

SPRING WATCH

Stoute's worthy Opinion

ON THE RADAR: Opinion is an emerging young stayer trained by Sir Michael Stoute for the Highclere Thoroughbred Racing Syndicate, managed by raconteur Harry Herbert, who is a regular visitor to Melbourne in the spring and is keen to bring Opinion to the Victorian carnival.

Herbert "talked up" Opinion after the horse's win in the Duke of Edinburgh Handicap (2400m) at Royal Ascot in June, saying: "We'll have a look at the Ebor (2800m at York in August) and even Melbourne."

Interestingly, Opinion is a half-brother to Fox Hunt, who finished an excellent seventh behind Dunaden in the 2011 Melbourne Cup.

After Ascot, Opinion started 7/2f in the Old Newton Cup (2400m), a Heritage Handicap, at Haydock on July 6. With Keiren Fallon unable to obtain a clear run, he dead-heated for fifth four lengths from winner Star Lahib (8/1).

Opinion will need to win the Ebor to get his rating high enough to come to Melbourne. Ebor winners include Caulfield Cup winner All The Good and Melbourne Cup runners-up Purple Moon and Give The Slip.

BREEDING: b h 4, Oasis Dream (GB)-Kiltubber (IRE), by Sadler's Wells (USA)

RECORD: 11 starts, 4-0-1.

TYPE: stayer—BMW Caulfield Cup, Emirates Melbourne Cup

HIGHLIGHT: won the Duke of Edinburgh Handicap, 2400m at Royal Ascot.

For the full dossier on Opinion, and for profiles of scores of likely spring runners, go to 'international race to spring' on www.racingvictoria.net.au

BOOK REVIEW

How an 'immortal loser' won me over

BY STEPHEN HOWELL*

This Drongo is a winner. The book I mean. The horse of that name raced in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide in the 1920s and couldn't win in 37 starts.

He is remembered for failure because his name became part of Australia's language, and that is his peculiar legacy. The inestimable value of that legacy is noted in *Drongo, The Immortal Loser* by author Bruce Walkley, whose thoroughly painstaking research has led to him putting together the story of horse and connections, close and distant.

And those involved include the mistress of a King of England, a famous Australian racing family, a jockey who won four Melbourne Cups, a trainer and his jockey brother, and thoroughbreds who were champs and chumps.

The book, while telling that Drongo the non-winner justifiably became the Aussie word for a slow-witted person—even an out-and-out no-hoper—also shows great sympathy for the horse. His record, when examined closely, reveals that he would have been a winner if connections had lowered their sights a little.

Drongo, you see, ran second in the 1923 Victoria Derby and the 1924 VRC St Leger and third in the 1924 AJC St Leger, races for the best staying three-year-olds. He ran in the Melbourne Cup in both those years. He was placed in the Memsie Stakes, a race recently promoted to Group 1 level, and was fourth in the Sydney

Cup, also a Group 1 race. In starts 34 to 37, against quality opposition, he was third, second, fourth and second.

And in many races he was ridden by Bobby Lewis, who shares the Melbourne Cup record of four wins with Harry White. Lewis, who rode eight Victoria Derby winners, also a record, wrote of Drongo's Derby second behind Frances Tressady, ridden by Frank Dempsey: "He (Dempsey) beat me by three-quarters of a length. I am sure that but for (another) horse coming back on me I would have won. Drongo turned out to be a very unlucky horse."

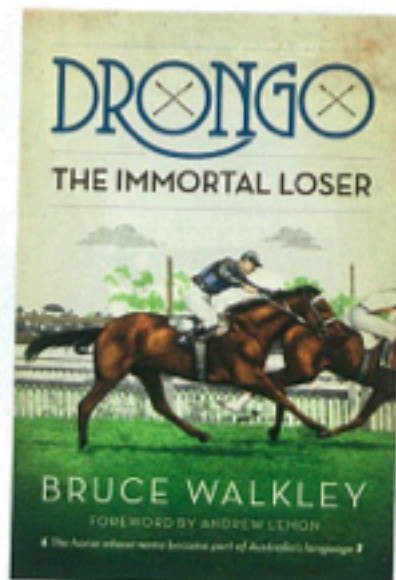
And Andrew Lemon, the Victoria Racing Club's historian, wrote in the foreword that Walkley's book "can only bring out a new legion of fans to cheer on a champion that never was, eternally the out-and-out Drongo".

Drongo turned out to be a very unlucky horse.

BOBBY LEWIS

But the book is more than racing, it is an historical reference that tells of the actress Lillie Langtry's liaison with the Prince of Wales, Later Edward VII, and how 'The Jersey Lily' and her interest in horses eventually linked to Drongo; a sort of six degrees of royal separation—read it and you will follow.

The book also reminds us that there was rioting and



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looting and death in Melbourne on Derby night in 1923, not because of Drongo's defeat but the much more serious consequence of a police strike.

The Creswicks are the famous racing family. In 1909 pastoralist and sportsman Alexander Creswick gave his daughter Dorothy an imported filly, Lys d'Or, who was to become Drongo's dam. And Drongo raced in the famous Creswick colours, black with a blue sash. Dorothy Creswick later married VRC vet Samuel Wood, who was to sign the papers that cleared Phar Lap to race in America.

George Tantram was the trainer, his brother Harry an occasional rider of Drongo. Tantram Avenue in East St Kilda, not far from Caulfield racecourse where Tantram trained, is named after the family.

Walkley worked as a reporter and sub-editor for leading Australian newspapers and news organisations for 50 years. His "retirement" gave him the time to indulge his passion for research and writing, and it has been time well spent.

* Stephen Howell, in between putting together recent editions of *Inside Racing*, edited *Drongo, The Immortal Loser*.