

MELANIE SHARPE AND QUEENSLAND HERO BUFFERING HAVE BEEN TRUE TO FORM WHEN IT COMES TO AUSTRALIA'S ENDURING AFFECTION FOR THE CHAMPION-STRAPPER RELATIONSHIP.



It was a few days before the Manikato, the flagship sprint of the 2016 Cox Plate carnival, and Buffering, the rousing, ragtag old hero of the Australian turf, was batted down against an unseasonably cool October, even for Melbourne. He was vying for an eighth Gr1 victory, made more remarkable by it being his thirty-fifth Gr1 effort. But then, Buffering was nine years old. The Manikato Stakes would be start number 55.

That he was still plying his trade on the top shelf of horse racing was phenomenal. The old gelding had opened his book at Doomben in March 2010, and between that day and the 2016 Manikato, he had run into Black Caviar three times, Hay List four times, and when those two had gone there was Lankan Rupee and Chautauqua. Buffering had run in three countries, four different Australian states, and tallied \$7.2 million in earnings. It wasn't bad for a gelding that cost \$22,000 as a Magic Millions yearling. He had paid himself off 331 times over.



BEING WITH BUFF

JESSICA OWERS

Melanie Sharpe thought about this only occasionally, because when you tend any horse in training, you hardly have the time to be sentimental. The likeable, pale-haired 27-year-old is Buffering's strapper, and the racing manager and travelling foreman for Eagle Farm-based trainer Robert Heathcote. Heathcote had had Buffering since the horse's debut at Doomben six years before (which he won), and Sharpe had been at Buffering's side for the last two, arguably his best, years.

She knows the horse intimately. High withered, 16 hands high, 510-kilogram racing weight. "Rob often refers to him as a drag star because he's got that big backside on him," Sharpe says. "He's different, not your average-looking racehorse. He's got a fair bit of lump about him, and he's a grot. He'll pee and poo wherever. That's just him. He doesn't care."

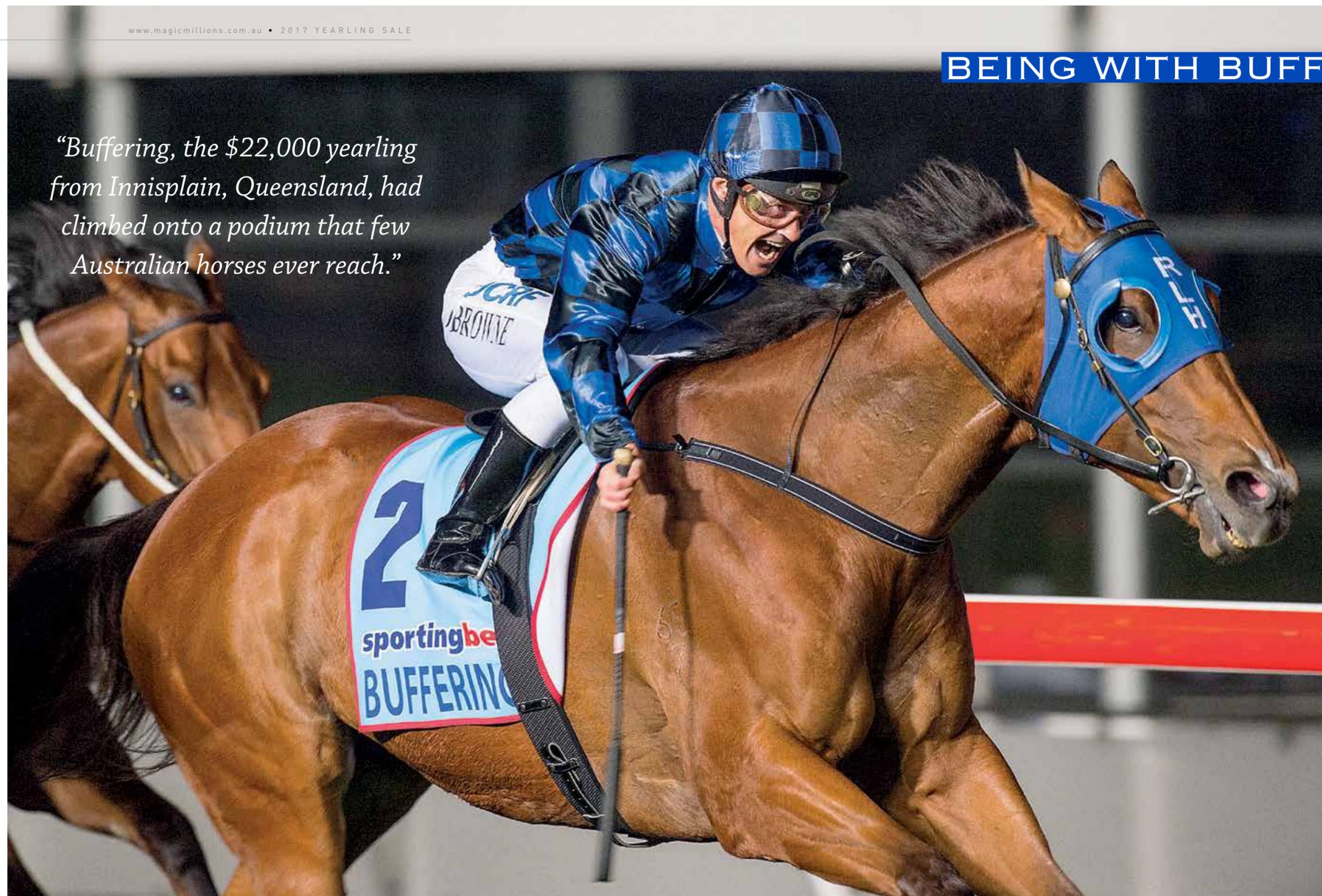
Few airs, no graces, Buffering had been a darling of the Australian turf since he broke his Gr1 maiden in the 2013 Manikato. It was a popular victory, in part because of the public sympathy for any sprinter going around in the Black Caviar era, but also because it had taken the horse 17 attempts to land a top prize. After that he won the VRC Sprint Classic, Moir Stakes (twice), Winterbottom Stakes (twice) and Magic Millions Plate. Heathcote had travelled Buffering to Sha Tin for the Hong Kong Sprint in December 2014, where the horse finished sixth behind Aerovelocity, but as an eight-year-old in 2015, the gelding's tail was up. He was going too well to stay at home.

"Prior to the Moir [of October 2015], Rob mentioned Dubai to me," Sharpe says. "He said we had to keep the horse sound and keep him happy, and if he could win another race we'd be going. Then Buff went on to win the Winterbottom and Magic Millions, and that was it." A famous episode had begun for the Australian pair.

It was a given that Sharpe would travel to the 2016 Dubai World Cup with Buffering. "It was an unreal given," she says. Her diarised Twitter account became a popular attraction. Sharpe, a former jockey and accomplished rider, with state-level decorations in pony club and eventing, is an ideal travelling foreman for the reason that she can do everything – ride, strap, treatments. "I'm like a combo deal," she says. In Dubai, when everything went to plan and Buffering settled into the sandy surrounds of Meydan like he'd been there all his life, history followed. Under Damian Browne, he won the Al Quoz Sprint by three-quarters of a length, with the likes of Peniaphobia, Not Listenin' tome and Sole Power in his wake. "We were just happy to be there," Sharpe says. "But when he won, we were overwhelmed."

Buffering, the \$22,000 yearling from Innisplain, Queensland, had climbed onto a podium that few Australian horses ever reach. His strapper had become used to the attention before the Meydan victory, but following it, it was almost relentless. "I got used to it, in terms of being noticed" she says. "I enjoyed it, but I didn't reach out for it. It's nice to be recognised for hard work, but strappers, trackwork riders... we don't get as much recognition as jockeys and trainers, and that's just the way it is."

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That might be a pragmatic Queensland attitude, or it might be one cultivated from Sharpe's interesting backstory. Born in Gosford, New South Wales, she followed her parents to Far North Queensland at the age of five, and enjoyed a bush childhood that Australia is so known for – hot, scrubby country, her own pony at the age of nine, freedom. She was a confident equestrienne, something her mother embraced and encouraged, even as it became just the two of them when the marriage failed. "I'm an only child. We had nine horses in the back paddock with 20 acres. I wasn't spoiled much," she jokes. "My mum gave me the option at 15 to stay in school or go to Brisbane to be an apprentice jockey. What's a 15-year-old kid going to do, but of course go off to be a jockey."

Sharpe's first introduction to racing came with a school-time gig at Cornlands Stud in Far North Queensland, but as an apprentice in big smoke Brisbane she tasted the drama and the dirt of competitive racing, and it didn't last as long as she might have hoped. "I was young and I fell into the world of fun and fame, and I wasn't focused or dedicated," she says. "If I could do it all again I would do it so differently."

Sharpe had about 160 rides in her short two-year career for 17 winners, and suddenly faced with so much youth and a new career choice, she headed into the training yards of Heathcote, then south to Melbourne for a time before rejoining Heathcote, and Buffering, in 2014. "I don't necessarily regret finishing riding," she says. "I've seen a lot more things since then."

Off the back of Buffering's glittering Meydan victory, the pair headed to Sha Tin, but the gelding was last in the Chairman's Sprint Prize in May. Chautauqua, the other Australian, was too good. Sharpe partly blames herself. She says she rolled her ankle and got food poisoning and, as a result, her star was undercooked. Buffering was lame returning to scale, and scoped so poorly that Heathcote was unsure if he'd race again. But he did, returning to Moonee Valley in the Australian spring for another tilt at the Moir (he ran fifth), and onwards to the Manikato the night before the 2016 Cox Plate.

BEING WITH BUFF



At start number 55, it was inevitable Sharpe would wonder if each race would be the gelding's last hurrah. She and Heathcote were hoping that Buffering, the old warrior, would rediscover his punch, yet the young strapper was realistic about it going the other way. "It will be a sad day when he retires, but it will be good. Everyone needs to stop at some point," she said. "Buff has given me so much. He has helped me to get to where I am, and made me feel a bit more appreciated. It's all about him at the moment."

The night of the Manikato meeting, Melbourne's sun dropped and the temperature followed like a stone. They were assaulted by the cold. Chautauqua was there, English too, along with the Godolphin globetrotter Holler, and Buffering did everything he normally would. But Heathcote would later say he couldn't see it in the horse's eyes anymore; the fight just wasn't there. Buffering was retired after an unplaced run in the Manikato, and that was finally that. "It's a sad time and we'll miss him, but he's done a super job," said Sharpe. "Big green pastures for the old boy from here on."

It might have come sooner than she was expecting, but Buff's retirement is hardly the end for Melanie Sharpe. Her career is not a one-horse race. She'll tell you that in fact Hopfgarten is her favourite, a horse she calls "Nugget" and one that, like Buffering, was a Magic Millions cheapie at \$26,000. When the spring is done, she'll return home to Brisbane where her three cats are waiting, and where her valiant mother, who suffered a stroke some years ago, is in a care facility. Like most of us, Sharpe has her burdens. But she has ambitions too.

BUFFERING (AUS) 2007 b g

Mossman (AUS) – Action Annie (AUS), by Anabaa (USA)

Trainer: Robert Heathcote

Career: 55 starts, 20 wins, 17 placings

Prizemoney: AUD \$7.3 million

7 Gr1 wins, 13 times Gr1 placed, 35 overall Gr1 starts

13 Gr wins, 16 times Gr placed, 47 overall Gr starts

Major wins:

2016 Gr1 Al Quoz Sprint, Meydan

2015, 2014 Gr1 2012 Gr2 Moir Stakes, Moonee Valley

2015, 2013 Gr1 Winterbottom Stakes, Ascot (Western Australia)

2013 Gr1 VRC Sprint Classic, Flemington

2013 Gr1 Manikato Stakes, Moonee Valley

2012 Gr2 Schillaci Stakes, Caulfield

2011 Gr2 BRC Victory Stakes, Eagle Farm

2010 Gr2 Roman Consul Stakes, Randwick

- Foaled 5 November 2007, Racetree (now Sun Stud, formerly Eliza Park), Innisplain, Queensland

- Lot 192, \$22,000 yearling April 2009, Magic Millions Gold Coast QTIS 600 sale

- Purchased by bloodstock agent Paul Willetts (syndicated)

- Buffering was one of four Mossman yearlings at that sale, fetching the second-highest price for the stallion (highest was \$32,000)



"My mum taught me a lot of values," she says. "You've got to work hard for your money. If you want something, you don't just get it handed to you." Her eventual ambition is to have a pre-training facility, and Buffering, with all the attention he brought them both for so long, might have pushed her gently closer to that goal.