



A champion's story... the legendary Peter Pan in 1932 and Peter Pan - The Forgotten Story of Phar Lap's Successor author Jessica Owers at the horse's grave at Baroona, near Singleton. Photos: Darren Pateman, Fairfax Archives

# Owers gives life to legend

**M**any figure Peter Pan was the greatest and Jessica Owers, described as being a fly on his ear, is only too happy to agree.

Just what is an Irishwoman bred with the benefit of an Australian primary education and finishing school in Scotland doing writing books about old-time champions? "Phar Lap was on the curriculum at school and, being crazy about horses, I accumulated Phar Lap memorabilia," she said. "I remember, after Phar Lap died, this flashy Peter Pan, who won two Melbourne Cups under extraordinary circumstances. Peter Pan was considered as good if not better than Phar Lap. Something crept up about Peter Pan. I loved the horse physically. I was just absolutely taken with his looks. When I examined his racing career properly, I was staggered that we didn't have more on his life."

From 39 starts Peter Pan won 23 times, was placed in seven and unplaced in nine, including a failure in the 1935 Melbourne Cup under 10 stone, six pounds (66.2 kilograms).

First to Owers, now 31...

She arrived here when not quite a



MAX PRESNELL

yearling, went back to Ireland at nine and started riding. She returned as a teenager, then went to Scotland and the University of Stirling, one of the few that offered a degree in journalism and environmental science. Still, on returning to Australia, the best she could do was to take a job as a riding instructor at Centennial Park.

"I was obsessed with horses, watched *The Man From Snowy River* countless times," Owers said. But Peter Pan became the focus. "He could run seven furlongs [1400m] with the best sprinters of the day and come back and win over two-and-a-quarter miles. Horses were made of iron, much more so than today. During my research, I virtually lived in a 1930s mindset for years as I was poring over newspapers, but even back then people

complained horses of that era weren't as good as in Carbine's day. Peter Pan would race on Saturday, Wednesday and then the Saturday at the autumn carnival and he wasn't overraced."

Tougher, but were they better? "Black Caviar is running over seven [furlongs] now but no way could she run over two miles," Owers said. "Investigating the subject of my second book, *Shannon*, I saw Ajax [winner of 18 straight] termed a 'cot-ten wool' champion because of being kept to weight-for-age events. These stories are so magnetic for me. The response to *Peter Pan - The Forgotten Story of Phar Lap's Successor* has been incredible. I get emails like: 'My God you must have been a fly on Peter Pan's ear'... I became really attached to him. I would leave an apple on his headstone at Singleton."

The wee lass has even rebuked the legendary Banjo Paterson. "The dictum that they run in all shapes was never better exemplified than in the case of Peter Pan and his appearance raises the eternal question: why is this horse so good? Is it his action or his heart or his pedigree?"

Certainly not his appearance, for few would pick him for the champion he is," Paterson wrote.

Owers said: "Paterson was so far off the mark it was risible. In every way he was a dream machine, a horse with light lines, powerful shoulders and the length to run all day. He was loose-limbed, clean-winded and a brash competitor. Paterson's words were redundant."

The Banjo "risible" and "redundant"? Would I cast such sacrilege about George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce or even Brendan Behan when he was awash with Guinness? Paterson in his class is at least the equal of Peter Pan. Thus I asked Frank McGrath, who still has roots at Randwick and the offspring of Frank McGrath, who trained the champion, for a review.

"Did you hear about the millionaire prince of the NSW squattocracy, the impossibly handsome horse he bred to race for glory, not money [and achieved both]? And the trainer, one of 20 children - he had three wives - of an immigrant Irish farmer? After an almost fatal fall in a Caulfield Cup, he went on to a stellar career as a leading trainer for over 50 years."

Thanks to Jessica Owers, you can. "As one of Frank McGrath's grandchildren, raised around the stables where my father also trained, of course I knew all kinds of tales about Peter Pan, but I never thought anyone could weave together the entire story of the horse, McGrath, [owner Rodney] Dangar, [jockeys Darby] Munro, [and Jim] Pike and so many more; the tragedy and excitement of the depression era; and the atmosphere of thoroughbred racing at the time, in the compelling way that Owers has done."

"Her effort has been in prodigious research, eliciting facts I would have thought were lost to history, but her real gift is in her imaginative but so plausible reconstructions of the thoughts and conversations of the major players as the story evolves... If you want to imagine a time when racing engaged most Australians and the Melbourne Cup was discussed for months before November, when races were watched through field glasses not wine glasses - well, Owers's book is just the cracking yarn for you. And it's all true."

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