

Trigger's final shot

EXCLUSIVE
By PAUL COURTS

LEANING against a fence pole, coffee in hand, Lance Justice stops and ponders the latest in a string of questions as he observes his retiring star Smoken Up relaxing in a paddock.

In the midst of a 'farewell tour', Smoken Up, or Trigger as he is affectionately-known, will make his final racing appearance at Tabcorp Park Melton on September 6 – five days after turning 12!

As for the question that has Justice pausing... "What was the greatest moment with Smoken Up?"

With so many to choose from, it's only natural for Justice to take his time to provide a calculated, precise answer.

After all, Smoken Up has claimed 13 Group Ones across Australasia, won at 15 tracks and set numerous records, including becoming the first standardbred in the Southern Hemisphere to better 1:50.

Further to his 1:48.5 success at Tabcorp Park Menangle, Smoken Up has registered an additional 73 victories and 54 placings from 150 starts for earnings of \$3,606,635.

"The greatest moment with Smoken Up was the moment we were able to secure him for the stable," Justice said.

"Had we not bought him for clients of the stable we wouldn't be standing here having this conversation.

"Since then he has proven to be a champion, won so many top races, set so many records and earned more than three-and-a-half million dollars.

"But all that is just a bonus after we were fortunate enough to have bought him in the first place."

Beginning his career in New Zealand, the son of Tinted Cloud finished fourth on debut at Cambridge as a four-year-old on August 31, 2006.

His maiden win came four starts later when accounting for Tinkerbella and Kamwood Boy at Cambridge on November 26.

With a win and four placings the result of his next five outings, the promising pacer caught the eye of a visiting Justice.

After successfully acquiring the light-raced gelding, Justice made no secret of the fact he had found a certain replacement for his ageing pacer, dual Miracle Mile winner, Sokyola.

Triumphant at 78 of his 161 starts, Sokyola bowed out of racing on a winning note at Moonee Valley on June 22, 2007.

Smoken Up had raced nine times for Justice by then and was unbeaten for his new connections.

"Smoken Up was bought on the thought he was a nice horse, but it didn't take long after I got him to my stable to realise he was something special," Justice said.

"When I said he was ready to take over from Sokyola, which was close to retiring, people thought I was mad or overstating his potential.

"But I knew what he could do at home and just how special he was...it was just a matter of time before everyone caught on."

Fast forward seven years and Justice is again set to retire a stable star and hoping for a 'fairytale ending'.

"I haven't made it public yet, and will in the next few days, but September 6 will be his last race," Justice declared.

"I may be hoping for too much, but I would like nothing better than to see him go out with a win like good old Sokyola did.

"But that's in the hands of the draw and the racing Gods I guess."

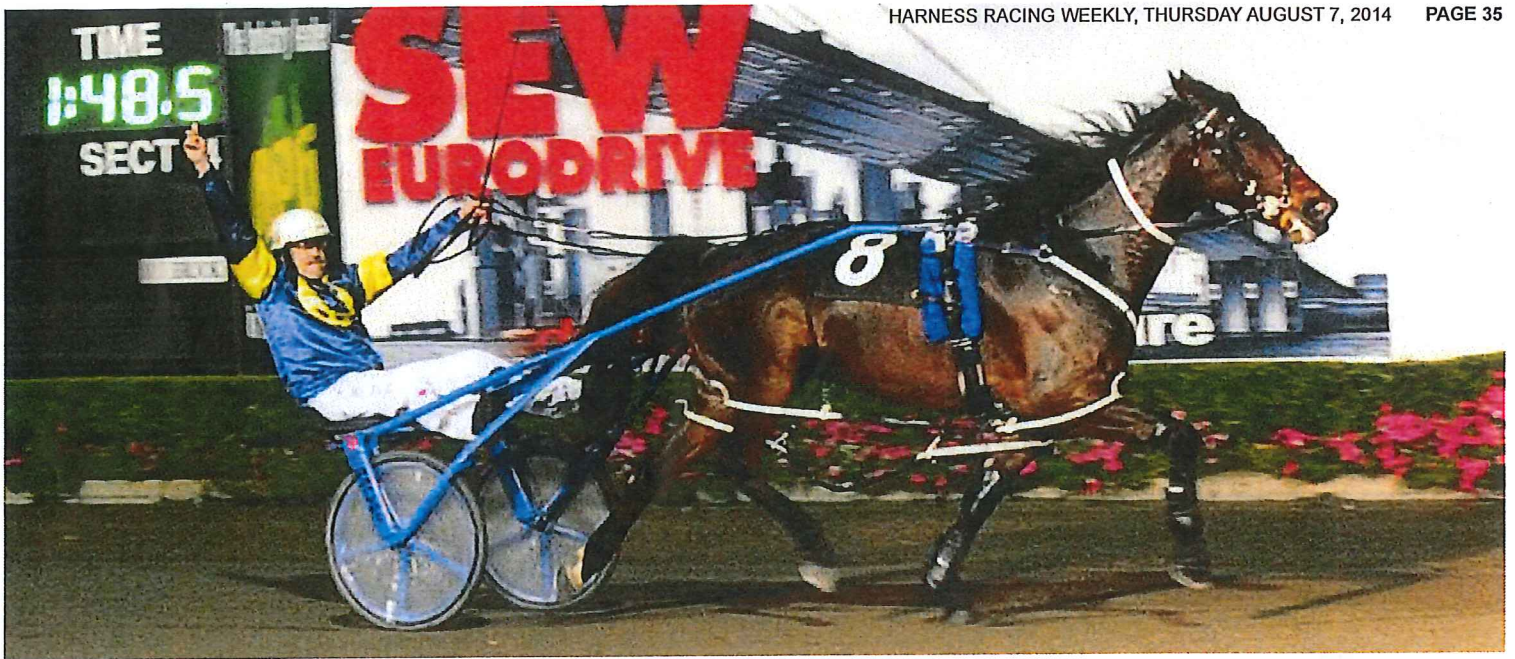
While time will tell if fate – and a touch of luck – has been kind to Smoken Up during his last race, it has been the gelding's grit and determination which have carried him to numerous memorable victories.

After making a rapid transition through the grades, Smoken Up made his Grand Circuit debut in the Victoria Cup on December 15.

Leading the field 50 metres from the finish, Smoken Up was grabbed in the shadows of the post by Robin Hood.

Much to Justice's dismay and frustration that was the beginning of several near-misses for the unlucky Smoken Up.

LANCE JUSTICE spends time with Smoken Up as he contemplates the champion's career and pending retirement



Although he won top shelf events such as the Len Smith Mile and South Australia Cup, Smoken Up had a string of narrow defeats in several majors.

Developing into a 'bridesmaid', Smoken Up ran second in the Miracle Mile, Len Smith Mile, Victoria, A G Hunter and South Australia Cups during the next two years.

Smoken Up's Grand Circuit seconds consisted of being beaten by a metre, half-head, metre-and-a-half, neck, metre and a half-neck.

It is amazing how five metres can make a difference, not only in the win tally, but the stakes.

Smoken Up's seconds earned him \$272,694...not an amount to scoff at...however, the winners collected \$1,186,107, or an extra \$237,221.40 per metre!

He also finished third in two Inter Dominion Finals - beaten three-and-a-half and six metres by Blacks A Fake on both occasions, and third in the New Zealand Cup.

Justice admits the "period was one of frustration."

"He was running top races in all the majors, but kept getting beaten," Justice said.

"While I was happy with him and the runs he was putting in, that period was one of frustration.

"From those figures you just told me, a metre here and there makes the difference of him having an extra million in the bank.

"I'm glad I didn't do the math back then as I may have gone nuts."

Following his third in the 2010 Inter Dominion at Menangle, Smoken Up went on a rampage, winning six of his next seven starts before being taken across the Tasman.

Luck avoided the Aussie duo yet again at Grand Circuit level as Smoken Up finished second in the New Zealand Cup and third in the New Zealand Free-For-All.

Much to Justice's delight, Smoken Up then completed an overdue win at the highest level when he captured the SEW-Eurodrive Miracle Mile at Menangle in November 2010.

"I'd won two Miracle Miles with Soykyla, but it was all the more satisfying with Smoken Up given all the close calls he'd had," Justice said.

"If any horse had paid his dues and was deserving of a win on the Grand Circuit it was him."

Luckless again in the Victoria Cup a fortnight later, Smoken Up was taken across the border for his second South Australia Cup triumph.

In doing so Smoken Up became just the sixth campaigner to complete multiple wins in the feature since its inception in 1939.

The elite fraternity includes Bandbox, Minor Derby, Young Pedro, Gammalite and Westburn Grant.

Continuing his sensational form to become Australasia's premier pacer, Smoken Up won 19 of his next 22 starts during a dominant 13-month period.

His victories included the Len Smith Mile in a Southern Hemisphere record 1:48.5.

"When he went 1:48.5 I doubt there was a pacer in the world who could have beaten him," Justice said.

"He was just an animal on the track and wanted nothing more than to run a quick time.

"It's hard to explain, but he pretty much had a mind of his own as if he knew he was out there to do something special.

"Time records are always made to be broken, but he will remain the first horse to better 1:50 in Australia for eternity."

Smoken Up's reign of terror also saw him capture a second Miracle Mile, a third South

Australia Cup, the Victoria Cup and make a clean sweep of the heats during two Inter Dominions.

To Justice's dismay, one of Smoken Up's victories - the Inter Dominion Final - was wiped from his record, while a mistake proved costly in the Inter Dominion decider.

Being stripped of the New Zealand Inter Dominion remains the lowest point of Justice's association with Smoken Up.

"Being robbed of the Inter Dominion is still something I don't like to think, or talk about," Justice said.

"It was gut wrenching then and is gut wrenching now.

"It's the worst time I've had with him and will be my worst time in harness racing in general.

"Then in Western Australia he was in a zone when he won his three heats despite his discomfort around Gloucester Park, but unfortunately he chose the Final in which to make a mistake and cost himself a win."

In between his Inter Dominion campaigns, Smoken Up was taken back to the Shaky Isles, where he finished third in the Cup and won the Free-For-All.

While New Zealand remains the scene of Justice's biggest disappointment, it is also the setting of the strangest moment the multiple premiership winner has experience within the industry.

During Smoken Up's warm up before the Cup, a woman made her way on to the track and began to strip as Smoken Up approach, with club officials laughing as she looked on.

"I couldn't believe what I was seeing," Justice said.

"Here I am taking the horse through his preliminary and a woman races onto the track and starts stripping as we pass.

"She wasn't shy either. She took her top straight off and revealed the lot.

"When people saw the pictures they didn't believe me they were real and thought I superimposed her on the track."

A month after his Western Australian Inter Dominion campaign, Smoken Up was back at Menangle for another Len Smith Mile win...his fourth from five editions of the Group One.

Racing in his usual strong manner during the next few months, Smoken Up then completed his fourth success in the South Australia Cup.

Only Gammalite, with five wins between 1981 and 1985, has a better record in the time-honoured feature.

"That last SA Cup win sticks out in my mind as was headed by Caribbean Blaster, a horse half his age, on the home turn, but fought back along the straight to score by two metres," Justice said.

"Even I thought he was done and had resolved to run second, but he had other ideas and came again. Here he is as a 10-year-old showing that kind of fight."

A battling fifth in the Ballarat Cup a week later, Smoken Up was then sidelined for six months as a result of niggling problems, but was back in the winners' circle by October despite celebrating his 11th birthday a month earlier.

Six weeks later, the 'grey beard' bettered 1:50 for the second time by securing the Cordina Sprint at his favourite track - Menangle.

"Another super night with him," Justice said.

"I've taken him as a washed-up 11-year-old to

Menangle and he's run the third fastest time in Australasian history to win the Cordina Sprint.

"It was only third time 1:50 had been beaten on this side of the world and he did it twice."

For the record, For A Reason stopped the clock at 1:49.4 at Menangle three weeks earlier.

Despite his tired legs finding it increasingly difficult to stave off the fast finishes of his younger rivals, Smoken Up has managed seven wins and 11 placings from 24 starts this season for earnings of \$240,333.

The latest victory coming at Globe Derby last Sunday when the 'Melton Marvel' rated 1:57 for the 2230 metres, with his time just six-tenths of a second outside Franco Heir's track record established during the 2007 Inter Dominion!

"He'll be 12 in a month and he's come out and run one of the quickest times seen at Globe Derby over 2200 metres," Justice said.

"I didn't go out there looking to give him a hard run, but in hindsight, if I pushed a bit more I reckon he could have broken the record."

It was a fitting farewell for a campaigner which has made Globe Derby his 'adopted home'.

Justice is hoping for a similar farewell at Melton next month.

"I just hope he draws to lead," Justice said.

"He hasn't had a good draw for a long time and is due for one.

"If he can find the front then I'm sure he can hold them off, but if he has to work hard then he's open to the outsprinted.

"Regardless of where he finishes at his last start, he has given us an amazing ride and it's been an honour to have been the person who has experienced the journey with him."



OFFICIALS watch on as a track invader strips for Lance Justice as he puts Smoken Up through his paces ahead the New Zealand Cup, providing Justice with 'the strangest moment' of his time within harness racing.