



I WAS RIDING FOR HIM

Triumph and tragedy meet in the saddle

THE sequence of life-changing events — brutal and euphoric — still melts Damien Oliver's signature stoicism.

In the 17 years since Oliver lost his brother, Jason, in a racetrack fall and won the Melbourne Cup eight days later on Media Puzzle, the double-edged nature of life's harshest realities haunt him still.

Sitting in an ante room at Flemington, Oliver reflects on a victory that will always be the most memorable of his 2463 wins but, for the most tragic reasons, will never be regarded affectionately.

"It's obviously the most memorable but it's hard to say it's my favourite because of what happened," Oliver said.

"I don't think I'll ever enjoy it because it's the memory of losing my brother more than winning the Cup.

"You can still see now how emotional I get and it's 17 years ago."

The winner of three Cups — Doriemus (1995), Media Puzzle and Fiorente (2013) — Oliver can smile about runner-up finishes on Paris Lane, Pop Rock and Purple Moon.

But there is fraught introspection when he revisits those hellish eight days from the spring of 2002.

Media Puzzle's triumph resonates so powerfully because of the ghastly toll exacted on a family shaped by a sport that has given plenty but taken far more.

Jason and Damien Oliver followed their father Ray into racing despite his death in a race fall at Kalgoorlie in 1975.

Jason Oliver was fatally injured in a trial at Belmont on October 29, 2002.

"He was on life support for a few days but I had to turn off the life support a few days later," Damien said.

"He was someone I always looked up to, especially with my

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father dying early. There was always a rivalry there but I followed him into racing and he was always helping me along the way.

"The circumstances in 2002 were obviously exceptional, losing my brother the week before the Cup."

Oliver agonised over whether to ride on Derby Day and also on Cup Day.

Fretting over public perception and aware of family sensitivities, he said: "I was probably at the height of my career at that stage and it (Jason's death) really threw everything into disarray.

"I didn't know what to do, what to think and what people would think if I rode.

"I sat down with my mum (Pat) and obviously my brother was a huge inspiration.

"My mum and I both thought about it and came to the conclusion that if I was sitting on the couch at home watching the Melbourne Cup, Jason would have been saying 'You bloody idiot, what are you doing?'"

Despite an imposing book of rides, Oliver struggled on Derby Day.

"I had one placing from eight rides and I was starting to question whether I'd made the right call," he said.

"I rode most of them OK, but there was a lot of noise on the outside. People were good to me but at times it was difficult to focus.

"I was most comfortable when I was on a horse.

CONTINUED PAGE 79



Damien Oliver reflects on his victory in the 2002 Melbourne Cup, which came eight days after the death of his brother Jason, and (inset) the *Herald Sun's* front page the day after the Cup. Picture: MARK STEWART



TOP 25 MOMENTS

Oliver and Media Puzzle the best ever

Melbourne's fabulous spring carnival is synonymous with barely imaginable highs and crushing lows.

For more than a century and a half, the post-winter extravaganza has become a magnet for racing devotees and those with only a passing interest as bluebloods — horses and humans — compete for glory.

Champion gallopers and their handlers have shaped the carnival since the 1860s.

With thousands of epics to choose from, chief racing writer LEO SCHLINK says Damien Oliver and Media Puzzle's 2002 Melbourne Cup victory is the greatest spring racing moment in history.

1 MEDIA PUZZLE 2002 MELBOURNE CUP

Damien Oliver and Dermot Weld, contrasting characters from completely different backgrounds, combine to win a Cup drenched in emotion. Weld was the first northern hemisphere trainer to master the logistical challenge of travelling horses across the world to snaffle our brightest jewel. The Irishman ignited the carnival's internationalisation with Vintage Crop in 1993. Media Puzzle's quest was overshadowed by the death of Ollie's brother, Jason, eight days before the Cup. It is unimaginable for most athletes even to contemplate competing in such circumstances. Instead, Oliver produced a peach of a ride on a perfectly prepared raider. Simply epic.

2 MAKYBE DIVA 2003-05 MELBOURNE CUPS

Minutes after Makybe Diva achieved what no other horse in history had with a third straight Melbourne Cup triumph, Lee Freedman summed up the achievement best. "Go and find the smallest child on this course, because they will be an example of the only person here that will live long enough to see something like that again," he said. As with the 106,000 spectators at Flemington staring at the mighty mare and jockey Glen Boss — responsible for three perfect rides in three successive Cups — Freedman was awestruck. He had inherited the stayer from David Hall after her first Cup win. Freedman was asked if Tony Santic's champion was the greatest of all time. He said: "I don't want to put Phar Lap down, but I never saw him win three Melbourne Cups."



THE GREATEST. ALWAYS.

3 WINX 2015-18 COX PLATES

From defeat in the 2015 ATC Oaks, Winx was utterly extraordinary and, with due deference to heroics north of the border, the Cox Plate and the Valley became her ultimate stage. If Chris Waller's superstar was slightly under the radar in '15, she stamped her authority in extraordinary fashion over the ensuing three years. There was the clock-smashing demolition of '15. There was the record eight-length margin in '16. In '17, she broke her own track record. Last year delivered another record – standing as the only horse in the race's storied history to win it four times. Waller's staggering management of his sensational mare has been widely feted. Equally, Hugh Bowman's nerveless handling of the superstar was inspiring.



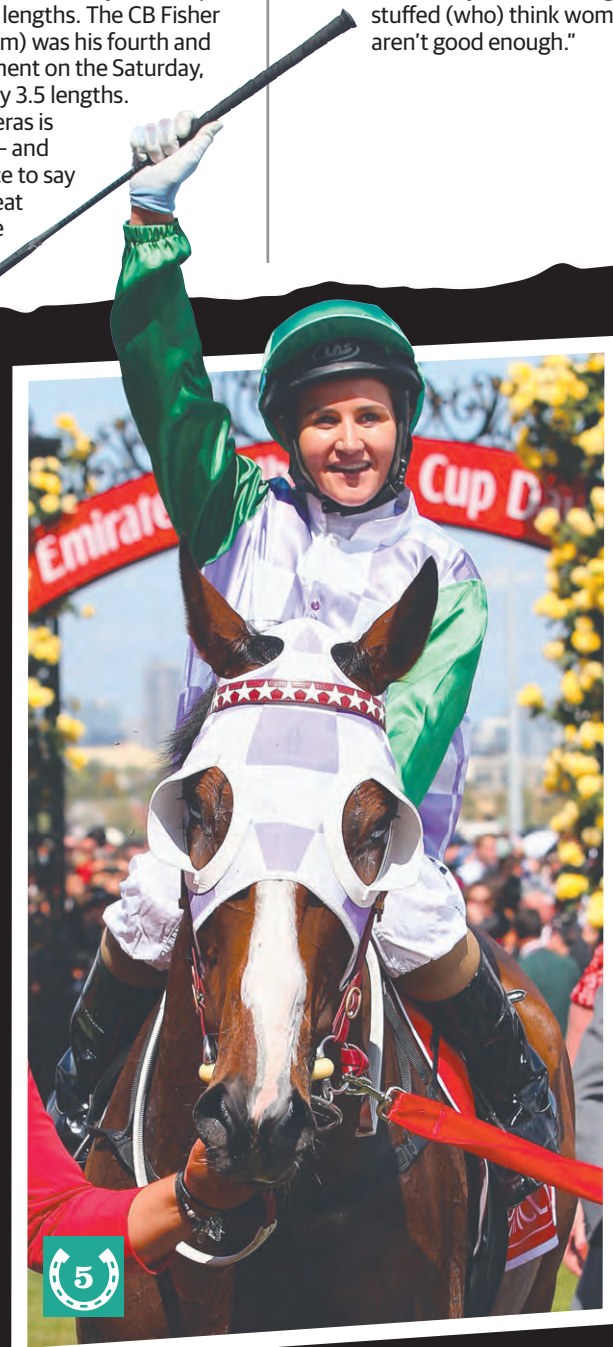
4 PHAR LAP MELBOURNE CUP WEEK 1930

Almost 90 years on, Big Red's Flemington tour de force is barely comprehensible. It started on the first Saturday with victory in the Melbourne Stakes (2000m) – a day after gangsters tried to shoot the chestnut. Lumping a record 62.5kg for a four-year-old to victory in the Cup (3200m), the champion of the Depression bolted in by three lengths. His job was half done. Contesting the Linlithgow Stakes over 1600m on the Thursday, Phar Lap won by four lengths. The CB Fisher Plate (2400m) was his fourth and final assignment on the Saturday, strolling in by 3.5 lengths. Comparing eras is impossible – and unfair. Suffice to say Phar Lap's feat will never be matched.

5 MICHELLE PAYNE and PRINCE OF PENZANCE

2015 MELBOURNE CUP

Michelle Payne and \$101 bolter Prince Of Penzance combined for a victory for the ages. Payne had to lobby connections to stay aboard the injury-prone gelding. Having meticulously followed track walker Peter Ellis's speed map, Payne used the opportunity to strike a blow for her gender. "It's such a chauvinistic sport, a lot of owners wanted to kick me off," she said. "Everyone else can get stuffed (who) think women aren't good enough."



6 KINGSTON TOWN 1980-82 COX PLATES

Racecaller Bill Collins' famous declaration "Kingston Town can't win" as the field turned for home in the '82 Cox Plate resonates as powerfully as memories of the "The King's" searing acceleration. Collins, known as "The Accurate One", was not the only caller that day to get it wrong. Crooked by leg injuries, Kingston Town was restricted to racing only in the spring as an older horse, making his effort to become the first galloper to win three Cox Plates even more phenomenal. Trained by Tommy Smith, he was partnered to victory in those three successive wins by three different jockeys – Malcolm Johnston, Ron Quinton and Peter Cook.

7 BONECRUSHER and OUR WAVERLEY STAR

1986 COX PLATE

If Collins was deemed to be errant in '82, he nailed it four years later with his wonderful call of what was dubbed the "Race of the Century". The two-horse war took shape from the 600m as Our Waverley Star, shadowed by Bonecrusher, hit the front. "Here come the New Zealanders," Collins said. "Have they gone too early?" The lead changed five times over those closing three furlongs with Our Waverley Star appearing likely to win. But Bonecrusher refused to yield, drawing this gem from Collins: "And Bonecrusher races into equine immortality."

8 MIGHT AND POWER 1997 CAULFIELD CUP

As displays of pure, sustained pace and power go, few rival Might And Power's demolition of a class field in one of the world's best 2400m handicaps. Given free rein from barrier seven by Jim Cassidy, Jack Denham's powerhouse crushed his rivals in record time, bolting in by seven lengths. While the infamously reticent Denham maintained his public stonewall and refused to speak with the media, Lee Freedman summed it up with: "The most amazing race I have ever seen."

9 BART CUMMINGS' MELBOURNE CUP DOZEN

1965-2008

Seconds and minutes shape racing. Bart Cummings shaped the Melbourne Cup, not for seconds or minutes, but for generations. His training association with the Cup spanned 56 years, 89 runners and 12 winners. His personal link to the Cup started when he strapped his father's horse Comic Court to victory in 1950. His first Cup runner was Asian Court (12th in 1958). His last was Precedence (sixth in 2014) when the training colossus was almost 87. His winners include some of the greats – Light Fingers, Galilee, Red Handed, Think Big (twice, pictured above with Cummings in 1974), Gold And Black, Hyperno, Kingston Rule, Let's Elope, Saintly, Rogan Josh and Viewed.

10 VINTAGE CROP 1993 MELBOURNE CUP

If not for the timely lifting of a Dublin "pea-souper", Dermot Weld's former hurdler would not have changed the face of the Cup. Weld capitalised on a break in the weather to fly Vintage Crop to England before the fog closed in again. The rest is history. Ridden by Mick Kinane, the chestnut bolted in to trigger the radical internationalisation of the Cup. He returned twice more to finish seventh and third, bowing out in his final career start behind Doriemus and Nothin' Leica Dane in 1995.