

GIBBONS JUNIOR

starts to make waves

Although it's around 18 months since his riding debut, Dylan Gibbons is as comfortable as you can be with the hype that comes from being the son of a prominent jockey in the social media era.

Nothing can be concealed. You can't fail in private.

And with a Group 3 win already on the board, Festival Dancer's success in the Spring Stakes on his home track at Newcastle, he's already set the bar high.

But on Gibbons' side is the experience of his father, popular Newcastle jockey Andrew Gibbons, and that of everyone who has guided him along the way.

That list includes his master Kris Lees, Lees' foremen Cameren Swan, Mal Ollerton and Lucas Miller, trainers Joel and Wayne Wilkes and ex-jockey turned trainer Cody Morgan to name a few.

"Even when I was having my first ride I was 'Andrew Gibbons' son having his first ride' so from day dot there's been that little bit of extra expectation on me because of dad's reputation for being a very good jockey," he said.

"People like Cameren Swan talk about how their first 100 to 150 rides were at country meetings that weren't even televised. So, you're able to learn a lot easier without the pressure of television and the media watching you.

"Now everyone gets on social media if you put in a bad ride and let you know how they feel.

"It's just the way it is now, everyone has adjusted to that, and thankfully I've had dad alongside me all the time always helping me and giving me the best advice."

Given he's the son of a successful jockey you'd expect Gibbons to have an easy path into the industry but then again racing wasn't his father's first passion. That was soccer. Then boxing.

However, this is Dylan's story and in some ways you could argue he did have an easy path. But it had to be his decision.

Even though there are photos of a young Dylan Gibbons decked out in racing silks and goggles riding winners on his rocking horse it was never pushed upon him.

"Dad never really tried to turn me away from it but was never forthcoming with getting me involved in it," he said.

"I don't think mum and dad had much choice. There's so many pictures of me as a baby, I was always on my rocking horse pretending I was in races.

THERE'S A LOT EXPECTED OF DYLAN GIBBONS IN 2022 – HE KNOWS IT, BUT IT'S NOTHING NEW TO THE EMERGING 20-YEAR-OLD APPRENTICE JOCKEY

WORDS: RAY HICKSON
PICTURE: BRADLEY PHOTOGRAPHERS

"Mum dropped a few 'you're not being a jockey' comments but she tried without trying too hard because she always knew there was no hope."

It wasn't until he was nearly 16 that Dylan, by this stage spending more time on horse form than schoolwork, committed and, ironically, it was after something of an ultimatum from his father.

But he had to start at the bottom. To learn how to ride,

having been on the back of nothing resembling a thoroughbred other than his childhood rocking horse.

"I think by then I was making sure I couldn't do anything bar racing," he said.

"I was happy just doing the form and telling people I was going to be a jockey but I didn't actually try to get things in place.

"When I was 15 or 16 dad was like 'do you want to do this'. So, he got me riding."

Once Gibbons entered the Kris Lees system, prior to leaving school, he'd "burn around the track" on a pony provided by Mal Ollerton. He spent a month at Taree with Wayne and Joel Wilkes and two months in Tamworth with Cody Morgan.

He says he wasn't a naturally gifted rider at the start. But perhaps he was, and just didn't know it because you don't ride 86 winners in your first full season if there isn't some talent to be unlocked.

The goal for this season is to top 100 and this far in that's more than achievable.

"When I first started riding I wouldn't say I was hopeless but I wasn't a natural," he said.

"I looked a bit awkward on a horse and didn't have most of the tools but because I wanted to do it so much it really helped me.

"It took me too long to start riding horses it had me on the back foot a bit. Going away to other trainers, going to Kris' farm and having Mal bring in the pony for me all those little things helped me ride consistently and work on how I looked on a horse and how I was riding."



Dylan Gibbons: "There's so many pictures of me as a baby, I was always on my rocking horse pretending I was in races"

"I just had my mind set on doing it, it was never like 'I'll try it and give it a go'. I never let any doubt get to me.

"Lucas Miller would video horses to send off to owners and he would send me videos of how I was going and back then I didn't think I was too bad, so I never doubted myself. Now I look back on them and it humbles me a bit."

Eventually the time came for Gibbons to have his first race ride. It was going to be at Cessnock on the Lees-trained Star Raider on July 27, 2020, but that meeting was called off and he had to wait an extra day to pilot

the same horse at Taree.

Star Raider ran fourth as a \$1.85 chance. It would only be another 11 days before that first winner, Ocean Ruler, at Coffs Harbour and he was away.

"I didn't actually think there'd be as much hype around as there was," he said.

"There were plenty of articles and posts going around to let everyone know. Once I got out there and got on the horse it was all about enjoying it.

"A couple of times before my first race ride dad would say 'relax, you know what you're doing, don't worry about anything else'. 'You're better off making the wrong decision than no decision otherwise you won't learn'.

"He always knew what to say and what not to say and that made it a lot easier.

"When I rode my first winner it felt like this big weight drop off my back. Even though there was no pressure to get it.

"Because I wanted to be a jockey since I was so young it felt like I had to wait 18 years to get my first winner. It was what I'd always dream about.

"I had no bigger thrill than watching dad ride winners, I think I enjoyed most of his more than he ever did. It was a shame he wasn't there but thankfully mum was."

The plan for 2022 is for Gibbons to transition from the provincial circuit to join the metropolitan ranks, that's not going to change after his early Group 3 breakthrough, and he already knows the path to follow.

It's been set out and perfected by Mark Newnham who has guided his apprentices Robbie Dolan and Tom Sherry to the last three champion apprentice crowns. No doubt the 2022/23 title is in his sights.

"I'd have senior jockeys and dad who I'd always look up to and idolise but being able to watch what Robbie and Tom have done, watch them go through their grades and use what they could out of each claim, was really good to see," he said.

"How everything has gone so far it speaks for itself.

"The best time for apprentices to switch zones is normally about winter, it's been a bit different the last couple of seasons because of COVID.

"Towards the end of the season Kris will send me in there and we'll see how we go." **RNSW**