



TOP: Red Rum in full flight at Haydock Park making his very last jump in a race before retiring



RIGHT: Kensei wins the Melbourne Cup

OWNERSHIP

– *it's all about a dream*



ABOVE: Tony Curtis with Kensei RIGHT: Diana & Tony Curtis and the 1987 Melbourne Cup

IT'S BEEN A LONG ROAD INTO HORSE OWNERSHIP FOR TONY CURTIS BUT THAT ROAD HAS SINCE BEEN PAVED WITH GOLD WORDS: SHARON HUNT (EXECUTIVE OFFICER – NSWROA)

It's funny – isn't it that most people who are 'racing tragics' were indoctrinated from a tender age. Longstanding NSWROA member Anthony Curtis is yet another to fall into this category.

Born in the United Kingdom and growing up during the war years, Tony's first memories of racing were the English Derby and the Grand National – events which he still loves today.

He can recall the 1945 Derby in particular which was won by Dante. Likewise, the 1946 Derby which was won by Airborne as all the soldiers saw it as an omen bet and were on it.

Even though the war was just ending, the Derby was the event that stuck in his mind as being very important.

Growing up in modest surroundings, there wasn't much money to spare in the Curtis family, but this did not deter Tony's father from his passion for punting.

His father was convinced that he could beat the bookies and this remained his life ambition.

His mother would remind him on a Saturday morning "Don't go in there; Dad's reading *The Sporting Life*".

Although employed in His Majesty's Stationery Office in a role that included printing the instructions for the D-Day landing team, racing was forever the driving force in Mr Curtis's life.

In those days it was difficult to bet unless you were at the track and thus began a ritual for the Curtis family of either hiring a car or taking a train to the races for Mr Curtis to try his luck because if Mr Curtis won, the whole family prospered.

Everyone in the family went in separate directions once at the track. Mrs Curtis who wasn't interested in racing mainly stayed in the car if they travelled that way, his sister would follow the 'evangelists' around the course, Mr Curtis would settle into the betting ring whilst Tony would pick up tickets and make shapes with them, whilst the older Tony would help his father seek the best odds with the bookies in the 'silver ring'.

An avid devotee to jumps racing, the incredible Red Rum (Quorum-Mared) remains to this day a great favourite for Tony.

He said: "There is something magnificent about a jumper over the big fences and Red

Rum just seemed to soar through the air".

Red Rum came to the attention of Tony as a two-year-old. There was something about the horse that caught his eye – he was by no means flashy – but there was something definitely there.

He would often discuss the horse with his father who agreed that Red Rum was a good national hunt horse.

Tony would later feel that it was a great pity that his father wasn't alive to see how great Red Rum would become.

Red Rum achieved an incredible record in the most famous steeplechase race in the world, the Grand National. He was successful in the event in 1973, 1974 and 1977 and also finished runner-up in 1975 and 1976.

To this day, Tony is of the view that the 1973 Grand National was the greatest race he has ever seen. He recalled: "The great Australian chaser Crisp was the dominant force in jumping at the time; he would get to the front and defy the others to run him down.

"Who would have thought that someone would? In the 1973 running of the Grand National, Crisp had led the field virtually all of the way in this great endurance test and at the last fence was some 15 lengths clear of his nearest rival, Red Rum.

"Somehow in the shadows of the post Red Rum overtook the tiring Crisp to score by three-quarters of a length – simply unbelievable."

As a side note Tony mentioned that he had put ten pounds each-way on Red Rum at the ripe old odds of 33/1 well prior to the race, so it could be said that some of his jubilation at the win could have been influenced by this!

The 1973 Grand National may have been the best race Tony has ever seen but he has no doubt that meeting and subsequently marrying his wife Diana, has been the best thing he has done.

Tony enjoyed a successful career with IBM working and living in London, Paris, New York and Tokyo as well as Sydney. He took every opportunity to go to the local races in each of these cities to broaden his knowledge of this wonderful sport of thoroughbred racing.

Once in Sydney, Tony felt he understood the difference between Australian and European racing and thought the time was right to become a part of the racing industry.

"Owning a horse in Australia was a realistic thing unlike in England where the sport is very elitist," Tony said.

"It was cheap to get into and was generally accepted by society. I set myself criteria – the horse had to be New Zealand bred, reasonably priced, a colt, staying bloodlines, trained at Randwick and preferably by a first time trainer so we could learn together and have up to six part-owners."

To his great amazement, he heard an advertisement on Radio 2KY for Harry Lawton who had a horse that met all the criteria. The horse was to be trained by Neville Voigt who was just starting out as a trainer.

After inspecting the horse at the William Inglis & Son complex at Randwick, Tony decided to take the plunge and bought a share of the horse for \$3,750.

Who was the horse? His name was Kensei (NZ).

Kensei, who was owned by Messrs K. Mitchell, A. McDonnell, T. Strickland, R. Mann, R. Lazarus (another NSWROA member) and Tony, was being set for a 3YO Classics campaign – the year in question was 1986.

Unfortunately for Kensei, this was the era of Drawn and another Kiwi galloper, Bonecrusher, who would subsequently take all before him that year winning a string of Group One events before spelling and returning to win an epic W.S. Cox Plate later that year.

It was at this time that Tony and Diana had moved to Tokyo in another work

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posting and the other owners decided to move trainers.

Les Bridge was selected as the new trainer and it was decided that a Melbourne Cup campaign was to be attempted.

Even though he was living in Tokyo, a few miles were not going to deter Tony from returning to watch Kensei run.

He returned for the 1987 AJC Metropolitan Handicap only to see Kensei go down by 2-½ lengths to Balciano – yet another Kiwi making a name for himself at the time.

The next trip back to Australia was for the 1987 Melbourne Cup but this was a much better result with Kensei turning the tables on his Kiwi rival.

Kensei won the Melbourne Cup by ½ length from yet another Kiwi, Empire Rose, with the Bart Cummings-trained Rosedale (USA) in third place. Balciano finished in fourth place.

Tony recalls: “The number went up and I thought the world had stopped – I’m dreaming – this can’t be true”.

Fighting his way down to the mounting enclosure he finally realised that this was really happening. He continued: “It was a day you can’t describe – it was just surreal.”

Kensei raced on to 1990 but never won another race after his Melbourne Cup success. He subsequently retired to part-

owner Russ Lazarus’s property where he happily lived for the rest of his life.

A couple of pieces of trivia that Tony shared were that Kensei is the only horse to have won the Grafton/Melbourne Cups double in the one year, and he is the only publicly offered (via Harry Lawton radio advertisement) horse to have won the Melbourne Cup.

Since then, Tony has part-owned lots of horses – some slow, some fast including Red Eagle, Miss Zoe, Bosworth and Utzon, all trained by Les Bridge.

Tony has known Les for over 25 years and considers him to be a terrific trainer with a great eye for a good horse as well as being a close friend.

Growing up with the likes of Red Rum and Mill Reef who were his idols on the track but I think that it would be fairly correct to say that there is now only one idol for Tony – his pride and joy, and Sydney’s most popular horse, Hot Danish.

What can I say about this wonderful mare that hasn’t been said before? Probably nothing.

Put into plain terms, she is just great. This season, racing in her seventh year, may very well be the last we see of Hot Danish on the track but I am sure she will leave a very lasting impression on us.

At the time of writing Hot Danish had

faced the starter 31 times for 16 wins (13 at Black Type level including two at Gr 1, six at Gr 2, a Gr 3 and four Listed Races), 7 seconds and 2 third placings for some \$2.33million in career prizemoney.

Tony is also in the partnership of Maigret’s Cat, Hot Snap and Racing Red all of whom are showing some promise at present.

When asked what it feels like to be a part-owner of such wonderful horses as Kensei and Hot Danish, and who’s the best, Tony said: “It is a privilege and quite humbling to be associated with such great horses. I refuse to compare them as both have given their all to those of us lucky enough to have been associated with them.”

What advice would he give to someone thinking of entering the ownership ranks?

“If you want to do it, then do it. If an opportunity arises to enter the industry, go in as you really want to do it – don’t hang back – it is all about a dream and you should take it.

“Always assume that what you initially outlay you are going to lose and most of all, don’t go beyond your means. Remember all horses, regardless of how fast they are, cost the same to run.

“I believe that BOBS Extra has been a great initiative for owners, particularly if you have a slow maturing horse like Hot Snap. It gives you the opportunity to have a little patience, a luxury which was never available previously.”

What does life after Hot Danish have in store for him?

Tony said he loves horse racing and has no intention of ever leaving the industry.

He was a supporter of the merger of the AJC and STC and hopes that the ATC will now be able to implement proper programming.

When asked was there any race in particular he would like to win, Tony’s response was instantaneous: “I’d like to the win the ultimate Classic race, the Australian Derby at Royal Randwick.”

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Racehorse owners are very special people, are you one? If not, why not give it a go!

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Tony Curtis accepts the Queen of the Autumn Award at the 2009 NSWROA Racing's Night of Champions