

# CLERK OF THE COURSE

## – no ordinary horse

**D**igger, Spinner and Aussie are not names you'll find in the race book but they are stars of racing in their own right.

While it's up to the likes of Winx and Redzel to captivate crowds, it's Digger, Spinner, Aussie and the team of genial greys that see the show roll on without a hitch.

Tessa Richardson has been a clerk for four years now operating mainly at Randwick, Rosehill and Canterbury and says the horses have to have a very special temperament to do what they do.

"You know them backwards and they know you. Most of the time when they are doing their normal duties they are very passive but as soon as they realise something has gone wrong they change completely and become very focused and quite aggressive," explained Richardson.

"If there is a loose horse, they all know. Sometimes they know before we do. It sounds silly but they can tell if there is a horse with no rider on it.

"They all know they have to catch it and start getting up on their toes. The perception is that they are docile, 'doughy' animals and while they are quiet, they can pull as hard as a racehorse if they want to.

"When they are hunting one down to catch it, for a short distance, they can be as quick as a thoroughbred. They are athletes; just a different kind."

The thoroughbred breed was phased out of the clerk ranks as they are built for sprinting and given a clerk's horse can travel upwards of 15km a day, their durability lets them down.

"Generally, if a thoroughbred has a good work ethic they have been a good racehorse and you can never get the racehorse out of them. The ones we use are more for endurance.

"They are differently educated being stock horses, they are tougher too. The stock horse breed is derived

**CLERK OF THE COURSE CAN REFER TO BOTH THE RIDER AND THE HORSE – THEY ARE ONE AND THE SAME. ATTACHED AT THE HIP ... LITERALLY** WORDS: BRAD GRAY  
PICTURE: STEVE HART

from Walers which were used in war.

"They are hearty little things, they don't ever stop. They just keep going," she said.

Richardson, who currently divides her time between being a clerk and riding work for Mark Newnham after a stint with Gai Waterhouse, was originally courted by Head Clerk, Mick Stanley, who is currently sidelined with a knee injury.

"Mick approached me at the track one day and asked if it is something I'd be interested in. I said yes because it is a pretty coveted job," said Richardson.

"I had a strong background in equestrian beforehand so I had done a bit of everything which helps because riding the ponies is very different to riding racehorses. You have to have the pony so it's part of you.

"You have to be strong but a lot of it is about technique. You will never outmuscle a horse. That's just a general rule of working with horses.

"You are never going to beat them on strength so you have to either outsmart them or negotiate with them. Let them think they are getting their own way."

Leading highly strung horses to the gates is only part of a day's work and although some of them come with warnings, often it's the clerk's first dealing with a troublesome horse.

"Every horse is different. Sometimes you have never seen these horses before and when you grab hold of them you have to make an

assessment then and there.

"They might try to flip over and you have got to talk them out of that and get them to behave. Some just won't go at all.

"We've got a couple that throw the anchor out and you have to figure out how to get them to move," she said.

"We do have our usual customers which are certain horses we see every time they race because the pony keeps them calmer.

"As soon as they get on the grass a lot of them think they can bolt. We have to make sure they get to the gates without impacting the market, in an order where they are fit to race."

There are a number of horses the clerks use, all with different levels of experience, backgrounds and personality quirks, but Digger is a favourite of Richardson.

"He was Mick's pony so he was really well educated. He is reliable and very quick when he needs to be. If one is loose, he'll catch it no matter what. He is just that fast," said Richardson.

"He is brave and aggressive which they need to be because if you are taking a colt to the gates they will try to put it over you and he just puts them straight back in their place.

"Racehorses are very strong and will try to go through you if they can but he doesn't cop any of that. He pushes back just as hard."

Richardson counts leading in Winx and Sweet Idea as highlights and also recalls her eye-opening first day on the job, having been called into action at Randwick after Kathy O'Hara took a tumble.

"It gave me a good introduction. The loose horse came past and Mick caught it straight away.

"I was a bit star struck about what had happened. I was on Aussie, our most experienced horse, and he took off after it without me even realising what was happening.

"He knew his job and I was just a

passenger; he knew where he was going and went after it," Richardson laughed.

"It was my first experience of how dangerous a jockey's job is. You understand it a bit more when you see that happen, especially on your first day. You don't really understand sitting in the grandstand.

"When I brought Sweet Idea back from the Missile that was pretty good because I was working at Gai's at the time and I really liked the horse.

"Bringing Winx back after she won a Group Two at Randwick is another one. I've got a photo on my wall leading her in.

"She is a special horse and her last win at Randwick was amazing. We can hear the crowd from the barriers and as soon as the gates opened, they started roaring.

"Then when Hughie went right down along the grandstand the public section was screaming. I haven't seen anything like it."

Richardson who has been riding horses since she can remember, needed a job when she was 19 and two of her friends were riding work for Waterhouse. That was her entry point into the industry and she spent five years with Gai.

Richardson started two days out from Pierro winning the Golden Slipper before seeing the likes of Fiorente, Overreach, Sweet Idea, Vancouver, Cosmic Endeavour, English and More Joyous filter through the stable.

Then there is Glencadam Gold, winner of the 2012 The Metropolitan, who is living out his life in a paddock at Rossmore under the care of Richardson. The now 10-year-old import had feet issues when he arrived in Australia and they still need to be managed.

"He is a cheeky horse. He can be nasty sometimes but I loved him and I was lucky enough that Gai, Adrian and the owners let me keep him afterwards. I don't ride him often as he doesn't like it.

"He wants to be a fat old retired man eating so I let him. He is happy and has done enough work in his life," said Richardson.

"He is not a cuddly horse but he is tough, brave and has a sense of humour which I find quite rare in



*Tessa Richardson alongside Winx and Hugh Bowman after a Royal Randwick win*

horses."

These days, Tessa rides fast and slow work six mornings a week for Newnham, with the two striking up a close working relationship during their time under Gai.

"(Mark) has always been great to work with and very good to me. I said to him if you get your own licence I'll come and work with you.

"About six weeks later he had six horses out at Warwick Farm and then a couple of weeks after that I came out as well. I was his first employee out there. We have opened up at Randwick since.

"(Horses) make you smile. When you have a really good gallop on one, they amaze you. You do the same thing every day but they still

amaze you with what they can do. The horses, that's why I'm in it."

Winner of last year's Group Two Skyline Stakes, Diamond Tathagata, who also went on to run in the Golden Slipper, already holds a special place for Richardson.

"Mark did some of his major gallops but I rode him a lot. He is special to me as I've worked with him since he came from the breakers and being Mark's first Group winner, he'll always be a very special horse.

"Henry (Diamond Tathagata's stable name) ran second to She Will Reign and then won a Group Two which was validation for Mark that he was already on the right track getting immediate results from a small pool of horses." **RNSW**