

No looking back with June's yellow & black

A PHOTO ON HER OFFICE SHELF OF A PLAIN BAY GELDING CALLED GANN AND ANOTHER OF HER LATE BROTHER, BOBBY, ILLUSTRATE TWO SIGNIFICANT CHAPTERS OF JUNE BAKER'S LIFE IN RACING

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Most people would be familiar with the name Ms J Baker in racebooks and form guides.

She owns the likes of Kopi Luwak and Pumpkin Pie, her runners in the 2018 Country Championships Final, but on raceday you could easily walk past her without knowing.

June Baker is a champion for country racing but relishes being in the background.

That interest in the country, borne out of her upbringing, has seen her predominantly yellow, with a black Maltese cross, family colours become prolific on country tracks and, in recent times, synonymous with popular Goulburn trainer Danny Williams.

And she has, first, her jockey brother Robert 'Bobby' Baker to thank for that and, second, that unassuming gelding called Gann.

"We used to listen to the races on the radio on a Saturday, as you did in the country. When (Bobby) was alive I'd go to the racetrack with him," June said.

"I'd say to him 'I think I might become a jockey' and he'd say 'no way'. I was as little as he was but thank God I didn't."

June was born in Moree, the youngest of 10 children, but when her father drew 1000 acres in a soldier settler's ballot, following service in the war, they moved to Delegate near the Victorian border.

She learned to ride, as did all her siblings, and when Bobby was 14 he decided to move to Sydney to become an apprentice jockey. He worked for several trainers and finished his apprenticeship with Jack Denham.

Once June finished school it was Bobby that encouraged her to try the big city and as a 16-year-old she moved in with him and his wife. Eventually, June would spend her working life as a stockbroker.

But about a year after her move, in January 1968, tragedy struck.

"I'd been down at the farm and I came up to Sydney and Bobby met me, he left the next day and was going to Southport to ride," she said.

"Coming around the turn the horse went straight and drove him into concrete and killed him. He was 26 and had a six-month old son.

"I didn't have anything to do with horses for about 17 years. The reality of being involved in the races had gone."

That's where Gann comes into the story. In the late



June Baker and trainer Danny Williams

1980s, June's sister Margie and her husband Brian Callaghan had decided to train racehorses and had purchased a horse, that would be Gann, for around \$2500.

"By then I was established in Sydney and they rang and said 'would you like to come into a horse with us'," June said.

"I said 'no I'd rather have a mortgage'. Then I thought about it, I thought that probably wasn't very fair and it'd be a bit of fun.

"I went to lunch the next day with a client and said 'do you want some of a racehorse' so he went in too. We had a cheapo horse, a few hundred bucks each, and we had a ball.

"That started it. He was an honest little horse and he always ran place."

Gann retired in 1995 having won five races from 53 starts and his success paved the way for June to buy into another horse, though for more than she would've liked.

That horse was Perfect Rapture – June has a large picture of him adorning one of the walls in her office – who won 18 races and placed another 22 times and who she describes as "a wonderful animal".

Fast forward a few years and June was looking to buy a property for cattle and horses.



Kopi Luwak (Rory Hutchings) powers home to score at Moruya in his first start for more than two years

Brian and Margie had given up training, their daughter Karyn took over for a few years, and Brian recommended she seek out Danny Williams.

"I bought a farm at Yass. We noticed that Danny was going out on his own having been a private trainer," she said.

"Brian said if I wanted someone really good and near home it'd be the time to go there while you can because he'll be popular in time.

"Danny was re-establishing himself and we wandered in and gave him some horses.

"I think he is a very good horseman. I like the fact, although I'm trying to kill him, that he rides them.

"It's near my farm and he's a really good bloke. He's very calm, matter of fact, and just a nice person and a very good trainer."

The "trying to kill him" remark probably doesn't need explaining if you know the story of Kopi Luwak.

It took seven trips to Snitzel before his dam Lady Breakfast finally conceived and it seems Kopi, named after the most expensive coffee in the world, has been attention-seeking ever since.

June says she owes a debt to her breeding adviser Garry Burgess, who gave her the confidence to go to Snitzel and to purchase Pumpkin Pie.

Of course, Kopi Luwak is the horse that Williams was thrown from when he suffered terrible injuries, including a broken pelvis, in 2015. Then big Kopi suffered his own life-threatening tendon injury.

"He's 640kg and just over 17 hands. He's a powerhouse. Danny says he's never thrown a leg over a more powerful animal," she said.

"When Danny gets injured I just say 'which one of mine was it?' I was horrified when that accident happened.

"I thought 'what have I done to this man, I've been there six months and nearly killed him'. Then the horse hurt himself and it took two years to get him back.

"I nursed him at the farm, we just kept giving him time. If I thought there was any doubt about his recovery there's no way I would have raced him again."

While Williams trains the majority of June's horses, she likes to support country racing by spreading them around to different trainers, including Stephen Lee – who gave June her first Country Championships Qualifier with Profiler – Wayne Wilkes and Cody Morgan.

There'd be few racecourses around NSW that June hasn't set foot on and she loves the Country Championships because she says it brings so many country people together.

"It's given everybody an opportunity to participate," June said. "Country people do struggle and it has given small trainers a dream. You can go to town, race against your own and be competitive. And it is terrific prizemoney."

And, in retirement, racing is her passion with an interest in over 30 horses and that never-ending desire to find a good one.

"Everyone will tell you racing is a disease," she said. "I love the animal, I love the magnificence of them. You get your ups and downs. I certainly think of my brother a lot when I have success.

"You always live in hope you get that special animal, I've been through enough of them. I just say I hope this is a good one, Bob." **RNSW**