

HOMETOWN HERO

SHAYNE Cramp is on the verge of creating history tonight as he strives to become the first local trainer to win the Mildura Pacing Cup. *Daily* sports chief MATT TAYLOR spent a morning with the state's leading harness trainer at his Merbein South stables on the eve of his Cup quest.

Cramp's shot

HISTORY beckons for Shayne Cramp tonight.

The 30-year-old is on the cusp of becoming the first local trainer to win the Mildura Pacing Cup.

According to Mildura Harness Racing Club records, no local trainer has won the Cup since it was first run in 1957.

Cramp said a Cup win had been "a goal of mine for my whole career."

"It would be such a great thrill to be the first local trainer to win the Cup," he said as he took a break from morning work with the 30 horses at his Mildura South stables.

"It really has been my focus for a long time."

Cramp will have two runners -

Washington Heritage and Maastrich - in tonight's Cup final.

Stable star Washington Heritage tasted defeat for the first time in 14 starts when he finished second to Flaming Flutter in the second Cup heat on Tuesday night.

Maastrich placed third in the same race.

Washington Heritage has the "potentially awkward" draw of seven for the Cup final.

He will start behind Maastrich, who has drawn the pole.

Cramp said he remained confident that both of his runners would perform well at the City Oval Paceway tonight.

"Washington Heritage and Maastrich both pulled up well from

their heat on Tuesday," Cramp said.

"I was half hoping Washington Heritage would get beaten. It now takes the pressure off maintaining the winning streak going into the final."

He said he was expecting a fast-run Cup.

"With the speed likely to be on early, it is a potentially awkward draw for Washington Heritage," he said.

"So with my race tactics, I'll be just summing it up as I go along."

The main dangers tonight are likely to include the Greg Sugars-driven Flaming Flutter, who is set to start favourite, and Melton pacer Machin Out, winner of the first Cup heat for Lance Justice.



CHARIOT AWAITS: Shayne Cramp works one of his horses on his Merbein South property.
Picture: Luke Birch

HOMETOWN HERO

at history in Pacing Cup



DREAM RESULT: Shayne Cramp could become the first local trainer to ever win the Mildura Pacing Cup. Picture: Luke Birch

Cramp's journey to top

A PIVOTAL moment in Shayne Cramp's rise to the top of Victoria's harness-racing training ranks occurred during a trip to New Zealand in 2003.

Cramp was in the Land of the Long White Cloud for the Australasian Young Drivers' Championship as Victoria's representative.

It was there he had a "lengthy chat" with the Western Australian representative Gary Hall Jr, whose father is the leading trainer in WA.

Cramp, who had been based at his father Greg's Mildura South stables since 1996, was offered the opportunity to join the Hall set-up in Perth.

He duly accepted it.

"Gary and I had a good chat about things, and, as I was driving more professionally and started having some success, I decided to challenge myself and make the move to Perth," Cramp said.

"It was a really good learning curve for me, in terms of how to best work horses.

"I ended up having about two years over there, and when I came back, I combined what I'd picked up in Perth with Dad's experience, and it has worked pretty well since then."

With the new place, we can build the right tracks, build the right stables to accommodate more horses, and employ a few more workers

Secret of his success

ONE of the key points Cramp picked up from Hall Snr was training horses in beach-like soft sand.

"There's no doubt that's been a big factor in our success," Cramp said. "The way our horses race, they are tough and very fit because of our training methods."

Greg Cramp, who is now the foreman and "occasional driver" for Shayne, said he took some time to be convinced of the soft-sand training system.

"Shayne learnt a hell of a lot more over there than he did with me," Greg, 56, said.

"They train them a lot harder; it's a different style of training. They call them Sandgropers, and for good reason," he added with a laugh, "because they train the horses

in a foot-deep of sand.

"And they use these sulkies which are that heavy, you can hardly lift them.

"At our property, we've got something similar to them with the river sand.

"It took a while to work it all out, and to be honest, it took me about six months of convincing that the sand system would work. I was concerned that we'd kill 'em. But we'd keep taking the horses to the track and they'd keep winning, so I was converted."

The training track at the Cramp property is similar in size to the City Oval Paceway circuit.

It has the soft, deeper sand on the inside, and much less on the outside for "fast work".

Post-Perth era

SHAYNE says he and his dad "gradually build up the numbers" after he returned to Sunraysia.

"The way we were successful when I came back was turning older horses into better horses," he said. "Now our clients are spending more money on better horses, and it's only getting better."

Shayne is now the leading trainer in Victoria.

He won the 2012/13 premiership with 150-odd winners, and is on course to match that feat this season, which ends on August 31. Before Thursday night's Mildura meeting, he had 88 winners for 2013/14, six ahead of Emma Stewart.

He said the stable's success was "unbelievable".

"It was something I had thought was unattainable from up north here in the state," Shayne, who employs two full-time staff aside from his foreman father, said. "But we've worked hard, and I guess that's paid off."

Dark chapter

IT hasn't been all smooth sailing for Shayne Cramp in his journey to the top.

A year ago, he copped a six-month suspension and \$10,000 fine for foul driving at a Mildura meeting.

Asked how he reflects on this dark chapter in his driving career, he said: "Financially, it hurt me.

"It was something that happened. I put it down to a life experience, I copped it on the chin, and it's onwards and upwards now."

In relation to integrity in harness racing, he said: "In Victoria, it seems to be high on the agenda for HRV (Harness Racing Victoria), and they are enforcing it more and more, which I totally agree with."

Forward focus

CRAMP has just bought a house on about 30 acres at Birdwoodton to set up a "state-of-the-art" training facility.

"It's costing me a fair bit of money, but we'll be setting up a soft training track, getting it like a beach as much as possible, because it's great work for the horses, and it's also good for their feet, which many have issues with," he said.

"With the new place, we can build the right tracks, build the right stables to accommodate more horses, and employ a few more workers.

"We'll go as hard as we can to try to win more premierships and more feature races."

Family life

LIFE off the track is just as rosy for Shayne.

He has been married to Mildura girl Cherie for three years, and has three young children - Charlee, nearly three, Hudson, 18 months, and Preston, 12 weeks.

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Cherie, 24, said she had not been involved with horse racing before meeting Shayne.

"No, I wasn't a horsey person," she said, before adding with a laugh, "but that has changed now."

Shayne was full of praise for his family's "wonderful" support.

"Cherie does a great job with the kids, as well as the grandparents on both sides," he said.

"They have that side of things under control, which allows me to run this business, which is a 24-hour-a-day operation."

Shayne will indeed be all business tonight when he chases his dream of Mildura Pacing Cup glory.

Mildura Pacing Cup night fields, Pages 43-50



ACROSS THE LINE: Shayne Cramp wins Race 4 at Sunraysia Daily Pace with Jamies Boy.