

Life's lessons help Jai win

By Peter Foley

Jai Williams has had plenty of challenges in his life and career, but he wouldn't swap them for anything; they've made him who he is.

At 22, he's already had a lifetime of highs and lows, but time is still on his side. He's earned a reputation for being unreliable, but no one has ever doubted his ability.

Among more than 240 winners have been four at Eagle Farm twice and five in a day at the Gold Coast.

"I'm glad what's happened in my life has happened because it's made me who I am today, and the rider I am today," said Jai, who is apprenticed to Gold Coast trainer Paul Shailer.

"It gives me a bit more dog, and a bit more grit. Me and my siblings lost our little sister, which was a hard thing to overcome, and I've had a few stops and starts in my career. I wish I had a consistent one; I could have done a lot more.

"I'll come good for three or four months, and then I'll just go walkabout for a month.

They call me Walkabout Williams.

"As we're getting older, we're getting better. I'm still a kid. People forget that sometimes.

"But I've got the right support in my corner. I've got a great manager (Cameron

Smith), great family, great girlfriend (jockey Sariah Champkin).

"Even people like Tony Gollan pulling me aside and giving me a good speaking to helps along the way.

"I've just got to keep doing right by them, and they'll do right by me." Jai, who said his childhood was difficult, was a teenager in 2021 when his sister Ella died from SIDS, just as his riding career was beginning.

"There was seven of us kids and that was a rough patch for us," he said.

"But that's brought us tighter. We're a very tight family.

"My mum says, 'God needed another angel.' She rides with me every time I ride.

"Then, literally a month later, my little brother was born. Mum lost a daughter and a month later, by little brother was born."

Growing up on the Gold Coast, Jai hated horses, but an ultimatum from his dad helped turn his life around.

"I was scared of them. Every time I sat on a horse, I got drilled. I got attacked, I got bit by horses, I got kicked. So I stayed away from them," he said.

"Then I came home from school one day and my dad said: You either piss off out of home or you're getting on this horse. I didn't really have much of a choice.

"I'm glad I've done it because I wouldn't change it for the world, and I'd do it for free if I could."

Soon, all Jai wanted to do was ride. His mother, Jessica, was a foreman for trainer Bryan Guy, who put him in touch with Ballina trainer Stephen Lee.

"He gave me a good bit of advice: 'You're a boy in a man's world; you're going to grow up very quickly,'" Jai said.



Jai Williams and State In Texas (third from left) are about to make their move on the home turn in the Vince Insurance Benchmark 78 Handicap (800m). (Peter Foley)

"I've struggled with that because I'm a bit more immature than the usual person.

"But we're slowly getting there. We don't go out anymore. We don't drink anymore.

We don't gamble. I've got a beautiful girlfriend that takes care of my money and helps me with my finances because I've been silly with them.

"I've had a lot of mistakes, but obviously I don't regret those mistakes because you learn from them.

"I've got a pretty out there character; people either love it or hate it.

"I love everything that's happened in my life - ups and downs."

That resolve was tested as Jai was in the hunt for the Brisbane apprentices' title when he suffered a punctured lung and concussion in a fall at Beaudesert on February 6.

After battling post-concussion syndrome, he returned in June. Rather than feel sorry for him-

self for missing the winter carnival, he went to Sydney to ride.

At Ipswich last Wednesday, Jai added another winner, State In Texas, for budding Beaudesert trainer Jimmy Downes.

"All props to Jimmy Downes; he's doing great," he said.

"He's only 10 years older than me and he does well with what he's got."



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