



2003

THE FIRST OF THREE

Makybe Diva was well-fancied at 7/1 for the 2003 Melbourne Cup, but to many the emerging mare, then a five-year-old and shaping as a strong stayer, was still an unknown commodity over Flemington's 3200 metres. Trainer David Hall asked jockey Glen Boss to count to 10 at the 600-metre mark before releasing the brakes. Boss did. At 400 metres she was flying. At 200 she was two lengths clear. The Diva sustained her run, and the first of a remarkable Cup treble was won.



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History and Culture

The Melbourne Cup has grown with the city of Melbourne, indeed with all of Australia, on the way gathering in New Zealand and, eventually, the world. Like Australia itself, the racing beginnings were modest, but they soon grew to establish a still burgeoning setting and a culture. One that is envied, enjoyed and talked (or written) about by all on, at least, one race day of the year – the first Tuesday in November.

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THE CUP OF 1889: This is one of Carl Kahler's magnificent paintings that have kept alive the colour of the carnival days in the late 1880s. The jockeys are Tom Hales and Mick O'Brien in Carbine's black, white and red – O'Brien was second on Carbine to Bravo in the 1889 Cup, Hales was unplaced on Benzon.

A WINNER ADMIRER:
Bart Cummings has eyes for the winner of 1996, Saintry, not the trophy. "Everyone loved this horse. He was Australia's favourite. Mine, too," the trainer said later.



[BART CUMMINGS]

The secrets of the Cups King

Bart Cummings, as a racing legend, is one of Australia's best-known figures. Despite his Melbourne Cup record and his hundreds of Group 1 winners over half a century, he remains something of an enigma. BY STEPHEN HOWELL

The Melbourne Cup is the best *distance* race in Australia and its king, Bart Cummings, is the best trainer of *stayers*. The sentence holds true without the words in italics, too.

Cummings first made Cup news as an extra when strapping the 1950 winner Comic Court, trained by his father Jim. Bart had his own runner in 1958 (Asian Court, 12th) and in 1965 had his own starring role with Light Fingers, the first of his 12 winners as the greatest trainer in the history of the race, a statement that may never age. Viewed, his 2008 winner, was the best of his three runners when seventh in 2009 as his tally of starters in the Cup climbed to 82.

Millions of words have been written about Bart – James Bartholomew, actually – and scores of writers have attempted to get to the essence of the man, and the legend. (Phar Lap in 2007 and Cummings in 2008 were named legends in racing's Hall of Fame, the first to be raised from their 2001 inaugural member status to legend.)

No writer has got it 100 per cent right; almost certainly none will. The *Sydney Morning Herald* racing writer Max Presnell summed it up best when he told of a conversation he once had with Cummings' faithful Flemington work rider Joe Agresta, who said: "If you think you know Bart, you don't know Bart."

And Bart doesn't make it easy for those outside his exclusive stable. He does not court the media in the style of his great peers of the 1960s-1990s, Tommy Smith and Colin Hayes, and their children and successors Gai Waterhouse (née Smith) and David Hayes. One thing most who have written about Cummings agree on is that he is a shy man, preferring the company of a precious few to many, and preferring even more the company of horses.

His shield is a collection of one-liners, used increasingly as his achievements climb from already extraordinary peaks in what has become the "open" era of racing. The simple answer, when cameras and microphones are thrust under your nose, is to deflect. Sunglasses, which he often wears, and very few well-chosen words do this best.

Cummings, 82 only 10 days after the 2009 Melbourne Cup, remains old school. His business is his business, and the less he says the less he gives away. Agresta provides another example. The loyal servant, when he finished talking with Cummings at trackwork at Flemington walked across to talk with me for an interview in *The Age* a few days before the 2006 Cup – one his boss *didn't* win; Japan's Delta Blues did. At the end of the interview Agresta said that Bart's parting words to him were, "Don't forget, loose lips sink ships". Agresta added that the boss often says, "Keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut".


That will never change. Nor will Bart, in that sense. However, as his legend grew either side of his 12th Cup, he was being wheeled out more and more as the face of racing. And what a recognisable face: for achievements and for profile (both senses); for eyebrows; and, above them, for coiffure.

But media street is not a comfortable fit for such a shy man, no matter how much experience he has had – he is much more at home in the stable and on the training track. This is where his genius lies.

As the sun set on the 2010 autumn carnival in Melbourne, Cummings had trained 258 Group 1 winners, including 31 Derbys, 24 Oaks, seven Caulfield Cups, four Cox Plates, 13 Australian Cups, 10 Mackinnon Stakes, eight Newmarket Handicaps, four Golden Slipper Stakes and, of course, 12 Melbourne Cups. Why is he so successful? Simply, he puts horses first. He is patient with them, feeds them well and trains them to be comfortable in their races; to finish off, and to finish off the opposition. The 2009 Cox Plate aside (when So You Think led all the way), Cummings' horses rarely go for broke; they go to break through.

Sports columnist Patrick Smith wrote in *The Australian* after 2008 Melbourne Cup winner Viewed won the 2009 Caulfield Cup, "The very word (Cummings) describes a mastery, a level of excellence that is difficult to comprehend and impossible to mimic. He has perfected horse training."

Cummings said as much in his ghosted *Bart, My Life*, published during the 2009 spring carnival: "You really have to love the horse



OH, MOTHER: Jockey Roy Higgins called Light Fingers "Mother" and developed a strong bond with the great staying mare. She had affection for him, too, and happily accepted a congratulatory pat after winning the 1965 Cup.

[JOCKEYS]

The view from the best seat at Flemington

Champion jockeys weigh in with their Cup tales of triumph ... and of disappointment. BY STEPHEN HOWELL

To talk with two champion jockeys about their Melbourne Cup wins and losses a generation earlier is to get vastly different portraits that also are paintings of the men themselves. One fills the metaphorical blank page with a bold brush, recalling – even embellishing – events that need no colouring; the other is a minimalist, providing the bare bones in black and white. The extrovert's words come face to face, a gentle prompting releasing a constant flow of the stories and the conversations, as he recalls, that came with them; the introvert's come via telephone. They provide outlines, and the background – at times even the foreground – is for the questioner to fill in.

Roy Higgins, 11 times Victorian premier jockey and winner of Melbourne Cups with Light Fingers in 1965 and Red Handed in 1967, both for the great trainer Bart Cummings, sits in a bar of the Post Office Hotel in St Kilda, a glass of red soothing any itch to get to his regular Tuesday lunch with mates at the pub. Harry White, four times a Cup winner (three for Cummings) and four times the champion jockey in the Higgins' era, comes to the phone, although my call is made as he is about to sit down to lunch at his Gisborne farm north of Melbourne. White is happy to talk, but with the unspoken words, 'This won't take long.' It has to take some time because I can't run the risk of him not wanting to talk face-to-face on the farm. To mix home metaphors – strike while the iron is hot, even if the lunch will go cold.

In the 1960s and '70s Higgins and White were mates and rivals, and, before then, Higgins actually went out with White's wife Lauris, and he remains mates with the couple. White had to scratch from Higgins' 70th birthday bash at the Post Office almost a year to the day before this interview because he wasn't well enough to get down from Gisborne – he has multiple sclerosis. He doesn't make a big deal of it, but it does make his life difficult. He also said it kept him from the races because he can't get around as he would like. "I get tired walking. With the MS, I can't stand up long," he said. Higgins, while active, alert and generous with his time, is showing his age. His is a body that took constant punishment so he could ride. He quit in 1983 after an asthma attack, finally, convinced him

that to keep playing the wasting game could kill him, and perhaps a fellow jockey. He has lived up to his oft-quoted comment that when he finished he wanted to be a little fat man.

Higgins is content with his success and does not harp on the one(s) that got away, but his last Cup ride, in 1979, could easily have been his third winner – he was beaten a lip on Salamander, by the Cummings-trained Hyperno, the horse he had intended to ride but rejected because he believed Hyperno needed blinkers to show his best. It was White who got the victory after Cummings, at the 11th hour, put the blinkers on. Cummings had taken over the training after the 1978 Moonee Valley Cup when, trained by Geoff Murphy, Hyperno was beaten on the line because Higgins dropped his hands when he believed the race was won. The jockey was suspended, and publicly apologised to connections and punters. Cummings stripped off all but the basic gear and told Higgins, 'I'll train him my way.'

"His track work was sensational under the care of Bart, but his racing was shocking," the rider said. "I was starting to get a bit toey because I'd accepted the ride on him in the Melbourne Cup, so I kept saying to Bart, 'You want to do something, this bastard's not trying.' Bart said Hyperno would be right over a bit more ground. I placed my faith in Bart. I'd known him to do it before and make a fool of everyone. Anyhow, I rode him in the (next) Moonee Valley Cup and he ran an ordinary fifth or sixth. Never tried, put his ears back ... Bart said, 'Tuesday morning I'll put a pair of blinkers on him and we'll jump him out and have a little trial. Let's have a look, OK?' That's a week before the Melbourne Cup. He led all the way in a 1000-metre trial and I couldn't pull the bastard up until he went another two furlongs. When I came back I said, 'There you are Bart, there's your answer. He said, 'You're kidding, you couldn't pull him up after a bloody gallop. What will he be like in a two-mile race? He'll bolt with you. I couldn't put blinkers on him'. I said, 'Bart I'm not going to ride him.' He said, 'Well, your call.' Harry was standing there, so Bart said, 'Roy doesn't want to ride him. Do you want to ride him?' Harry turned to me and said, 'What's wrong with him?' I said, 'He needs blinkers.'