

# THE SPORT O

● JESSICA OWERS

*The upcoming biopic, Ride Like A Girl, will cast light on a swathe of strong female characters, not least the film's executive producer, Melbourne businesswoman and racing identity Susie Montague.*

It was a day typical of Melbourne in late spring, more blue and burnished than anywhere else because it was Cup Day. Susie Montague was in the Members', buzzing with the rest of Flemington racecourse as Michelle Payne blew past the winning post at 100/1. It was 2015, before the acrid fumes from the Me Too movement, or the surge towards gender equality in sport. So when Payne told her critics to "get stuffed" that afternoon, Montague sat up.

"I remember the day vividly," she says. "I had actually backed Michelle to win. I was standing right next to the mounting yard, and I remember hearing her comment, that they could all get stuffed, and I was intrigued. I wanted to know what was behind that."

At her simplest, Susie Montague is one of the producers of the upcoming biopic *Ride Like A Girl*, the film that will next year showcase Payne's life in lights. It has kept her busy, but she's used to that. Montague is a filmmaker, and among her past projects is the Indy hit *Pawno*, which won the grand jury prize for best picture at the Cannes Cinema des Antipodes in 2016. Her investment in the Payne picture is different, however. It's a subject that sits close to Montague every day. She is an owner, a hobby breeder, an identity in women's racing.

At home in South Yarra, she is breezy about her involvement, but when she speaks about the film, she is stunning in her concentration.

"I had known the life rights to Michelle's story had been sold, and there was talk of a script," she says. "But by the time I came in, I was feeling very protective of Michelle because the people involved were wonderful, but they had no idea about the racing industry. None at all."

The people involved were globe-conquering actress Rachel Griffiths, who would direct, and Richard Keddie, who would produce. Both were Australian, both graduates of the same film school as Montague.

"There was a lot of interest around the movie," she says. "The Americans were looking it, and we knew that if it remained an Australian movie, it would be a really good film, one that everyone could be proud of. Part of me got involved to protect Michelle, and to build up her confidence about the film being made. She wasn't reluctant, but she was shy. She was really shy about it."

Montague is a soft light in the racing business, an industry that, admittedly, is cut from the cloth of hard men. Brunette, casually elegant, she is warm and well spoken, with an empathy despite obvious wealth, and a genuine interest in others. She describes herself as spiritual. She is a mother and grandmother, and has known deep, unforgiving loss. But it has shaped her, and she admits as much. In 2010, then Susie Delaney, she began a relationship with Ray Montague, whose family has remained Australia's preeminent fruit growers since 1948. They married in 2015. They have orchards scattered across three states, and operations nationwide, and it's an honest living that is both corporate and agriculture. Together, the couple are a symbiosis. Ray has lost two brothers and a son, Susie a husband. They understand each other, but are also in obvious rare love.



# F QUEENS

A man and a woman are featured in a photograph. The man on the left is wearing a dark grey fedora with a yellow flower on the side, a dark suit jacket, a white shirt, a blue patterned tie, and a maroon scarf. He is smiling and holding a smartphone. The woman on the right is wearing a blue fedora with a black band, a white jacket with a colorful floral pattern, and a black lace top. She is also smiling. They are standing on a red carpet, which is visible at the bottom of the frame.

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As the release date for *Ride Like A Girl* approaches, Montague considers the feminist conversations that are gripping the world right now. Incidental as it is, the film's timing is impeccable. She admits that Payne's Melbourne Cup victory was a very big deal, but its magnitude didn't dawn on her immediately.

"I'm really fortunate because I grew up in a household that championed women," she says. "My mum was a single mum, five kids, and she always made sure we were just as competitive as the boys. My dad too. We played soccer and softball, and I grew up thinking this was what women do. Women challenge. Background has an impact on you, and it impacted how I saw women in business and sport."

The Montagues are owners in up to 30 horses, and Susie says she knew of Payne, but didn't know her well. "She'd done trackwork for me, and maybe ridden for us once before, but I'd been watching her because I keep an eye on all women in sport. I like to quietly champion whatever they're doing."

She presumes that all women do the same, supporting and lifting each other, and was amazed at the mixed reception Payne's now-famous comment received. "The women were mostly cheering, while most of the guys were like, what was that for? I just thought, how interesting."

Montague is not a feminist, but she is at the centre of a swelling female presence in Australian horse racing. In 2015, she was one of almost 40 women around the world that dove head first into the Magic Millions Racing Women promotion, pointed at boosting female ownership in the sport. The concept was simple, and a world's first – a syndicate of only women that would select, buy and compete a Magic Millions yearling. They called themselves 'It's All About The Girls', and their first effort was *Global Glamour*, a slip of a filly at \$65,000 who returned \$1.5 million and two group ones.



THE HON KATE JONES MP, KATIE PAGE HARVEY, MICHELLE PAYNE, JANICE MCKENNA, RACHEL GRIFFITHS & SUSIE MONTAGUE



"There was a bit of luck in there," Montague says. "If someone had said to me, let's get all these great women, and get them a great horse, and win a group one, I'd have said the odds were thin. But this has been so good for women, and it's been good for racing. We've got a few in the syndicate who have never owned a horse, and their husbands have owned horses for years and never won a group one. We tease the boys about that."

When Montague talks about racing, it isn't an infatuation with its deep dollars or social circles. She coolly suggests it might be in her blood, then laughs it off. "My grandfather was an SP bookie at the Albert Park Hotel." She is excited by the mechanics of the industry, and buzzes at the sales, shortlisting 100 horses down to 40, 40 into 10, then coming home with only two. She could take more, but she keeps her feet on the ground.

"We have always said we'd like to stay owners rather than breeders," she says. "Breeding is another level. Ray is really good at breeding apples and fruit, and he's very successful, but I joke with him that I'm not sure the principles are the same. We both love learning, and that's why we started going to the sales, to learn."

**I THINK WITH GROWTH IN ANYTHING, YOU'VE GOT TO BE PREPARED TO LEARN, AND YOU'VE GOT TO BE THE FIRST PEOPLE TO SAY YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING."**

It's a distinctly female attitude, but where feminism can be loud and uncouth, Montague manages it with grace. She loves a pretty dress, fine heels and a good collection of girls, and is honest-to-god excited to see women succeed at anything. She is an advancing female tide in Australian racing, and anyone who would change that would stir champagne.

