

'BEL' OF THE TURF

BELINDA HODDER IS ENJOYING THE BEST SEASON OF HER CAREER TO DATE AND IS CURRENTLY THE LEADING FEMALE JOCKEY IN COUNTRY NSW WORDS: JULIEANNE HORSMAN PICTURES: GRAHAM POTTER



ABOVE: Belinda Hodder was the toast of the racecourse after winning the Murwillumbah Cup with connections and punters queuing up to congratulate her

BELOW: Anne Bonny salutes in the 2017 Murwillumbah Cup



At the end of the 2015/16 racing season Belinda Hodder was ranked 22nd of the female jockeys in country NSW. A year later she had worked her way up to eighth.

Now, with just two months to go in the 2017/18 season, Belinda has reached the top.

With 43 wins and 87 places to her name, Belinda Hodder is the highest ranked female jockey in country NSW.

"It's a good feeling," the 28-year-old said. "It's satisfying to know I've worked hard, focused and it's paying off."

"My manager Michael Smith has helped me secure quality rides and this is the longest period I have been going without injury so that's a contributing factor. I've been able to gain some momentum."

Belinda got her season off to a flying start when she won the Murwillumbah Cup aboard Anne Bonny in August 2017. She found a nice path along the fence before moving her mount into the clear where it kicked away and won by 1.6 lengths.

"It was a great day," she said. "It was special to get the feature win for Owen Glue (trainer) as he has given me a lot of support."

Since then Belinda has ridden winner after winner including a double at Cessnock's recent ANZAC Day meeting.

Like any good jockey, Belinda has worked hard for her success. Born in Perth, Belinda moved to Kempsey with her family at age 13.

Her and her siblings had their first ride on a horse before they could even walk. They had show horses, did eventing and often helped their horse trainer mum Julie around the stables: "There was no getting out of that," Belinda joked.

By the time Belinda was 15 she knew she wanted to make her passion her career. Being 170cm tall she towered over her peers and had to be disciplined to keep her weight down, but she did it.

At 16 she would be up before the crack of dawn to ride trackwork for her mother, John McGee and a handful of other trainers. She would shower and go to school then return



Trainer Owen Glue (left) with Bonny Anne, owner Wayne Carroll, and Belinda Hodder after the Murwillumbah Cup

home to work the horses again in the afternoon.

In late 2008, Belinda began her apprenticeship under the guidance of her mother. She rode her first winner, Mr Mumbles, at Taree on Melbourne Cup day.

"Mum really helped me improve," she said. "She took the time to make sure I was getting the fundamentals right. Eventually I had to move on to a bigger stable though."

Belinda transferred her indentures to Gordon Yorke in 2009 where she gained valuable knowledge and experience. Twelve months later she shifted to Ross Stitt's Taree stables in search of more opportunities.

By this stage she was riding winners every week but longed to be closer to her family in Wauchope so she packed her bags again and shifted to Port Macquarie.

Belinda completed the last 12 months of her apprenticeship with Marc Quinn and capped it off by winning the 2012 Mid North Coast Apprentice Jockeys' Premiership.

"It gave me a good kick along," she said. "I was a bit worried about the transition from claiming apprentice to senior jockey but it actually ended up being quite seamless. I had a good run after coming out of my time."

Belinda's career has been plagued with injury and she has spent more

than 20 months of the past four years on the sideline.

The list of bones she has broken is eye-watering – leg, ankle, both eye sockets, nose, ribs, wrist. It would be enough to drive most people to give it away but not Belinda, who has bounced back from every accident with more enthusiasm than ever.

Today Belinda's alarm goes off before 4am. She rides trackwork for Neil Godbolt, Grant and Colt Prosser and Graham Hoy before heading to the races. She's racked up 120,000km in a year chasing rides in NSW and interstate.

"It's all part of the job," she said. "Jockeying definitely comes first. There aren't many nights I am home for longer than eight hours. I have a very understanding husband!"

Belinda can't imagine life as anything but a jockey but she does have a back-up plan.

Racing NSW helped her train as a beauty therapist so she can swap her whip for a pair of tweezers in the future if she needs to.

"I'm not about to give up any time soon," she said. "I love it. There are more opportunities for women these days. Go into any jockey room and it's pretty close to 50/50."

For now, Belinda is focused on riding 60 winners before the season is out and she's on track to do it.

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