



HE'S NO FAKE

Blacks A Fake is far and away the best horse in the southern hemisphere with \$1.8 million in earnings to prove it. And he's a publicist's dream to boot. By Neale Donnelley • Photos by Jenny Barnes



The Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia. Huge, white sandy beaches, gorgeous women, never-ending nightlife. It is truly one of the best holiday destinations anywhere in the world.

Here there are lots of theme parks,

like Movie World, and just out the back of the Gold Coast is a children's fantasy Park, called Tambourine Mountain.

Tambourine, a little place not known for much else apart from 'the Mountain', is also home to a plain Standardbred

gelding called Blacks A Fake.

And wherever 'Blackie' is, it's a fair bet 29 year-old Natalie Rasmussen won't be too far away.

You see, this amazingly unlikely duo has hit the big time at the elite level of

HE'S NO FAKE

harness racing in Australia.

To put it in simple terms, Blacks A Fake and his attractive trainer and driver, have won almost \$1.7 (Aus) million in the past 12 months.

For Natalie Rasmussen, it has been a dream that only horse people can understand, yet the tangible proof is there every day for her to see.

In May last year, precisely one month after Blacks A Fake won the \$1.5 million Inter Dominion Final in Hobart, Natalie and her partner, prominent trainer-driver Grant Dixon, bought a 62 acre property at Tambourine. It didn't have much on it apart from a couple of cottages in need of serious repair, and a lot of potential.

That Inter Dominion was famous for being the richest open age harness race run anywhere in the world that year. Yet it became even more famous for the dynamic duo who captured the \$900,000 first prize cheque.

For as long as anyone in this country can remember, Queensland has been a battling harness racing state. It simply did not produce Group 1 horses to contest the Grand Circuit.

But that has changed, due most significantly to the introduction of now super sire, Fake Left, the Little Brown Jug winner of 1992. Fake Left died two years ago, but his influence in not only Queensland, but Australia-wide, has been nothing short of staggering.

In the past two Grand Circuit seasons, Queensland has produced more top class Grand Circuit horses than any other state,

and almost all of them are either by Fake Left, or out of a Fake Left mare. Not surprisingly, Blacks A Fake is by Fake Left, but he's certainly no fake!

Clearly the best pacer in the southern hemisphere, Blacks A Fake now has the imposing record of 39 starts, 29 wins, and earnings of \$1,897,571.

Like most great stories in the world of sport, they emanate from humble beginnings, and the Natalie Rasmussen/Blacks A Fake tale is no different.

Nat's father, Vic, is a carpenter by trade, and he and Nat's mother, Cheryl, were both originally from Victoria.

In 1974 they decided to head north to a provincial town called Townsville, where they settled to raise a family.

Although a builder by trade, Vic Rasmussen always trained and drove a few pacers, something he enjoyed as a hobby, and was quite successful.

Some years later the family moved to a place called Rosewood, near Ipswich, just outside metropolitan Brisbane, where Vic continued his life as a builder and part-time trainer-driver.

Nat has fond memories of her early years at Rosewood.

"We would always help Mum and Dad with the horses. We had chores to do, and we were involved in eventing and show-jumping as kids. And we were right into the mini-trotters, I loved them," Rasmussen said.

It wasn't long before the Rasmussen family was again on the move, this time buying the old Egmont Park Stud property



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at Caboolture, just outside Brisbane, and this is where the Blacks A Fake story starts to take shape.

By this time, Vic was spending less time building and a lot more time with his horses, as were his daughters Kylie and Natalie.

Stable client Ron Pointer took Vic to see three yearlings he had in a paddock. He decided to try them all and a there-way partnership between Vic, Ron and another stable supporter, Trevor Titcombe, was formed.

One of these yearlings was an unnamed Fake Left colt, who was broken-in by Kylie, as "one of hers to do that year. We all had yearlings to break in and he was one of hers."

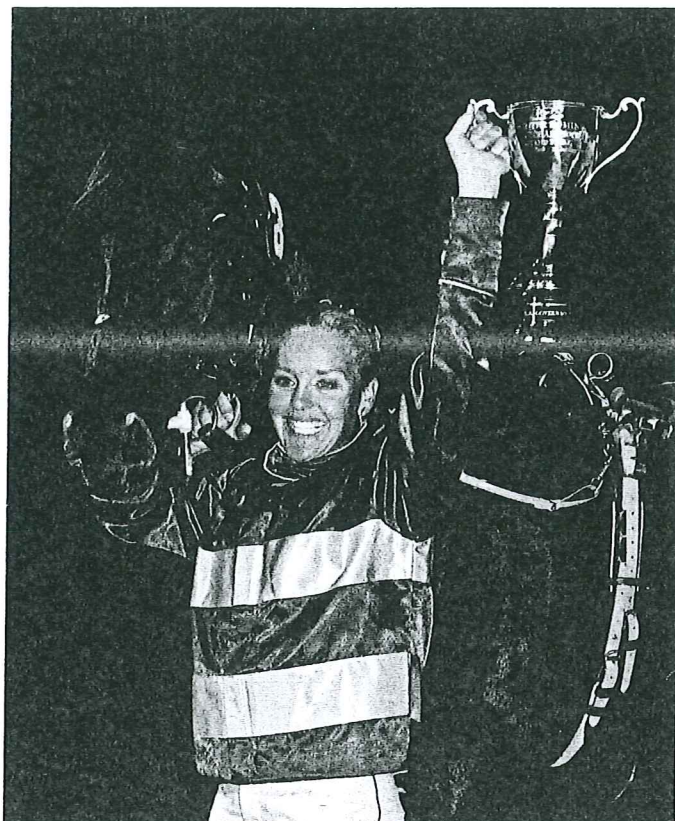
After being broken he was named Blacks A Fake, and moved into Natalie's care, where she had nothing but trouble with him as a young horse.

"He took three preparations to pace properly. He was always jumping out of his gear and running off the track at home. We always thought he had ability but he was a rat-bag, and I remember thinking if we took him off our place he might turn it around," Nat recalled.

"We went to the trials at Redcliffe and he absolutely flew. I said then he was the best horse I had ever driven."

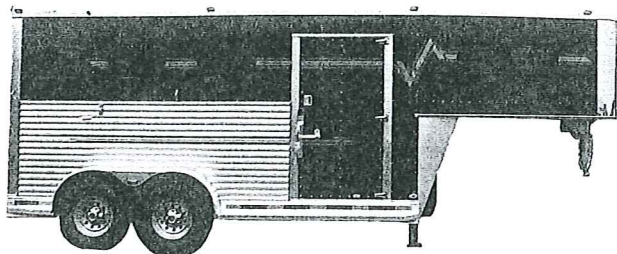
Blacks A Fake went to the races for the first time at the Gold Coast on August 3, 2003, winning a two-year-old maiden in a slick 1:58.7 (they time in tenths), earning \$1,977.

The small crowd there that day had no idea they had seen an emerging superstar. Indeed, Natalie was thrilled the unruly



Natalie Rasmussen became the first female trainer/driver to win the coveted Inter Dominion when she and Blacks A Fake took last year's \$1.5 million event. They repeated that victory in the 2007 version and will attempt to become just the second team to win three Inter-Doms next March.

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'rat-bag with ability', had simply behaved himself.

He had just four starts as a two-year-old, winning three of them, but it was as a three-year-old he came back a serious racehorse.

From eight starts he won seven, the last of those a stunning win over a horse called Slipnslide in the Queensland Triad Final (Sires Stakes), but there was to be a dark side to that then career highlight.

While Slipnslide went on for the next 18 months establishing himself as one of the best and richest four and five-year-olds in Australia, Blacks A Fake kept himself occupied in a lonely paddock, recovering from the start of a curb in a hock.

"He wasn't lame but he started to get a curb and we left him out for a full 12 months. It was hard at the time, but now looking back it has probably been the best thing we ever did," Nat noted.

He won that Sires Final on May 15, 2004, yet didn't race again until October 28, 2005. When he did come back, a star was quickly born.

He won his first six starts, some in fast time, and Rasmussen was quickly on the road to Melbourne to find out just how good 'Blackie' was.

Just out of metropolitan-maiden class and having not seen a Grand Circuit horse, Blacks A Fake was entered for the

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Tasmanian Inter Dominion the following March/April, "because everyone who has a horse that can run at all enters for the Inter Dominion," Rasmussen explained.

So, Blacks A Fake hits Melbourne having won 16 of 18 starts, but in a strong race gets beaten at his first start there after racing wide.

In fact, he is defeated in his first three starts in Melbourne, but his fourth, on A.G. Hunter Cup Day (the biggest day of the year) in a \$25,000 Free For All, Blacks A Fake sits parked and dominates a very good field.

"That was a defining day because it was only a matter of weeks before the Inter Dominion was due to start and he really put it together that day. We decided to go to Tasmania after Hunter Cup day, and went with some confidence he'd be a pretty serious player," Nat said.

What happened down in Hobart during that two week series saw this gelded son of Fake Left stamp himself the best horse in the land, against the

best the southern hemisphere could gather.

Even Brett Pelling, who imported two US horses, Cams Fool and Articulator for the series, couldn't get close to 'Blackie'.

On Final night, April 2, 2006, with \$1.5 million on the line, Natalie Rasmussen became the only female to train and/or drive an Inter Dominion winner.

Blacks A Fake started as the favourite that night and earned \$900,000 for Vic and Cheryl Rasmussen, Trevor Titcombe, and Catherine Pointer (Ron now deceased), and rewrote harness racing's record books.

It propelled a previously unknown young blond woman into the headlines, and had once again stamped Fake Left as a breed-changing influence in this country.

The five-year-old went straight to the paddock, his connections excited about the following season's Grand Circuit with the horse the whole industry now called 'Blackie'.

He returned in mid-July, won a \$30,000 feature at Albion Park, then two starts later the \$75,000 Winter Cup, before contracting a virus which stopped the campaign.

"It was tough for him and for us with the Grand Circuit races coming up and we couldn't work him. We just had to wait until the virus was gone."

Queensland's pin-up pacer missed several interstate features, but made it to Sydney for the Miracle Mile carnival. There were still question marks about his fitness level, and indeed, his form.

The now six-year-old came from last to finish second to fellow Queenslander, Be Good Johnny (by Fake Left) in the \$600,000 Miracle Mile, before a week later leading throughout in the \$100,000 Treuer Memorial at Bankstown, outside Sydney.

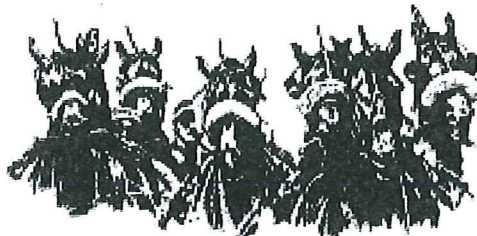
'Blackie' was back and he headed to Melbourne for the \$300,000 Victoria Cup, the premier mobile event for open pacers there.

Again he led from the gate and again he won, adding another \$210,000



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to his rapidly growing bank balance.

All the while, Natalie and Grant were making significant improvements to their property at Tambourine which was rapidly becoming "the place that 'Blackie' built."

Despite the fact that this year's Inter Dominion series was being run across Victoria and South Australia, Rasmussen decided, virtually at the last minute, that she would start Blacks A Fake.

He was beaten into fifth place on the opening night at Moonee Valley, in Melbourne, from a back-line draw, then finished second to Be Good Johnny in his second heat (mile-rating 1:54.9 for the 1,800 metres) on the half-mile track.

After that they didn't see him as he destroyed his rivals in the third heat, then in the \$500,000 Inter Dominion Final, after drawing inside the second-row, Blacks A Fake gave them all a comprehensive beating.

Rasmussen sent him around the field to park outside the leader with a mile to

go, and he simply out-stayed the best pacers from across Australia and New Zealand.

For Natalie, the Adelaide win was far more significant than the first in Hobart.

"The first one was better for the pocket, but the second one gave me far greater satisfaction. He had to come around them all and do it hard and tough. He had to prove he was the best horse to win."

The Inter Dominion has been conducted since 1936. In that time only one horse has won three Finals – Our Sir Vancelot – winning in 1997, 1998 and 1999.

He was trained and driven by "Mr. Inter Dominion," the great horseman Brian Hancock, a man who has either trained or driven six Inter Dominion winners.

For Rasmussen, this piece of history is something she will concentrate this entire coming 12 months to achieve – a three-peat of the Inter Dominion.


It could be a season where a never-ending array of records will be broken, not the least of those becoming Australia's highest stakes earner. That mantle is currently held by Shakamaker at \$2,229,634.

"It would be lovely to win three in a row. The history of this great race means so much and to think we could be part of it. It's just something else, a little surreal," Rasmussen mused.

The day of this interview was the same day Nat pulled 'Blackie' out of his paddock and back into work.

"It's been seven weeks now. He's just huge so his holiday is over. Our plan will be the Grand Circuit races here in October, Sydney (Miracle Mile) in November, Melbourne (Victoria Cup) in December, then the Inter Dominion (Melbourne) in March. That's the one I really want.

"I'll just be happy to get there.

"Whatever happens he'll be a chance come the Inter – he's a darn good horse!" 

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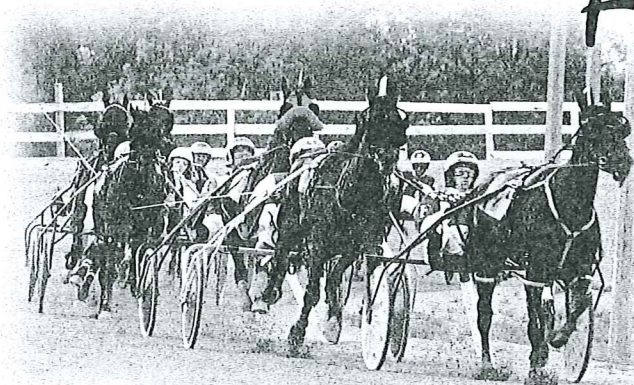
Aug. 30 – Trillium 3-year-old filly trot

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