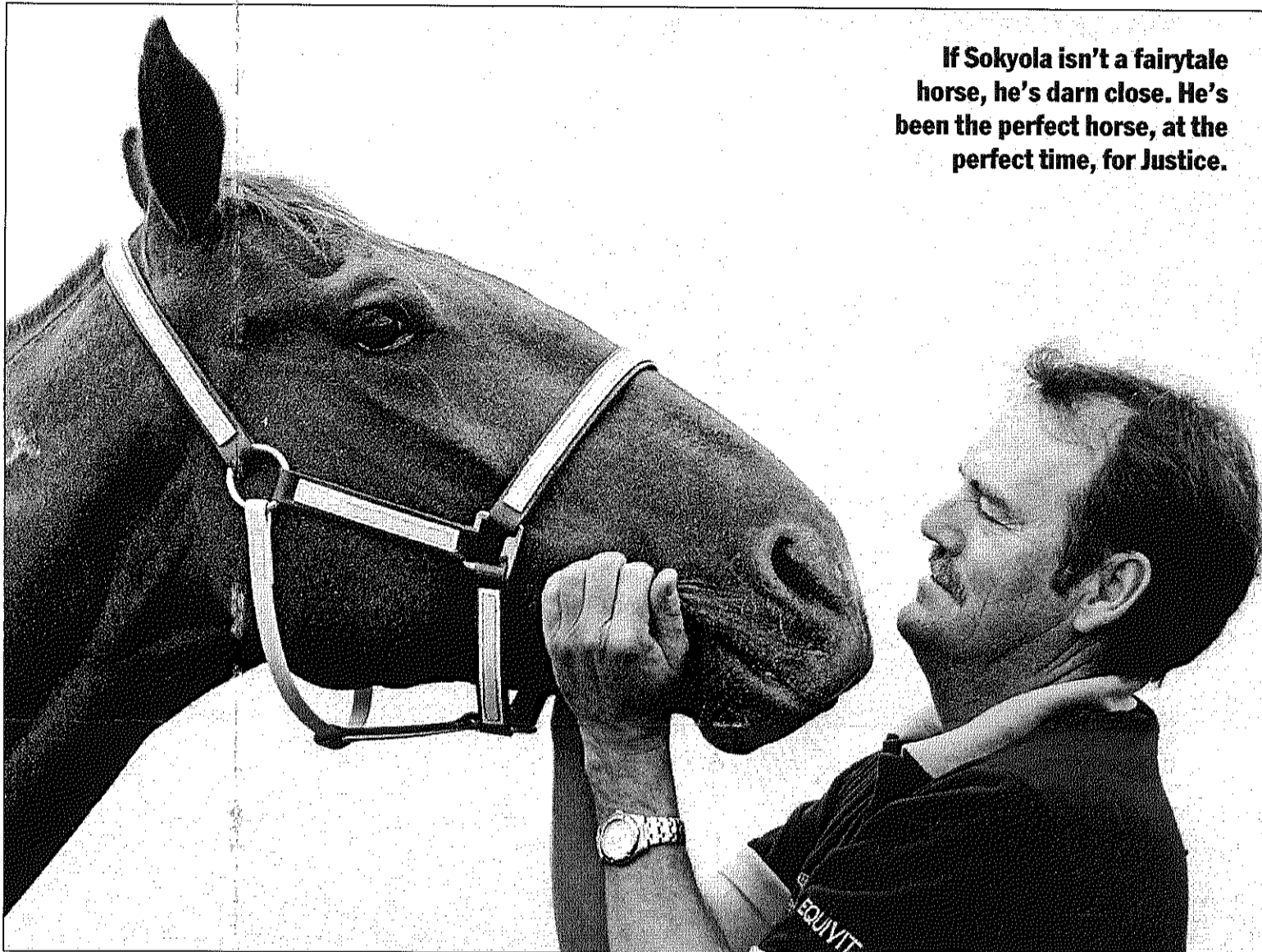
Justice jumped on a plane. The next morning he trialed the horse, whose maiden win the day before was given a rave review in the local newspaper.

Justice jogged the horse a lap right-handed, and one left.

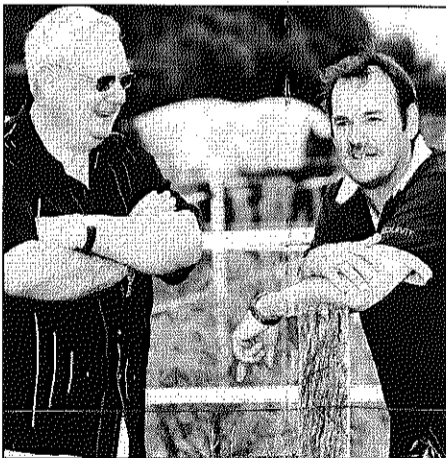
It sounds like a Seabiscuit snippet. But after one brief try-out, just two lazy laps, Justice knew he'd found the horse to justify the Melbourne move.

In another fairytale, the Kiwis didn't up the ante when Justice offered just \$50,000 on behalf of long-time client Colin Croft, who raced champion 1970s pacer Markovina.

"You just know sometimes. He gave me this great feel.



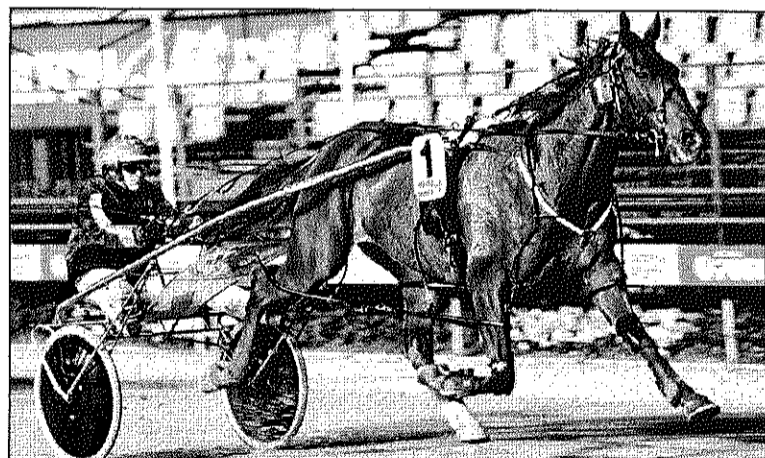
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**ABOVE:** Sokyola has been the best thing that has happened to Lance Justice since he moved to Melbourne.

**RIGHT:** Sokyola wins the VHRC Classic at Moonee Valley for stand-in driver Jodi Quinlan.

**LEFT:** owner Colin Croft and Lance Justice (right) have formed a handy partnership. Pictures: IAN CURRIE



There was just something about him. I knew he was the horse I was looking for," Justice said.

No eye contact, no wink, just a great feel.

The next day Justice trialed a quartet of far more expensive horses. "None felt as good as my bloke," he said. "I even cancelled a flight to make sure the deal was done."

Before Sokyola earned his keep, the once super-dominant stable seemed cursed.

Sokyola won his first start by a street in Adelaide. On pulling up, his two front legs blew up like balloons.

Justice feared the horse had "blown" two tendons. It was merely a skin infection, but there was trouble on other fronts.

Once settled at Melton, Justice's first two runners were placed, a good start.

The next night he took four to Ballarat. They couldn't keep up.

"Then things went crazy. All my horses, who were not good enough anyway, kept drawing (badly) barrier seven.

Desperate, Justice rang Harness Racing Victoria.

"I knew the draws weren't rigged, but I just couldn't see how horses could always draw the worst barriers," he said.

Drawing badly is one thing. Drawing badly with slow, sick horses is another.

The bore water on the property was high in calcium and nitrate. "The horses were pissing all the time and tiring really badly in their races."

The problem was eventually fixed, but there was more. The first three months Justice was in Melton, it poured. Work transforming the farm into a training centre came to a halt. The training track was flooded. Staff were impossible to find.

"I kept saying, 'Calm down, things will pick up'. For a long time they didn't," Justice said.

Justice thought his luck would change at Bendigo one night. He had a certainty running. The meeting was washed out. Halfway to Bendigo, Justice turned the float around.

One day he took a team to Yarra Valley and got lost, adding two hours to the 90-minute trip. He followed a local home to Rockbank. The local also got lost.

"That was the final straw. I remember running out the back at home, yelling 'I've had enough!' at the top of my lungs. It was affecting my relationship (with wife Diane)," he said.

"If I hadn't sold up at home, I'd have seriously thought of going back to Adelaide. But then pride kicked in."

The rains eventually cleared, the property was mowed and banded into shape, the barrier marble started falling Justice's way, and Sokyola came back into work.

Sokyola's legs were fine, but the horse's throat was making a "funny" whistling noise. It had done so for years and hadn't stopped Sokyola winning races.

"But you knew there was something wrong. His heart rate was always through the roof after a race because of the throat problem. If I'd got it fixed, I knew he'd be a far better horse," Justice said.

The operation was risky. Horses die under anaesthetic.

"It's like sending your kid off to hospital," Justice said.

In another Seabiscuit moment, Sokyola survived the operation late last year and came back a superstar.

He was a good thing beaten first-up, then remained unbeaten for seven months, winning three country cups, two features in Queensland, the Legends Mile and more than \$500,000 in prizemoney.

"He ran 1:54 in the Miracle

Mile and didn't know he'd had a race. At the presentation he had a huge grin on his face. He felt like the king of the world," Justice said.

Life has turned right around for Justice since the doldrums of 2000, thanks largely to one heroic horse.

Will the Sokyola fairytale continue in tomorrow night's Victoria Cup at Moonee Valley, the race Justice's father Dudley won in 1955 with Illawarra Wrack?

Being racing, and not a *Seabiscuit* movie, there is a major Victoria Cup hurdle; one that even Sokyola might not clear.

Justice knows all about bad barriers, and Sokyola has a shocker, 13.

"You need a really good horse to win the Victoria Cup, and you probably need a very good, even great horse to win from 13," he said.

"Hopefully Sokyola is good enough to do it."