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Legacy of Tommy lives on

By Peter Foley

The lessons Greg Cornish learned as a teenager from legendary Phar Lap strapper and trainer Tommy Woodcock remain at the heart of his training philosophy.

Greg Cornish was a teenager when he left his parents' North Queensland cattle station and flew to Melbourne to begin an apprenticeship with Woodcock.

Four decades after Phar Lap's famous exploits, Woodcock was training at Epsom, then Australia's largest training complex.

"I was Tommy Woodcock's last apprentice. I used to live with him and his wife Emma," Greg said.

"I spent five years in Melbourne with him - '75 to '81.

"My dad, Barry, was a horse trainer up in North Queensland. He only had a couple of horses.

"From a cattle station to Melbourne, with a cowboy hat; never been on a plane before. It was a big deal.

"There were a lot of good trainers at Epsom. It's all housing now but it was massive. Johnny Meagher was there and Jim Maloney.

"The Winders used to stay at our place."

Bill Winder trained 1975 Melbourne Cup favourite Suleiman, who finished fourth behind Bart Cummings' Think Big.

"We used to have the same setup that I have now. We trained out of paddocks. That's why I train out of paddocks now."

Tommy Woodcock's poster horse was Reckless, a kindly entire who won the Sydney, Adelaide and Brisbane cups in the same season.

Reckless was the people's horse and the public longed for him to win the 1977 Melbourne Cup. He ran second to Gold and Black, also trained by Bart.

Bruce Postle's adorable photo of Tommy and Reckless lying together on the stable floor the night before the Cup is in the National Portrait Gallery.

"Old Reckless, he was a beautiful horse. I won a couple at Flemington on him," Greg said.

"No horse will ever do what he did. I've been in horses all my life. I was 16 then."

Cornish is proud to have been Tommy Woodcock's final apprentice before he died in 1985.

Greg hadn't planned to become a trainer, but racing was in his blood and he needed a way to stay in the game.

"Anyone that gets into racing, it's pretty hard to get out of it, for good and for bad, I guess.

It's the adrenaline rush."

Now in Beaudesert, Greg had his first win in February 2004 and his best horse so far is Stampe, the first stakes winner for Grandview Stud's stallion Whittington.

Greg's wife Sheree Drake was a successful jockey before injury ended her career. They have two daughters, Kirsty and Jasmine. Jasmine was a leading apprentice.

In 2023, Jasmine was riding one of her dad's horses in a trial at Beaudesert when another horse in the trial was apparently spooked by a witches hat.



The field jumps in the Ipswich Party Hire Handicap (1666m). The Desleigh Forster-trained Swanfels (yellow sleeves), was the winner, ridden by Daniel Moor. (Peter Foley)

The resulting chain reaction brought down Jasmine's mount and slammed Jasmine onto the track.

She suffered a broken back and fractured eye socket. Despite months of painful rehabilitation, a career that had promised so much was cut short.

A recent Ipswich victory brought Cornish's story full circle, drawing on the lessons he learned from Tommy Woodcock decades earlier.

The Torque Factor, bred at Arrowfield Stud, is by the late champion sire Snitzel. He sold for $120,000 at the 2023 Inglis Classic Yearling Sale.

But, after developing cardiac arrythmia, he was bought by one of his original owners for just $900 in an Inglis online sale in March and sent to Greg.

"They must have thought he couldn't race any more but you would think a nice-looking horse like that, $900 is a bit cheap," he said.

"I haven't had any problems with him.

"He's trained out of a paddock now. I just let him roam around and be a horse. He's a bit highly-strung.

"I have had horses with heart arrythmia before. The horse Jasmine had a fall on, she had that.

"Relaxing him is the big key."

With Yvette Lewis in the saddle, The Torque Factor swept to victory at Ipswich by more than five lengths.

"He's always had the ability; it's just a matter of convincing his mind that he's going to be okay," Greg said.

The Torque Factor may have been more convinced of his ability after he backed up last Thursday at Ipswich with victory in the Fouchard Racing Handicap (1680m).



The Torque Factor, with Yvette Lewis aboard, races away with a dominant win in the TAB Handicap (1666m). (Trackside Photography)



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