

THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE'S LEADING STUD FARMS



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THE VIEW DOWNUNDER ~ HAROLD HOWE

Getting The Job DUNN

Dexter Dunn has the hottest hands in New Zealand and looks ready to topple every record he can find.

There has always been a debate as to whether or not top drivers are born or made. It's a bit like trying to compare horses of different eras and there is no definitive answer.

But when a young man at the age of 19 appears to be on the verge of breaking just about every meaningful driving record in New Zealand, the word phenom has to come to mind.

Dexter Dunn won \$1.3 million in his first (get that first) season in the sulky. Now he's just four months into his second and he's well on pace to win more races in a single season than any driver before him as well as having the potential to be the first to win 200 races in a 12 month period.

By North American standards, or at least those of American Tim Tetrick, that is what he accomplishes in a month, but New Zealand is not the United States.

There is nowhere near the amount of racing or the ability to drive at two tracks in a single day.

Through Christmas, young Dunn had won 79 races from 513 starts for purse earnings of \$562,370. Maurice McKendry set the record for most wins in a season with 162 back in the 1988/1989 season but that mark would appear ready to topple. At the moment the world is Dunn's oyster.

But behind Dunn's success is his boss Cran Dalgety, one of the more insightful and successful trainers in the southern hemisphere. For the past decade Christchurch based Dalgety has sent out a stream of good horses that are always in the headlines. It was he who identified Dunn and has been instrumental in getting him to the plateau he is at today.

"I was in the position that I was unable to secure a commitment from any

driver for all my horses. You can do more of that as a trainer in North America but here everyone of note is locked into several other stables so I felt the only choice open to me was to develop another myself," explains Dalgety who operates a 40 horse stable. His farm is called Kentuckiana Lodge.

It should be noted that Dalgety had been down this path previously with Mark Jones who he took on at age 17. Over the next eight years Jones won the nationwide premiership (number of races won means more in the southern hemisphere than purse winnings) and the World Driving Championship along the way to victories in some of the top races.

Dalgety was forced to look abroad, that being across the Tasman Sea, to Australia to find Dexter Dunn. The young man had left his native land of New Zealand and landed a job working with

trainer Andy Gath in Victoria with every intention of making that his home.

"I approached Dexter with my plan but it took three months to persuade him. I'm not sure he realized what I was offering which really was putting my own neck on the block. I had owners who were not happy in having to deal with different drivers every start but some were dubious about bringing along a junior (probationary) driver. But finally he decided to come."

Dexter explains his recollection of the series of events.

"I was very happy being in Australia where I was treated very well. I was away from home and things were going great. What finally tipped the scales was that I thought it was just too good an opportunity to let go by. I never thought I would be the main driver for a stable. Here a team will have their main driver and then a junior driver to fill in."

Like every racing jurisdiction in the world, Dalgety was second guessed by everyone.

"There were several reasons I picked him. For one he looks like the modern day driver, not very heavy, athletic and looks right in the cart. He also appeared to be very patient in driving the horses; maybe an old head on young shoulders.

Most importantly the horses wanted to race for him. I've never been able to explain that but some drivers can bring out a desire in horses to give it their all. I thought I saw that in him."

Three months into the exercise, Dalgety and his critics thought he'd made the biggest mistake of his life.

"It looked like a disaster. Everything he did seemed to be wrong. If he was on the front he should have been in the back. If he was on the outside he should have been in front. I thought I had completely screwed up and let me tell you there were some pretty heated discussions about it too."

Dunn lays much of the blame on the different style of racing that the Kiwis have compared to their Australian neighbours.

"The Aussie fields are smaller and there is not as much pushing out as there is in New Zealand. There are more lead changes in New Zealand and all that



Photo by Race Images

At just 19, Dexter Dunn has become the hottest driver in New Zealand, where he was the first driver to win over a million dollars in purses in his first year.

made it difficult for me to get my mind around things."

Gradually he got the hang of it and in no small part because of Dalgety's steadfast refusal to give up. He provided plenty of horsepower and eventually it paid off.

"As the wins began to come and it looked like he might have a chance to

win the premiership I took him aside and told him that if he was game we'd really take a run at it. Once he had that commitment from me he just took off. He won two Group 1 races and became the first junior driver ever to win \$1 million which are quite the accomplishments here."

The pace has never slacken and actu-

ally is speeding up as other trainers are calling upon his services whenever it does not conflict with Dalgety's needs.

"I am chuffed at the way things turned out last year and know that Cran had a lot to do with it. Going into the year I was hoping for 20 wins and ended up with 146. This season Cran has a lot of top class horses and I think we can make a real run before the year is done. His horses love it here and that means a lot."

Dalgety has proven to be a stern taskmaster which is hardly a surprise given his own father Jim was much the same. No one ever worked harder or expected more than Jim, a good horseman in his own right.

"If there is one thing Dex has to develop it's a thick hide. Doing what he's done has ruffled the feathers of some of the older drivers and he has not taken too well to a bit of physical and verbal abuse. I've explained to him that is just the way

the world is and he has to stand up to these guys and make them like it," says Dalgety.

"But when you talk with this boy about racing you'd think you were talking to someone 40 years old. He's intelligent and takes constructive criticism well. He can speak in public and as I said before the horses are responding to him. They want to please him and keep giving all they can.


"The only other thing I've said is that he's almost too dedicated and needs to loosen up a bit. The odd girlfriend would not hurt matters and he's had plenty of chances."

Dunn comes from a racing background. His father Robert has been a quality trainer in his own right with \$2 million earner Master Musician and the standout mare of a few years ago Mainland Banner, arguably one of the best female pacers ever to emerge from the southern hemisphere.

"Like Cran, my father has been in my ear all the time pointing out my mistakes. But the two are pretty much on the same page so it must be right. It was hard to leave Australia but it's been the best decision I could have made."

Unlike so many young North American hotshots, Dunn is not in a rush to strike out on his own.

"There's just not enough work here to become an independent like there is in Canada or the U.S. I'm with Cran for some time but maybe 10 years down the track I would get into training but it's not something on my mind now. Cran runs a great stable and as I watch the decisions he makes, it makes sense."

As this column has chronicled in previous issues, the racing industry in New Zealand is probably having its finest hour at least in terms of purse monies. Dunn's arrival on the scene could not have been timed better. 

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