

# Rod Lakey back on board after 14-year hiatus

• KIERAN ILES



Rod Lakey will make his long-awaited return to race driving at Friday night's meeting at Lord's Raceway. Picture: BRENDAN McCARTHY

THE continuation of harness racing despite the coronavirus pandemic has proven a blessing for one Bendigo reinsman.

Rod Lakey will make a welcome return to race driving at Friday night's meeting at Lord's Raceway.

His appearance in the sulky ends a 14-year hiatus from race driving.

Lakey, who was 30 when he last drove, is guaranteed at least four drives, all for Marong trainer Shaun McNaulty.

Both are hopeful of sneaking a fifth starter with Fratellino, who is the first emergency in an intriguing Aldebaran Park Trot (2150m).

Two of the combination's fancies - Hashtag in the night's \$12,000 feature event, and Stateswoman - are the respective favourite and second favourite in their races, fuelling hopes of success on his first night back for Lakey.

"I'll just be content with four nice drives, " he said.

"There's obviously a lot going on with the coronavirus and the move to regional racing.

"It's worked out absolutely perfectly for me."



Rod Lakey can't wait for Friday to roll around. Picture: BRENDAN McCARTHY

Lakey - a media executive with Southern Cross Austereo and former business manager at the *Bendigo Advertiser* - previously drove professionally during the 1990s and 2000s, most notably for trotting specialist Cory Van Ryn.

It was through his association with Van Ryn's son David that he met McNaulty, who trains from the Van Ryns property at Marong, and from where his interest in a racing return was ignited.

"After meeting Shaun, I started working horses a couple of times a week on weekends and Wednesdays," Lakey said.

"Shaun is a just a ripper fellow and a future star of harness racing.

"He's just young country fellow from a family farm at Logan and I'm a country guy (originally) from Dingee, so we get on like a house on fire.

"Bendigo and Maryborough (harness racing clubs) were really supportive, so we decided to get my trial licence back.

"I couldn't believe the amount of people that started well-wishing me and putting me on their horses, it escalated to the point it was time to to get back to racing."

Lakey returned to the trials on Australia Day and little more than two months later finds himself ready to battle the likes of legendary reinsman Brian Gath, current star Alex Ashwood, experienced hands Neil McCallum, Glenn Douglas and Ross Graham, and an eager crop of young guns including Jayden Brewin, Shannon O'Sullivan, Haydon Gray and Tayla French.

Phase one of his career was highlighted by wins in the Central Victorian Trotting Championship in 2004 on the Cory Van Ryn-trained Gun Of A Son, the Scotch Notch Memorial at Moonee Valley with Gegaw, and several derby race appearances on The Warp Drive.

"I left the (family) farm when I was at school and I was 16 and went to Melbourne to learn off Ted Demmler, who was a world champion," Lakey said.

"That's all I ever wanted to do. Participating in harness racing was always my dream.

"To have a second chance at it means everything."



Rod Lakey is guaranteed four drives at Bendigo, all for Marong trainer Shaun McNaulty. Picture: BRENDAN McCARTHY