

# He's a BELTER

*As one of Western Australia's most likeable and successful racing identities, former trainer Justin Warwick is on top again with his filly, Sheeza Belter. If it feels like déjà vu, it's because he's sort of been here before.*

WORDS: JESSICA OWERS

Justin Warwick, at 53 years old, doesn't bother heaven with his troubles. It's the kind of thing you say about a man that keeps on and keeps to himself, which Warwick has done the last year or so since handing in his trainer's ticket.

"I'm glad I did it," he says. "I'm glad I stopped. I didn't realise how much more there is to life than babysitting racehorses. I don't miss all the things that can go wrong with them, and I don't miss the commitment."

In April 2021, Warwick announced his retirement from training thoroughbreds. The news was sudden, almost overnight, and he was done by the close of the financial year. It brought to a halt a long life working alongside horses, both the trotting and galloping kind, but he didn't look back.

"I didn't plan on doing it," he says. "I just woke up one morning and made a decision. I'd gone through a marriage split, I had a cattle business and a horse business, and the horse business was taking up 85 percent of my energy but making 15 per cent of the profit. Maybe those figures are a bit dramatic, but I woke up at 2am one morning and I just couldn't do it anymore."

It was the end of one of western racing's most popular stables, a yard that had nursed along the careers of the Perth Cup winners Material Man and Black Tycoon, and the six-time stakes winner Wink And A Nod. There were plenty of others

that tallied Justin Warwick's 321 total winners over a decade, including 30 individual black-type successes.

"I had some good horses and I do miss the one-on-one a bit," he says. "Maybe one day I'll get back to it a little, but it won't be me having my name there. It might be my daughter or my son-in-law because I've done my dues."

After a long life of early mornings, Warwick gets a lot done by 9am these days. He doesn't need to, but it's hard to change the body clock after so long in the game. His everyday bread and butter now is cattle, which is a lot less intensive and by darn a lot more profitable, and, while he lives in Bunbury, his farm is less than an hour away near the township of Harvey.

Harvey is known for its oranges, its dairy and Snugglepot and Cuddlepie. For Warwick, it's from where he trades his cattle and he was doing this alongside training horses for many years.

"I feel very safe trading cattle," he says. "I find a lot of comfort in it and I enjoy the animals. It's similar to training horses in that it's animal husbandry, at the end of the day. It's raising young stock to be healthy animals."

In 2021, it was impossible for Warwick to walk away from horses altogether, so he didn't. He remains in racing as an owner, and he follows the sport still, albeit without the intensity of his training career. His ownership portfolio is









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usually around 10 horses at a time, with a half-share his standard investment, and he’s a regular on the yearling sale circuit, as he’s always been.

“I love going to the yearling sales and buying young horses,” he says. “I love that hope of them turning into something really good. It’s great when they make a profit, but even just paying for themselves, that’s a win in itself.”

Warwick is more qualified than most to preach in this respect. In 2015, at the Magic Millions Perth Yearling Sale, he plucked a filly out of the draft of Korilya Stud, a dark-coated youngster by Scandal Keeper whose immediate pedigree wasn’t anything obvious. Warwick paid \$10,000 for her and she was promptly named Quilista.

If the rest is history, it’s history worth repeating. Quilista won four races in Warwick’s care, including the Listed Raconteur Stakes, proving she was too good to stay in Western Australia. She went through a succession of eastern trainers, including Darren Weir, the Snowdens and the Maher-Eustace yard, and she won two Group races before her retirement in June 2019.

A month before her final race, however, Quilista was sent to the Magic Millions National Sale, selling to Tony Fung for \$950,000. It was a windfall for Warwick, a 95-fold return on his original investment. Quilista had delivered \$750,000 on the racetrack and, two years later, she was back at Magic Millions, this time topping the second day of the National Sale at an even million dollars.

Results like these happen once in a lifetime for people like

Justin Warwick, a small-time player from the west. Except that every so often, the exception overtakes the rule, and that was where Warwick found himself when he bought Sheeza Belter in 2021. The chestnut filly, a daughter of Gold Standard, won two of her first three starts in the west and, like Quilista, was too good to stay home. Warwick and his co-owners sent her east to the Snowdens, and she is now a Group 1 and dual Group 2 winner.

Sheeza Belter first crossed paths with Warwick at the 2021 Magic Millions Perth Yearling Sale. When he clapped eyes on her, she had all the razzamatazz that he looks for in a yearling filly.

“She reminded me of a couple of horses,” he says. “One was Quilista, a horse I bought and had a lot of success with, and the other was a horse called Red Can Man, who I hadn’t been brave enough to keeping bidding on.”

Sheeza Belter was Lot 60 two years ago, consigned by Mt Hallowell Stud and one of just three by Gold Standard in the sale. As Warwick sat ringside that day, he misread the bid board and presumed that his filly, Lot 60, was in the ring. He bid to \$40,000 and, when the gavel fell, it was job well done. He organised all the particulars and his ‘filly’ left the complex.

In fact, Warwick had bought Lot 59, a War Chant colt. He had no idea until his pre-trainer contacted him some weeks later, telling him his racy filly was, in fact, a colt. A hasty phone call to David Houston at Magic Millions told him exactly what he needed to hear... Lot 60 had passed in with a





reserve of \$50,000, and that was what Warwick would have to find if he still wanted her.

Sheeza Belter has banked \$1.76 million to date. Scraping together her \$50,000 price tag, which Warwick had to do at the time he was getting out of training, is a little less salty these days. He retained 45 percent of the filly and, right at the beginning, he and the owners agreed that Sheeza Belter will eventually head to the Magic Millions National Sale, chasing the standard set by Quilista.

Sheeza Belter has been a second coming for Warwick, a dazzling one, but what has he taken out of it second time around?

“All she has done is give me the confidence that what I do is okay,” he said. “I’m going to get it right some of the time, and I’m going to get it wrong some of the time. But the business model I have is okay right now, and it is possible to live the dream. We’ve done it twice now, and that’s not mentioning the other successes that we’ve had along the way. Getting a horse to be able to compete on the east coast is better than winning the lottery. It’s way more exciting and way more fun, and it’s what I want to keep trying to do.”

Warwick will admit that the highs have been as frequent as the lows. When he bought Sheeza Belter two years ago, he didn’t have enough money to keep her, yet he gifted five percent to a friend who had helped him out financially. Throughout his life, the former trainer has made quick decisions that have made him money and equally quick decisions that have cost

him money, but he’s comfortable now. Life is good, he says.

“I’m pretty much a man in the moment,” he admits. “If I make a decision, that’s it. It’s done. And I feel like I’m pretty lucky in life. I don’t procrastinate much but I know I’m lucky, that things just turn out for the better more often than not. I don’t try to swim against the tide.”

Warwick was married for 30 years to his former wife Carol. They’d been through a lot together, sharing a family, careers and a business. Their breakup has been part of the difficult white noise in his life for the last few years, but “I think we’ll be better people for it in the long run”.

For a very long time before taking to full-time training in 2011, Warwick was a pacing legend on the west Australian circuit. So was his father, his uncles and younger brother. He and Carol were a powerhouse outfit in the sport, switching codes after what Warwick called a “good perspective on life”. A staph infection put him in a wheelchair for months and, as would happen once again over a decade later, he made a decision and didn’t look back.

“Pacers were all I knew growing up,” Warwick says. “Monkey see, monkey do. I remember as a kid, my dad and his brothers were all in the top 10 on the trainers’ and drivers’ premierships in Perth. My grandfather wasn’t far away at the time, either. So I was lucky, I got to grow up and see everything from the inside.”

Harness racing, at times, delivered Warwick a fanciful life. Somewhere in the middle of it, when things were bad, he went into partnership trading horses to America. It was wildly successful and, within 18 months, he made money in a great big hurry, enough of a hurry to buy a farm within 18 months.

They were good times, he recalls. The dollar was low and the blood was up, and there was a constant stream of new horses coming through on prizemoney earned. Warwick was in America only three months, all told, but, like most events in his life, he had a crack.

“If there’s an opportunity to do it, I do it,” he says.

Warwick has handed over his headlines to daughter Lucy these days. At 25 years old, Lucy Warwick is a former champion apprentice in Western Australia and a seasoned horsewoman. She outrode her claim in 2015, then only 17 years of age, and much of her formative riding was courtesy of her father’s good horses, such as Wink And A Nod and Lucciola, and, later on, Material Man and the Western Australian Cup winner Dubai Escapade.

For her father, it hasn’t always been easy being dad, boss, mentor and friend, but “blood is thicker than water, isn’t it?” Lucy was aboard Warwick’s final runner, Queenship, at Pinjarra in July 2021. They were third and that, as they say, was that.

Which brings us back to 2023. Sheeza Belter isn’t done yet for Justin Warwick, and neither is life. He’s squeezed a lot of it into his 53 years, and its fabric still feels good against his skin.

“Do I deserve good luck?” he says. “No one deserves anything. You just need to put parameters in place to give yourself as good a chance of lucking falling your way as possible. I’ve been lucky. If my dad had been a plumber, I would have been a plumber. If he’d been a farmer, I would have been a farmer. But he was a horse trainer, so here I am.”