

## WOMEN IN SPORT

# Racehorses finding their

**RAELEE TUCKERMAN**

**TANYA** McDermott believes owning a Standardbred horse is a lot like eating chocolate: it's immensely rewarding... and it's hard to stop at just one.

"We find with most people, it becomes a little bit of an addiction," says the equine enthusiast, whose hobby is retraining retired and failed harness racehorses and finding them new homes.

"Once you get one, you fall in love and you just want to be able to give more of them an opportunity to go on."

The Standardbreds that Tanya and others like her re-educate and rehome at the end of their racing careers are given the chance to discover their unharnessed potential – as trail riding ponies, competitive show and eventing horses, pleasure animals and beloved family pets.

For many, it is a second chance at life, as the alternative is a one-way trip to the knackery.

"In the past, there have been limited options for an owner or trainer not in a position to give the horse a home themselves long-term," says Tanya, who has co-founded the Northern Standardbred Riding Group to promote the breed and their post-racing possibilities.

"If they couldn't care for a horse themselves or didn't know someone prepared to take one on, sometimes they would choose what we consider the unpleasant option (the slaughterhouse).

"Also, sometimes trainers have given a horse to a young girl down the road or a neighbour and found down the track that horse hasn't been cared for the way they hoped.

"That has put people off and they might say it's a better option to have the horse put down, knowing it won't ever be neglected or suffer, rather than place it somewhere and not be able to control what happens in five or 10 years time.

"So instead, we are trying to create a network where we know where the horse is placed and there is ongoing support and encouragement for the people who take them on and education to deal with the special needs of racehorses who have just come off the track.

"We are trying to help people who are willing to give them a chance."

Standardbreds are famous for their harness ability, racing as either trotters that run with a diagonal gait or pacers that have a parallel gait.

But Tanya, a former racing journalist whose husband Graham is a harness trainer, says they suffer unfairly from a range of image problems that threaten their future away from the track.

"There has traditionally been a perception that neither trotters or pacers will canter, but that is simply not true," she says. "You just need an understanding of how to re-educate them."

This can include breaking them in to saddle, getting them comfortable taking weight on their back and teaching them to be steered from close-range, rather than a long rein from a sulky.

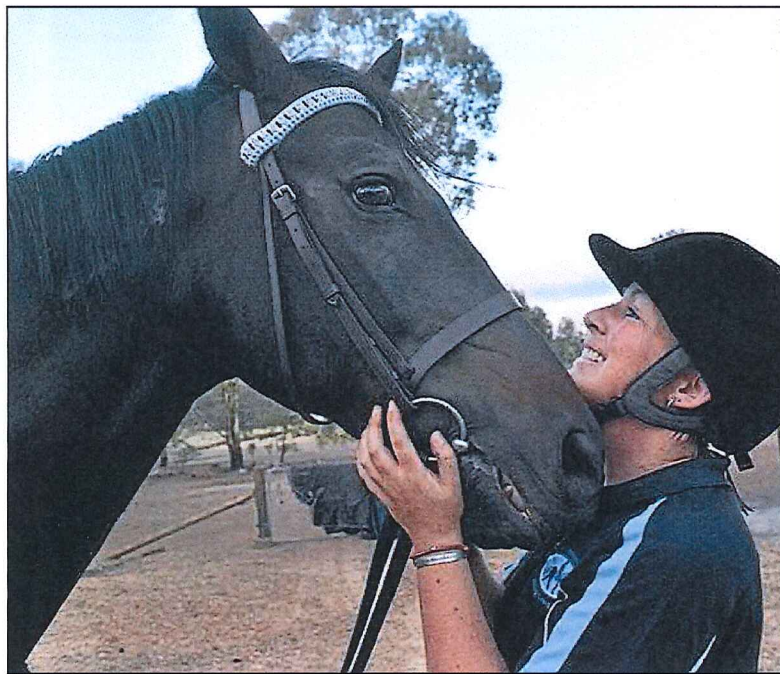
"One of the things we are about is changing the perceptions the broader community has had about Standardbreds being boof-headed, ill-gaited, uncomfortable riding horses," says Tanya.

"The breed has evolved enormously in recent years and as a result are much more impressive physical types than some people are led to believe. They have always been very intelligent and trainable and are just the perfect all-round horse."

Over the past three years, Tanya has helped find new homes and new



**BRIGHT FUTURE:** Northern Standardbred Riding Group president Tanya McDermott, treasurer Nikkiema Taylor and member Samantha Scanlon are giving Noddy, Moe, Ibis and many horses like them a chance to shine away from the harness track. Pictures: BRENDAN MCCARTHY



**PARTNERS:** Tanya McDermott with Noddy.



**SUCCESSFUL:** Nikkiema Taylor with Moe.

careers for about 25 former harness racers that left the industry because of age, illness, injury or lack of ability.

One ended up at the Rochester property of horsewoman Jane Reid and the two women struck up a friendship that led to the formation of the Standardbred riding group.

"I was doing this rehoming and re-educating thing on a very small scale through my husband's interest as a harness racing trainer," Tanya says. "Jane came to me one day and said what do you think about getting a formal group together?"

"A couple of Standardbred riding groups already existed in Victoria, but there was nothing in this area, which stretches from Kyabram and Shepparton to Bendigo, Rochester and Echuca.

"We pulled some people together we knew who were involved with

Standardbreds and decided to throw some ideas around and see what happens. The rest is history.

"It is 18 months to two years since that very first discussion and it really has grown like wildfire and the reaction has been astonishing, from the ordinary equine community to the harness racing industry to agricultural shows and businesses in the towns we take in."

With Tanya as president and Jane as secretary, the Northern Standardbred Riding Group has grown to almost 20 members, mostly women, and many more supporters and friends.

One relative newcomer is Samantha Scanlon, the smitten owner of former gifted racehorse Ibis (see breakout story for his history) since just before Christmas.

Samantha had spent the past

two years looking for the ideal horse on which to return to riding after the birth of her daughter but now seems to have found her Standardbred soulmate.

"He's the perfect horse for me. I had lost confidence after my last horse put me in hospital, but we are at exactly the right level for each other.

"I'd had an injury and had to get back into it slowly and he's had an injury as well, so we are coming together nicely.

"People turn their noses up at Standardbreds and think they are stupid horses but they're not – they are so smart.

"I can do anything with him: I totally trust him and he trusts me."

The pair spend hours on trail

rides together and Samantha is also hoping to prepare Ibis for the show ring, "as he's beautiful to look at".

"I have had him for five months now and we have forged a real love affair," she says.

"He has got us all wrapped around his little finger. At 11.30am every day, he even goes across to my neighbour's fence line because he knows she will come out with carrots for him.

"It's so nice to see them land on their feet after they have done all the hard work on the track."

Tanya McDermott's mount Noddy was a classy trotter that raced under the name of Kyvalley Mac, trained by Chris Lang at Nagambie.

He was given to her by Lang at

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# unharnessed potential



**REBORN:** The sun may have set on their racing careers, but these Standardbreds have a new lease on life.

the end of his career and the pair have done several shows together and are now working towards Horse Riding Club Association of Victoria events.

Another in a long list of successful partnerships is riding group treasurer Nikkiema Taylor and Moe, who have amassed an impressive collection of ribbons together in the show ring.

And then there's Frank (see breakout story), who is spending his twilight years giving pleasure to local disabled adults and youngsters at RDA Bendigo.

"There are so many stories...." says Tanya.

She doesn't sell any of the horses that graduate from her property, instead preferring to place them on the understanding that they can always return to her if their new "owner" can no longer care for them or their circumstances change.

The Standardbred riding group meets on the third Sunday of every

month at the Rochester Pony Club to showcase the talents of their ex-racehorses and members say there is almost nothing they cannot be taught to do.

Former trotters and pacers now compete in showing, dressage and showjumping, agricultural show competitions and horse trials, as well as being ridden purely for pleasure.

"We try through our rallies every month to do different things so our members are exposed to different disciplines within the equine environment," says Tanya.

"We started out with a strong focus on the showing side of it, but not everyone is interested in that. So every second or third rally, we do a trail ride or something very basic, so we draw in people who are not interested in the formal education and competition side of things."

Up to half a dozen members are actively involved in the re-education of harness horses and the group is

now being sought out by trainers and owners with retiring or unviable animals.

"The more we are getting out and promoting what we are doing, the more people are coming to us," says Tanya.

"Every time we go to a race meeting and talk to the trainers the reaction is always the same: it's fantastic that you are out there, we always want to find a good option for our nice horses."

Tanya paid particular tribute to the Bendigo Harness Racing Club for getting behind the venture and allowing the group to promote its activities on recent race days.

"On the Labour Day long weekend, we had two of our members ride at the race meeting, leading out the fields.

"And a couple of weeks ago, the club donated sponsorship rights to an entire meeting that we were able to on-sell.

## CASE 1: IBIS

IBIS' promising track career was cut short by injury, and he retired with three wins and three placings from seven starts.

He once suffered a fractured hind leg that required two screws and later a fractured shoulder prompted his vet to declare that nothing more could be done and he should be put down.

"But his owner, breeder and trainer (Mooroopna's Vin Pearce) refused to listen to that and decided to nurse him back," says Tanya. "He not only got him back to the races, he ended up winning a race with him, which was absolutely amazing."

When Ibis retired, he came to Tanya to be broken in and was rehomed with Rochester horsewoman Jane Reid, who co-founded the riding group with Tanya.

"She did a lot of work with him, but discovered because of his injuries he wasn't suited to hard competitions and particularly jumping, which she likes to do.

"We have since rehomed him back here to Bendigo to Samantha Scanlon, who has returned to riding after a lengthy break. She'd tried a couple of different horses before we recommended Ibis might be suitable.

"He is now a part of her family and they absolutely adore him.

"His story on the racetrack was incredible, but what he has been able to do subsequently is just amazing as well."



**ADORED:** Samantha Scanlon and Ibis.

## CASE 2: FRANK

FRANK was born with a twisted leg, but was very well bred.

He was given an opportunity as a racehorse, but was always behind the eight-ball because of his conformation issues.

The gelding did end up getting a couple of starts, but it soon became obvious his problems were causing him discomfort and he wasn't going to make it as a racehorse.

So Tanya stepped in and taught Frank to take a saddle – learning to ride on him herself at the same time.

"He gave me all the basics of learning to ride and all the trust and confidence I needed," she says.

While he was not suitable for horse shows and competitions, he has found his niche with RDA Bendigo, an organisation giving disabled people the chance to ride and drive carriages.

Tanya gave Frank to RDA under a lease agreement "for as long as he is useful to them, on the understanding there is always a home here for him if he wants to come back to me".

"He is now an integral part of their carriage and riding program... and he is considered a part of the furniture there now.

"Frank is what I consider very much a success story."

"That resulted in almost \$2000 coming into our bank account."

The money will benefit the group as it plans a new home at the Elmore Light Harness Club site, with hopes of developing a formal club ground and arena for future rallies and meetings.

With thousands of former racehorses ending up in slaughterhouses in years gone by, there is now a strong movement at industry level to give more of these animals a brighter future.

The northern riding group has received funding from Harness Racing Victoria and in-kind support from Harness Racing Australia and local race clubs, as well as securing sponsorship from Decron Horse Care and the Aldebaran Park Stud.

The state government has thrown its weight behind a similar program run full-time near Kilmore under the name Raising the Standards.

Tanya says Standardbreds

make ideal pleasure and competition horses because their harness careers have given them all the basics – being handled, wearing gear, knowing how to stand sensibly when tied and, for many, being transported in a float.

Some are even further advanced, with more trainers now riding their horses and the growing popularity of Monte races, where trotters race under saddle, as novelty events at meetings in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia.

"Of all the horses I have had go through in the past few years, I haven't had one yet that has bucked or over-reacted when I have put a saddle on," Tanya says.

"Uncertainty, yes, but nastiness? Not a single one. They adapt really well to a riding life and they are very rewarding to work with."

For more information about the Northern Standardbred Riding Group, visit its Facebook page or contact Tanya McDermott on 0419 326 165.