

MICHAEL COURT SITS DOWN WITH ONE OF THE DOYENS OF OUR INDUSTRY . . . A MAN WHO WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN HELPING MAKE MENANGLE INTO ONE OF THE WORLD'S GREAT CIRCUITS

This was one Miracle Mile that Brian Hancock had a hand in

HE DIDN'T drive the winner - or even train him.

As a matter of fact Brian Hancock wasn't even trackside that day to see the fastest mile ever run in harness racing in the Southern Hemisphere - when My Field Marshall rated a slashing 1:46.9 to win the 2018 Ainsworth Miracle Mile.

Yet it would be fair to say there was probably a tear or two in Hancock's eye as the doyen of harness racing in this state watched the incredible race - one of very few feature races on our calendar that he was never able to win as a reinsman - unfolded.

"Actually I was at home and felt like ringing John Dumesny immediately and asking him to race down and find Adam Hamilton or someone from Sky to say over the air 'I hope the Yanks are watching this,'" said Hancock.

"There is no doubt this is the best and most modern harness racing track in the world now - and yes, I felt like we should be letting the rest of the world know about it."

It must seem like eons ago when Hancock, then at the peak of his powers as our leading trainer-driver, sat down with Rex Horne (then chairman of the NSW HRC) and John Dumesny (then chief executive) at a lunch to discuss the future of our leading track, Harold Park.

"Simply I asked them if the horsemen would be given a say in the track," Hancock told me during one of his less-frequent trips to Menangle these days.

"I wanted to come here [Menangle] instead of buying something elsewhere.

"The best track I had ever driven on was Mohawk in Canada - it was a 1400m track and I thought that was great because the horses came past everyone twice.

"I also stressed that if we were to move to Menangle and build a bigger track when we wanted to be able to start 10 off the front - no second line.

"I just felt to make fair racing and for the public it had to be 10 off the front."

Hancock, like many in the sport, felt Harold Park had outlived its time.

. . . not to mention the fact it took our leading trainer-driver 80 sets of lights from when he left his South Coast home until he got to the Glebe circuit.

"I loved Harold Park - but the track was becoming obsolete," he says.

"Don't get me wrong, it was a great half-mile track.

"The last track we did there was a great track but I remember asking (US track guru) Dan Coon one day would he prefer a 1400m track or upgrade the one we had.

"Certainly he agreed and I'm fairly certain this is the only track built, anywhere, in the past 10 years.

"I think its world class - you only had to see that last Miracle Mile to agree."

Times have certainly changed in harness racing since Hancock decided to give it away several years ago.

Indeed the master horseman is concerned that ownership has diminished to the point where the horse population - or lack of it - has almost reached crisis point.

"I could talk for hours on this

subject," he says.

kid from Wollongong who had been working in coal mines and suddenly I was sitting here with these legends.

"I ended up with friends for life. Kevin Newman was enormous to me and he always gave you his time. "I sat on the lawn one night with the late Jimmy Caffyn; we were talking about training and what to do . . . and he didn't have to do that - but he was happy to. "These days no-one asks anyone about anything. They all think they know it all. "That's another thing that's different now - if you had a horse in the first race you raced and then stayed there watching until the last race. It was that simple. "Even as a horseman you just did that - but everyone's in a hurry these days and even with their horses they are in a rush. "That's maybe why we aren't producing the free-for-allers we always had. "I'm not going crook about that or anything but these days there may be more pressure on these younger guys to win a race. "The late great Bart Cummings once said the cheapest thing you can have is patience . . . it costs nothing. "I guess I was recognised for that and many a bloke might have said he's got too many paddocks but I think I finished up with 35 or 36 Inter Dominion horses. "And getting back to the Inter Dominion - to me that was the ultimate. "You talk about the Miracle Mile and no doubt it is a great race but the ultimate thing was always the Melbourne Cup for the gallops and the Inter Dominion for harness racing.

And as the late Bill Whittaker once said, the Inter Dominion was once worth more than the Melbourne Cup.

"The Inter Dom is our pinnacle race - they've all tried to tamper with it and I said when they first started to do that 'why try and fix something that already works'.

"People would take a couple of weeks off to go to the Inter Dominion and follow the horses right through. You have to understand you need all that too.

"I do think this is the best set-up in the world. You can go anywhere you like - I've been to The Meadowlands, I've seen the lot - it's not better than this.

"And we have more room down the back if we need to take the track to a mile one day - and I did say to Rex and John that we should leave room for a bigger track if ever we need it.

"I have this argument every day about people who say you can't see the horses any more - I tell them to go to Randwick - or even to Kembla Grange.

"There you only see the gallopers for the last 200m.

"I do think we could do something more with our cameras.

"I also said that to Rex and John - you need to be able to send something to people at home in their living rooms that might make them say 'we should go and see that' or kids walking past the TV to stop and say 'what's that Dad?'"

"Throw it at 'em - show them the excitement that is harness racing."

The inevitable question I had to ask Brian Hancock . . . does he ever stop and think how his great horses, pacers like Thorate, Koala King or Our Sir Vancelot would have gone at Menangle today?

"No, I don't ever think that way," he says.

"They would have been great horses in any era.

"It's a bit like comparing Winx to Black Caviar - they were two different types of horses plus one was a sprinter and one a stayer

"They were both great horses. It's like comparing the great horsemen - in their own era they were great horsemen.

"It's also like comparing Reg Gasnier with Johnathan Thurston - in their own era they were or are champions - simple as that. Or Gary Ablett senior with Garry Ablett junior - they're both champions in different eras."

So tell us about that famous first quarter when Thorate tried to hold out Westburn Grant and they burned like no others had ever done in a 25.9 first quarter in a Miracle Mile at Harold Park?

Would you have won if you had held Vic Frost on Westburn Grant out that memorable night?

"It was just one of those nights.

"I know I never won a Miracle Mile but that night both horses just went.

"Vic said 'get up Spot' and we talk about quarters here. They went 24.8 here but how do they compare with Westburn Grant and Thorate?

"They were both just great-gaited horses. Neither horseman gave any ground that night.



Brian Hancock with the mighty Our Sir Vancelot.



With family after scoring on Dick Swiveller at his last Harold Park drive.



A 1983 presentation after Bundanoon won a feature at Harold Park.

"Thorate was a lovely horse and Howard (James) looked after him most of the time.

"I got on great with Vic. To tell you the truth I had problem with any of them."

So never having won the Miracle Mile would Hancock do anything differently . . . like maybe lodge a protest against Joe Ilsley and Double Agent in 1984 when they beat Hancock and Bundanoon by a head?

"I've never protested in my life," said Hancock.

"I was involved in one at Fairfield one night when [steward] Ron Bottle protested against Chris Gleeson and took the race off him.

"I tend to think of the times I also got away with it. I played the game hard but I liked to play it fair . . . and probably no-one had more suspensions than I did."

So who was the toughest to drive against? Was it Perc Hall, for instance.

"Well, I was only a young bloke when I drove against Perc," says Hancock.

"I was inside him one night on a horse called Adios Jean which Dick trained.

"I went through inside Les Chant's wheel and I think I punctured both tyres and I shouted: "Mr Hall I'm in trouble" and, quick as a flash he replied: "That's your problem boy, you never should have gone there."

"I reckon it was three months later and he was inside me on a horse called Leading Light and it was pulling his arms out of their sockets and I moved out of the way and let him out.

"It goes both ways and I respected him. He was a great driver."

What about some of the toughest horses to beat.

Pure Steel, for instance!

"He was a killer," he said.

"I won three Victoria Cups off his back. I'd go three fence and let him do all the work and hopefully go bang and beat him.

"Pure Steel won a lot of races for me by following him. He did beat me in a Hunter Cup but Graeme Morgan forced me to

go two strides too early that time.

"He was a great horse and I went to WA and he beat me three times.

"I also drove Gammalite and he was different. As I said Pure Steel was a killer.

"But I did have a record on Gammalite that can't be beaten - five drives for five wins - that was when Ray Wisbey was training him.

"Don't get me wrong, Gammalite was tough - but Pure Steel was different.

"Yes, I did a lot of homework - mainly on drivers. That would be a lot more difficult to do today. I drove against some great drivers and there are some great young guys out there today.

"The kids do a lot of driving these days in fact they do a lot more driving than we ever did. We drove once or twice a week.

"We drove our own horses but these kids are driving and often times they have never trained a horse. And good luck to them - I'm not against them."

So were there any great rivalries with anyone while Brian Hancock was driving in peak form?

"Not really, no, I liked to beat everybody - and anybody," he grinned.

"I didn't care . . . I had respect but I also wanted to beat them.

"I was fortunate. I was 21 when I got a good horse. Teeny Rena. I drove against some champions. I had a nice horse, I was a kid and this horse was foolproof and she taught me a lot.

"I learned the shortcuts. I remember the night Lucky Creed was going for his 25th straight win and Cocky Raider beat him I was the one who took Cocky Raider into the race - I ran third that night.

"The more I talk about these things the more it comes back to me.

"Teeny Rena was something special - she got me going.

"And we didn't know what she was going to do in the breeding barn.

"That's another story."



A young Brian Hancock.



With Thorate in 1988 at Harold Park.



Courage Under Fire parades at Bankstown.



Brothers Richard and Brian Hancock after Jikk Adios won in 1981.



Parading Gammalite after a Spring Cup win in 1980.