

Pizzuto and Tiger Tara cheat death for shot at glory

HARNES RACING

Chris Roots

Inter Dominion Grand Final

It was a day in August that Kevin Pizzuto will never forget – the day he thought his Inter Dominion dream for Tiger Tara was over. The owner-trainer was taking his star with a couple of other horses to work at Bankstown from his Leppington base when another car went through a stop sign.

“A lady pulled out in front of me, going straight through a stop sign. I T-boned her and the truck smashed into two trees,” Pizzuto said. “I’m still trying to get over it ... I’m really scared of driving. I’m still scared on the road at the moment. Fortunately he pulled through it fine – better than me.”

Tiger Tara could complete a fairytale comeback at Melton on Saturday night less than four months after defying death. He is one of the favourites to win the Inter Dominion Grand Final against the best harness horses Australia and New Zealand has to offer in the most traditional and toughest race on the calendar.

“Every win means the world to me now with him,” Pizzuto said.

“He is all heart, he is like the trainer. I have been to hell and back about 50 times and I keep picking myself up. Some people give up, but I kept going and he has that in him. He doesn’t give in in his races. He is tough and everyone knows it.

“I think he is the best stayer in the country, and he gets the chance to prove it. He is certainly the toughest horse in the race.”

The accident could have been much worse. The 500kg athletes were knocked from their feet. Pizzuto smashed his head into the windshield. Only luck saw the worst injury being a couple of broken ribs to stablehand Karen Crouch, who was in the passenger seat.



When Pizzuto got out of his crumpled truck in the trees with the float next to it, rather than behind it, he found his horses in a distressing state.

“The float actually snapped off. The main thing was to get out of the car and tend to the horses.

They were all laying down flat on their sides underneath the rail,” he recalled. “You don’t want to see any horse like that. All I could see was half their heads. I had four horses on the float and they were all laying down. The others got up pretty quick when I was getting

them out. There were no horse people there to help. I had to lift up bars and drag the horses out from underneath the rail.

“Tiger was the last one. And when I got to him, he wouldn’t get up and I thought he had broken his back. It was heartbreaking.

“All of sudden he got up and my heart started again.”

Tiger Tara remarkably raced again within a month and won the first Grand Circuit race of the season, the Victoria Cup, at Melton only six weeks after the accident.

The crash didn’t stop an

Tough hombre: Inter Dominion hope Tiger Tara with owner-trainer Kevin Pizzuto and, below, the aftermath of the horror crash from which the pair luckily emerged virtually unscathed.

Main photo: Ashlea Brennan

ambitious campaign for Pizzuto and his Tiger. He went to Christchurch and attempted to beat the Kiwis in the biggest race of any code across the Tasman, the New Zealand Cup. Tiger Tara was gallant, a glorious runner-up after working outside the leader for the last mile of the 3200m race, only beaten by Thefixer, which used the sprint lane, not going around a horse, to nose him out.

Pizzuto admits he got it wrong with Tiger Tara in the New Zealand Free For All a couple of days later, where he was an inglorious last.

“I thought he had broken his back. All of sudden he got up and my heart started again.”

“I cut him a heap of grass after the New Zealand Cup and he blew up on it and held too much water,” he said. It is part of the process of learning that Pizzuto has been through since he decided to become a trainer with no background in harness racing.

He has taught himself and worked hard. After years building up, Tiger Tara was his first group 1 winner earlier this year and this campaign is his greatest success.

“Usually it gets passed down through the family. I didn’t have that. I had to work it out and buy horses and try to make them good,” Pizzuto said. “I have worked hard and he is my best.”

Tiger Tara will be having his 99th start in the Inter Dominion Grand Final, another sign of his toughness and durability. He has recorded 81 wins and 37 placings with 18 of those wins coming under Pizzuto’s care. The latest was in the third set of Inter Dominion heats at Cranbourne last Saturday, and it came in trademark style from the front, daring those to run him down.

Tiger Tara will start from the outside of the front row with driver Todd McCarthy, the third prong in the team. There is little doubt he will be in front at some stage.

“Todd knows him and knows what he can do. We have options from out there and I’m sure there will be others looking at what we do,” Pizzuto said. “It is going to be a good race. We are lucky to be there. Maybe we are meant to be there. They will have to beat him.”