

Lighter Ash is aiming high

By Peter Foley

Weight. It's the enemy of most jockeys and a common cause of careers ending. Ashley Butler is a survivor of the battle; his weight is right and he's ready for another crack.

No one doubts Ash's ability as a jockey, but his weight has held him back. A few years ago he was 62kg and had to starve himself before race days.

"I originally went home after my apprenticeship because I was having weight problems," Ash said.

"I had spent the last nine years up north, but I always wanted to come back down here and have another crack.

"But I told myself, if I was gonna come back down again, I needed to get my weight right.

"I'm walking around at 54(kg) now."

Since heading south about four months ago, he's been riding trackwork for trainer Kelly Schweida and getting plenty of rides from Rob Heathcote and Billy Healey.

Weight isn't the only battle Ash has fought. His jockey career started because his dream of playing in the NRL was shattered - ironically, because he was too small.

Ash grew up in the mining town of Moranbah about two hours west of Mackay. When he was 15, he signed a contract to play rugby league with Wests Tigers in Sydney.

He was set to transfer to the renowned Keebra Park State School but, after finishing school in Moranbah, he received the unkindest call.

"All you want to do is be a professional NRL player, and to get the phone call to say that I'd got a scholarship to Keebra Park was obviously pretty exciting," he said.

"And then all your dreams come crashing down when they say, You're too small and we can't renew it.

"I just went cold turkey and got a bit dirty on the world, and at footy. I don't think I've picked up a football since.

"At the time, my dad owned a few horses in Mackay and that's just how it started."

He had little background in horses except travelling to Mackay on school holidays to help out trainer Lyle White.

"I had never touched a horse, I didn't know how to put a head collar on, never rode one," he said.

"Next thing I was riding track work and then riding on race day. I picked up riding pretty quick.

"I started my apprenticeship with Lyle, then went to Stuey Kendrick when he was in Mackay."

Ash's first race ride was memorable to say the least. It was at Keppel Park in Yeppoon on November 1, 2008 on a horse called Haggis.

"It was an 800-metre race and I was gonna run second and, about five strides before the winning post, the leader lost an iron and fell off, and I won," he laughed.

"I had all my family there - mum, dad, a heap of mates."

Ash went from Mackay to the Gold Coast where he rode on loan to trainer Gillian Heinrich.

"My first three meetings, I rode two trebles



Ash Butler guides Ave Cantare (centre, gold cap) to a winning break in the Poco Vino Handicap (1200m) at Ipswich racetrack. (Trackside Photography)

and a double, and then my provincial claim was gone," he said.

He then went to Brisbane and finished his apprenticeship with Hall of Fame trainer John Meagher, who trained with his sons Dan and Chris.

"Johnny Meagher, the whole Meagher family were probably the best thing I've ever done.

"They took me in like family, they took me to Melbourne, gave me rides in Group races as an apprentice," Ash said.

"If I had my time again - nothing against any of the other trainers - but I would have gone straight to Johnny.

"They taught me so much about being a person, and a lot in racing as well."

Despite his weight troubles, Ash has ridden 840 winners at an outstanding 17% strike rate.

He won the inaugural The Archer in Rockhampton on Emerald Kingdom in 2022 for trainer Rob Heathcote and won it again two years later on Namazu.

"I've always kept in contact with Rob. We've had a pretty good relationship, even when I was an apprentice here the first time," he said.

At Ipswich racetrack last Saturday, Ash repaid Rob's support by winning on Ave Cantare in the Poco Vino Handicap (1200m).

"From barrier one, it's pretty easy," he said modestly.



Three horses go across the line locked together in the China Gemmell Memorial Handicap (1700m) with Jemoma Alpilage (Bella Youngberry, right) prevailing ahead of Consort (left) with Prestige Ice (centre) third. (Peter Foley)

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