

SHELBY SIXTYSIX

keeps motoring along

SHELBY SIXTYSIX GAINED CULT STATUS FOLLOWING AN AMAZING MONTH WHEREBY HIS FOUR STARTS EARNED CONNECTIONS MORE THAN \$633,000 IN PRIZEMONEY WORDS: RAY HICKSON PICTURES: BRADLEY PHOTOGRAPHERS



Robbie Dolan prepares to celebrate as Shelby Sixtysix proves too strong in the Furphy Galaxy at Rosehill Gardens

Shelby Sixtysix, the cult hero of the Sydney autumn, is the once in a lifetime story that Danny Williams never saw coming but one he's so grateful to have been a part of.

Not just because the unassuming gelding handed the popular Goulburn trainer his first Group 1 win, he taught Williams to love the sport again after a difficult time.

Exactly how Shelby Sixtysix made his way from a TAB Highway win to Group 1 glory in the space of a month is something Williams still ponders.

What's great about the fact that he achieved such a remarkable rise is how much people got behind the underdog story as it evolved week after week.

"It's uncanny how everything unfolded, and we were just going along for the ride," he said. "We just kept throwing the dice and having the ride of our life.

"It bowled me over how many people followed him. It's just amazing how many people this horse touched.

"If you've got a horse going well enough, never doubt yourself. Have a go.

"Aim high and have a bit of confidence in yourself, have a throw of the stumps. This wouldn't have happened if I hadn't have done that."

There are so many sides to the Shelby Sixtysix tale.

When Williams went to \$150,000 to buy the son of Toronado at the 2018 Inglis Classic Sale he was the most expensive horse the trainer had purchased. That year, buoyed by a run of success, Williams spent almost \$1 million on yearlings.

Thanks to Shelby Sixtysix's heroics in the autumn he's only now fully paid for.

It's one thing to outlay money for a yearling you like, it's one of the biggest gambles a trainer takes, you still have to find owners and after a couple of pledges fell by the wayside Williams and partner Mandy O'Leary were left with 35 per cent.

That grew to 45 per cent when one of the owners had to sell their share.

Shelby Sixtysix is named after a car and while his engine runs smoothly, the same can't be said for his tyres. It soon became apparent as Williams got down to the business of training the horse that there was an issue.

"We always knew he had some sort of ability; it was frustrating because the horse each preparation continually pulled up lame after he worked fast," he said.

"He'd pull up lame but by the time he got back to the stables he was sound. So we couldn't isolate the issue."

Without a clear diagnosis from vets, Williams elected to send the horse to Agnes Banks Vet Clinic for scintigraphy, a process that isn't cheap but one that finally shed some light on what was ailing him – Palmar Osteochondral Disease, a condition that generally affects the lower ends of the cannon bone.

The owners would have to be patient as what Shelby Sixtysix needed most was time.

"He lit up in the front pasterns and joints and the hocks and behind his wither in the back," Williams said.

"It was a concussion related problem. Every time we did high velocity work he would feel a bit of pain in the joints.



Aim high and have a bit of confidence in yourself, have a throw of the stumps. This wouldn't have happened if I hadn't have done that.

"They said while he's young we may be able to get him through it. The vet gave us as positive an outcome we could get."

It would be almost two years after Shelby Sixtysix was purchased when he finally made his racetrack debut, at the end of March in 2020.

As Williams nursed the horse through his problems, he stumbled on something that, obviously unbeknownst to him, would be crucial to his rise to fame.

"We had a wet period at that stage and we were able to get him to a level of fitness where we were able to start him," he said.

"Being a gross horse too didn't help, he was a heavy thick set sort of horse and slow to mature. We went into our first start quite underdone.

"We aimed around running him as many times as we could in sequences but that's not always able to be done."

As it happened his first win came on a seven day back-up – his only win on a good track – but problems were never too far away.

If any race was ideal for a talented horse like Shelby Sixtysix it's the Country Championships. He fit the bill perfectly.

An up-and-coming galloper, trained in the country, who appreciates the forgiving autumn ground.

In 2021 injury would get in his way after an eye-catching third behind eventual Country Championships Final winner Art Cadeau in a Highway at Randwick and you could forgive anyone for considering they were fighting a losing battle.

"He had two quarter cracks in the one foot. I just threw my hands in the air and said 'it's too hard'," Williams said.

"We knew the horse was a pretty good thing of winning a Highway, we knew he had that much ability. He frustrated us because you'd take three steps forward and one step back every week."

Fast forward to 2022 and, having gone winless for over 18 months, his rating simply wasn't high enough to even make the field for the South East regional Championships.

But behind the scenes, Williams had been able to use Alan Cardy's property to swim his horses and that would become the secret weapon that allowed Shelby Sixtysix to retain a high level of fitness.



Trainer Danny Williams holds the Galaxy trophy aloft with Robbie Dolan by his side

He ran second, narrowly beaten in a TAB Highway, the weekend after the Nowra regional event and was found to have a corn, then a week later finally broke his dry spell with a runaway Highway win on a heavy track.

As funny as it sounds, being out of play for the Country Championships led to the turning point that transformed Shelby Sixtysix into a Group 1 winner when a last-minute decision was made to back up again in the Group 2 Challenge Stakes (1000m) and take on The Everest winner Nature Strip.

"It was a race we were looking to get a run under the belt for (stablemate) Ahead Start," Williams said.

"We'd had the conditions that were suitable for us to get a bit of work under Shelby's belt before he started winning those races. We galloped them together and Ahead Start had so much on him it wasn't funny.

"I noted the last five years the Challenge Stakes only had half a dozen to eight runners and it was \$5000 to run 10th.

"So we nominated Ahead Start for the Challenge, he wasn't fit enough to run in the Highway that day, and Shelby was nominated as an afterthought. There were only eight acceptors so we were definitely going to pick up \$5000.

"Then there were four scratchings, unfortunately we had to scratch Ahead Start as he was lame, and all of a sudden we were going to earn \$22,500 and we thought 'how great is this'.

"We had no chance but thought wouldn't it be great to have a run against the likes of Nature Strip and Eduardo and pick up \$22,500 for the exercise."

Of course Shelby Sixtysix, at \$61, ran the race of his life under the weight-for-age conditions on a heavy track. He sailed past Nature Strip inside the 200m and set out after eventual winner Eduardo.

"At the 600m I couldn't believe my eyes," he said.

"What I saw was Shelby Sixtysix travelling better than Eduardo and Nature Strip when the week before he couldn't keep up with Highway horses.

"He was flat footed from the 400m to 200m, they were too sharp for him and left him but I was excited thinking he'd be beaten three or four lengths. I didn't

know what to think when he got so close to Eduardo [he picked up \$94,000].

"Like everyone who saw the run I thought it was a one off." It wasn't. A week later he took out the Group 3 Maurice McCarten Stakes (1100m) and Williams elected to pay up for the Group 1 Galaxy (1100m) the following Saturday.

His rating had exploded from 62 going into the Challenge to 96.

By now the Shelby Sixtysix bandwagon had many passengers, he was labelled the 'Party Boy' by racecaller Darren Flindell for turning up every weekend, and when Robbie Dolan drove the gelding to the front in the shadows of the post disbelief again set in.

"There was more pressure on us but not at any time did I think we could win," he said.

"We weren't believing what was happening, I was like everyone else. People went with him on the journey. That's what made it so inspiring.

"Mandy and I enjoyed it. When we won the Maurice McCarten we came home and had Hungry Jacks.

"After the Galaxy we were that exhausted mentally I think we just had a cup of tea and went to bed. The next day we enjoyed reading all the emails and social media about him.

"The horse has always had the ability, it's taken him a long time to mature and get circumstances to gel."

By the time the Group 1 TJ Smith Stakes came around the media focus on Williams and Shelby Sixtysix was huge. It was great publicity not only for the trainer but for racing.

Williams says he may have gone to the well one or two times too many after the Galaxy but is adamant the horse was not showing any signs of disinterest.

Now he's had a spell the spring carnival beckons, and if it's a wet one perhaps the Shelby Sixtysix story will have another chapter.

"It would be a nice continuing story to have. Not just for us but the public," he said.

"After what he'd done leading into the TJ I came out of that satisfied to the point that I don't care if he retires. I just want to do the right thing by the horse, the owners and his fans."

Looking back, of all the horses to hand Williams his first Group 1 win it's amazing it was Shelby Sixtysix. And it was timely.

Williams, 57 in August, freely admits he's found it difficult to stay afloat financially the past couple of years and also mentally after the loss of his horse Hot 'N' Hazy in the winter of 2020.

"We paid off not only him, that particular year when we bought him, we bought near \$1 million worth of yearlings," he said.

"We were very heavily in debt to the point we almost gave it away a few times.

"We went through the period with Hot 'N' Hazy, it took us a long time to recover. I was ready to throw it in, I didn't want to go to the races.

"A horse like Shelby Sixtysix has just been a rebirth for me." **RNSW**