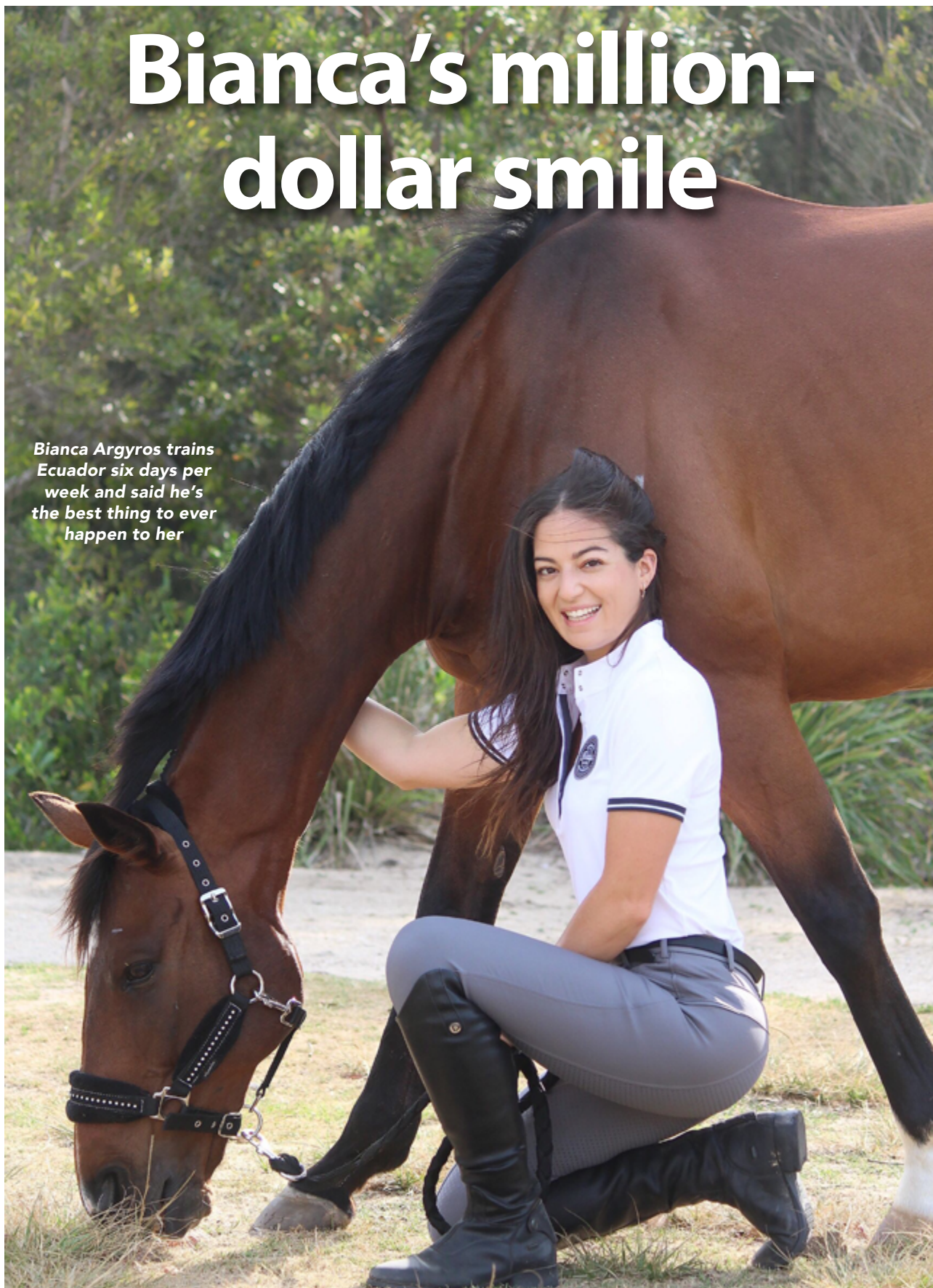


Bianca's million-dollar smile

Bianca Argyros trains Ecuador six days per week and said he's the best thing to ever happen to her



WHEN BIANCA ARGYROS DECIDED TO ADOPT A RETIRED RACEHORSE EARLIER THIS YEAR, SHE COULDN'T HAVE IMAGINED THE IMPACT IT WOULD HAVE ON HER LIFE

WORDS: JULIEANNE HORSMAN PICTURES: AMELIA SUTHERLAND & BRADLEY PHOTOGRAPHERS

Bianca Argyros had just returned from a working holiday in the United States and getting back into riding was high on her "to do" list.

Bianca's friend told her about Team Thoroughbred, Racing NSW's equine welfare and rehoming division, and she knew straight away that's where she wanted to start her search.

"Team Thoroughbred NSW was an obvious choice because I felt like I would be giving a horse a second chance," Bianca said.

"I also knew Team Thoroughbred staff would be up front about the horse's history because matching the right horse with the right person is their priority."

Bianca filled out the expression of interest form and went to Princes Farm to meet two horses chosen for her. She rode and liked both but wasn't convinced either was her ideal match.

It was then she was told about former Gai Waterhouse and Adrian Bott-trained galloper Ecuador, a recently retired winner of more than \$1.1 million prizemoney with a gentle temperament and nice movement.

The next day she jumped in her car and made the five-hour drive to Cassie Schmidt's property at Redbank near Port Macquarie where Ecuador was being retrained for life after racing.

"As soon as I laid eyes on him, I knew he was the one," Bianca gushed.

"He was already saddled up when I arrived and the minute I got on, I felt a sense of trust in him. Cassie was guiding me through the first ride and the minute I got off I bought him."

Once Bianca had Ecuador back home, she put him into work six days per week.

She started with flat work to make sure he was safe then progressed to pole and grid work before they started jumping.

In just under two months they were ready for their first dressage competition together at Como. Coincidentally it fell on Ecuador's 10th birthday.

"We placed third in Prep E which is a basic test, but he was so well behaved and calm on the day," Bianca said. "I couldn't have asked for a better performance."

The day was made extra special for Bianca by a couple of surprise guests in the audience.

"In the days before the competition I was contacted by Ecuador's previous owners Bob and Robyn Winney," she said.

"They came along to support us on the day and showed me some memorabilia from EC's racing days. It was a beautiful moment, strangers united by the love for this one special horse."

Since then Bianca has continued Ecuador's education, gradually stepping up the complexity of his training each week.

"Over the past six months we have got to know each other inside out," she said.

"Initially I was a little bit intimidated by his sheer power but now I am confident in how to use it for us.

"Next year we plan on taking things to another level. My goal is The Jump Off series.



ABOVE: Bianca Argyros retraining former champion racehorse, Ecuador, for dressage and showjumping

BELOW: Ecuador (Adam Hyeronimus) wins the Listed Carrington Stakes at Royal Randwick in January 2017.

It was one of 10 career wins



"With Ecuador's power, agility and speed, I know he'd be one to look out for in the show."

Their strengthening relationship is especially evident on social media.

Videos of them galloping along the sand at Kurnell Beach and cuddling in the stables inspire other young equestriennes dreaming of doing the same.

They even featured in a story on page 3 of The Daily Telegraph to promote the Sydney Spring Racing Carnival.

"That was amazing! It was such a fairy tale to be able to ride along the beach with my beautiful horse and work with such a talented photographer. It was something I will never forget.

"Since that article was published, I have met so many other people connected to Ecuador including stablehands and strappers who cared for him.

"It's been an incredible experience. He's the best thing that's ever happened to me!" **RNSW**

Find out more about Team Thoroughbred NSW at www.teamthoroughbred.com.au

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