

**WE'VE DONE IT:** Spearfelt's win in the 1926 Melbourne Cup was the culmination of a long and tough campaign mapped out by trainer Vin O'Neill (left) and owner Douglas Grant - Spearfelt ran third in 1924 and missed the 1925 Cup because of pneumonia. O'Neill nursed the horse back to health and he and Grant shared the spoils.



# THE CUP

*the characters & the glory*

*The Story of the Melbourne Cup, Australia's Greatest Race* ruled its editor's life for more than a year before it went to the printer. Like life itself, the task combined pleasure and pain.

WORDS STEPHEN HOWELL

**H**ow do you put all the Melbourne Cup races into one book? You can't, of course. You need a library for that because soon after 3pm on the first Tuesday in November this year there will have been 150 Cups run. And there were 20-plus years of evolution in getting to the first running at Flemington, Archer's success in 1861. That's three lifetimes ... or more.

So what you do is tell the Cup story - which is also racing's story, and sport's and society's story, part Melbourne's story, part Victoria's, even Australia's - in a way that brings out its importance in our life, for almost everyone has his or her own Cup tale.

Most know of Archer, although many still believe the early story that he walked from New South Wales to Melbourne, when he travelled by ship. Almost all know of the champion of the depression, Phar Lap, probably through the movie or having seen him stand, stuffed, in the Melbourne Museum. And Makybe Diva's great treble from 2003-05 remains fresh in our memories.

Take this snapshot from *The Story of the Melbourne Cup*:

There has never been a finishing line to define so perfectly a Melbourne Cup as in 2005 - 'A champion becomes a legend'.

Twenty-four hours out from Makybe Diva's tilt at history there was no such line. Caller Greg Miles recalls: "I was doing a preview program on radio and Bruce McAvaney made the comparison with Cathy Freeman's gold medal run in Sydney. He'd thought about that race and had his line ready. Then added: 'I'm sure Greg's got a line.' And it dawned on me: 'I haven't got a line'.

"I agonised all night with three or four floating through my head. But it came to me when I was watching old replays of her. Beforehand my heart was pounding. If it was a photo finish and you're not sure, you can't get it in. The race had to fall a certain way.

"It was just beautiful because when she appeared on the scene it was >



PHOTO: SLICKPIX

McGrath only hoped – they did not know – something big might be brewing. McGrath was more than a race caller; he was a regular at international meetings and was the ideal man on the ground to liaise with European racing people.

Brilliant stories, all, obvious topics for commission, but what about widening the tales to the trainer with five wins, Lee Freedman, whose great-grandfather Midge McLachlan rode three winners? There is also another wonderfully successful family, the Munros, with six winners between them (Darby three and Jim two, both as jockeys, and their father Hugh, one as a trainer). Darby liked a drink, and his second wife Shirley was well aware of this.

“Yes, Darby was certainly the worse for wear when he won the Cup on Russia (in 1946),” Shirley said. “Knowing Darby, I had arranged for us to dine on Cup eve with friends, a Sydney couple who had not had a drink for months and were prepared to have a nice, quiet evening.

“We were driving along St Kilda Road on our way to the restaurant when we had a collision with another car, whose driver was obviously intoxicated.

“Darby, who was driving our car, had not had a single drink. No one was hurt, but Darby decided to go to a house across the street to ring the police. As fate would have it, a Cup-eve party was in full swing at the house and the host, a well-known Melbourne racing man, immediately recognised Darby and invited us all in for a drink.

“Well, the outcome was that Darby and his friend arrived back at the hotel hours later – about 6am – in an advanced state of intoxication.”

Apart from the two miles or, since 1972, 3200 metres, of the great race, the book looks at the great party Australia holds over Cup week each year, bolstered by fashion and celebrity. Looking back, there is the building of Flemington (and how it got its name) and its signature race. And looking every which way there are stories galore, from breeding winners, backing winners (and losers) and those obsessed with owning a winner. Looking skywards, you can't miss Melbourne's weather. It has added to the Cup's character. ➤

apparent she was going to win. I've probably called better races but that's the one I'll be remembered for. I'm just glad I didn't muck it up.”

Of course, Bart, the great trainer J.B. Cummings, is large in our Cup memories. He won his 12th Cup as recently as 2008 and is seeking a 13th this spring just before he turns 83.

Cummings told a devoted audience at Tuesdays at Champions, a series of interviews at the Australian Racing Museum in Melbourne, that he bought his 1966 winner Galilee cheaply as a yearling, “for 3200 guineas, from memory”, because the young horse's front legs were turned in. “(Rival trainer) Tommy Smith told me, ‘Bart, you bought a bloody cripple’,” Cummings said, mimicking Smith's squeaky voice. “After it won the Sydney Cup, I said, ‘That bloody cripple's going all right, Tommy.’” Galilee carried 9st 7lb (60.5kg) to win the Sydney two-miler in the autumn after his Melbourne Cup win with 8st 13lb (56.7kg).

Important in the Cup romance are Harry White and Bobby Lewis, four-times winners as jockeys; and champions Scobie Breasley and George Moore, who did not win the great race.

Then there's Damien Oliver, who brought hardened racegoers to tears when he won the 2002 Cup on Media Puzzle in brother Jason's

riding pants, a week after Jason was killed in a track fall. The movie is in production.

And there is the overseas invasion – that started in 1883 with Martini-Henry from New Zealand, to be built on by “stealth” from the northern hemisphere, then fully disclosed in 1993 when Irishman Dermot Weld brought out Vintage Crop. Of course, there could be another page added to this chapter in the Cup's 150th running. Bruce Clark wrote in the book:

If there was to be a catalytic moment in the internationalisation of the Melbourne Cup, it was in Hong Kong in April 1993 in the now defunct Hilton Hotel. Legendary journalist Jack Elliott was scoffing down breakfast, and sniffing a story. He spotted three familiar faces in the same breakfast room. Sharing bacon and eggs were VRC chairman David Bourke, secretary Rod Johnson and ex-pat race caller Jim McGrath. “What are you bastards up to?” Elliott snorted at Johnson. If you knew Elliott, one of those larger-than-life characters and very large in life as well – he was nicknamed ‘Bulging’ – you can picture the question being snorted. He was the man who had the Melbourne Cup starting time moved forward to suit his newspaper's (The Herald) deadlines.

Elliott's question was left unanswered in Hong Kong because Bourke, Johnson and

**DIVA DOES IT:** Glen Boss gets ready to celebrate as Makybe Diva wins the 2005 Melbourne Cup, her third.

“It was just beautiful because when she appeared on the scene it was apparent she was going to win ... I'm just glad I didn't muck it up”

GREG MILES

PHOTO: HERALD & WEEKLY TIMES PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION



There are those who brought the Cup to the people, those who overcame great odds, those who took their passion to the extreme, the unlikely heroes, the characters (two-legged such as George Hanlon, four such as Subzero) and the punters and bookies.

Joe Thompson, who proclaimed himself 'King of the Ring', was as theatrical as he was fearless. The morning after he lost £30,000 on the 1877 Melbourne Cup – which had total prizemoney of £1940 – he proved his solvency by standing on the steps of the Exchange in Collins Street and paying out his debt in £100 bank notes.

Turn to the trophy itself, and what stories there are: the one cup that is three cups, Phar Lap's, Wodalla's and Beldale Ball's; Sol Green's rose-bowl trophy won by Comedy King, brought back into the spotlight by Green's grandson Robert Green at the exact time the book's search for it began – a hunt prompted by seeing a photo of the trophy trackside as the runners reached the post in the 1910 Cup. Until this year the trophy was listed on the Victoria Racing Club's books as "present location

unknown"; Ireland's two Loving Cups that sit in a bar outside Dublin; and Rogan Josh's trophy, used as a baptism font on its outback journey home from Flemington to Darwin.

All this and much more is not easy to put together when commissioning and co-ordinating 35 writers of 60-plus stories and sourcing 300 photos, not to mention 149 sets of colours worn by the winning riders. Designer Sam Russell was up to the task of presenting all parts with the quality finish the Melbourne Cup, and its guardian the VRC, demands.

The presentation of photos highlights Russell's eye for display. There are some beauties: the 1910 finish, the 1936 start, the 1944 return to scale; George Hanlon's impish pose in front of the silhouette of his 1978 winner Arwon; Cummings, head thrown back in delight with his collection of cups; the moments after Oliver's teary win on Media Puzzle; Sainly, ears flattened into his mane; troops in New Guinea, ears glued to the broadcast of the 1943 Cup; a young boy from Melville Island, holding the 2005 trophy; Jean Shrimpton in that dress, the one that was bigger news than Light Finger's Cup win in 1965; Rising Fast's owner with a spring in his step as he led the 1954 winner back to scale ...

**CHARACTER:** the late George Hanlon, one of the great trainers of stayers, is portrayed in the book. Here he holds his trophy for Arwon's win in the 1978 Melbourne Cup – the horse is in the background.

Perhaps the biggest job of all with Australia's Greatest Race fell to handicapper Greg Carpenter, who happily took to the challenge of weighting the best 24 winners for the "Greatest Cup Never Run".

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Perhaps the biggest job of all with Australia's Greatest Race fell to handicapper Greg Carpenter, only the ninth man to weight a Melbourne Cup field. Carpenter happily took to the challenge of weighting the best 24 winners for the "Greatest Cup Never Run". What a field he has assembled – the hypothetical race will be a talking point throughout the lead-up to this year's 150th real version.

Talking points run well with all Melbourne Cups: take the 1938 win of Catalogue, prepared by top New Zealand trainer Hedwick Wilhelmina McDonald, known as Granny, but presented at Flemington in the name of her husband Allan because rules, now considered archaic, did not allow women to train in Victoria.

It was Allan McDonald who accepted the trophy and made the speech. It was Allan McDonald who won the plaudits in the mounting yard and got his photo in the papers. It was such an open secret who really trained the horse that the New Zealand Prime Minister, Michael Joseph Savage (a Victorian by birth), reportedly addressed his congratulatory telegram not to Allan, but to 'Granny'.

It was fitting that it was another New Zealander, Sheila Laxon, who officially became the first woman to train a Melbourne Cup winner when Ethereal won in 2001. But that's another tale, one of the absorbing collection in *The Story of the Melbourne Cup, Australia's Greatest Race*. U

THE BOOK

The Story of the Melbourne Cup, Australia's Greatest Race

On sale in book stores from August 1, or at [www.slatterymedia.com](http://www.slatterymedia.com)

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