

Young driver shows her class in elite company

Group joy for French

Breakthrough feature race win at Melton a special moment for impressive Heathcote driver Tayla French and the connections of promising horse Aldebaran Alissa.

HARNES RACING

BY KIERAN ILES

FOR Heathcote's Tayla French, the best part about landing her maiden Group race driving win with Aldebaran Alissa at Tabcorp Park Melton was who she got to share the milestone with.

Her victory in the Group 3 Lyn McPherson Memorial Breed For Speed Silver Series Final last Saturday night was no ordinary win and was special on many fronts.

That was especially the case for Aldebaran Lodge's Duncan McPherson, who races the daughter of Muscle Hill and Triple A with Peter Svanosio and Elizabeth MacLean, and won the race named in honour of his late wife Lyn, who lost her battle with ovarian cancer in 2010.

The popular harness racing identity and businessman has been a tireless advocate and fundraiser for ovarian cancer awareness for more than a decade and is the founder of Team Teal, the harness racing industry's six-week campaign aimed at shining a spotlight on women's cancer research.

The significance of the win for McPherson was definitely not lost on 23-year-old French, who was thrilled that her first Group race win was achieved while wearing the teal-coloured pants, which have become synonymous with the Team Teal concept.

"It was pretty exciting and particularly emotional, it was a very fitting race with Duncan McPherson being so involved with Aldebaran Alissa," she said.

"Obviously the race is named in memory of his late wife, who passed away with ovarian cancer and he's the head and shoulders behind Team Teal.

"The race means a lot to Duncan and for him to actually own the horse I won on was pretty significant



DROUGHT BROKEN: Aldebaran Alissa, driven by Tayla French, scores a sentimental win in the Group 3 Lyn McPherson Memorial Breed For Speed Silver Series Final at Tabcorp Park Melton last Saturday night. **Picture:** STUART McCORMICK

for him.

"He was very excited, you could see it in his facial expressions, he was holding back the tears, but I'm rapt for him.

An all-the-way win for Aldebaran Alissa - a \$9.60 chance, who is trained at Romsey by Chris Svanosio - was French's fourth metropolitan success and the 79th win of her young and blossoming career to date.

Nine of those victories have come in a promising opening to the 2020 racing season during January and February.

French admitted heading to harness racing headquarters with a degree of confidence in the four-year-old mare, who finished fifth in her heat at Bendigo on February 17.

"I thought if she was able to find the front I thought she would be hard to run down, so everything seemed to go to plan," she said.

"I actually messaged Duncan during the day on Saturday and told him that I had a good feeling and I was pretty confident and I never ever say that.

"She was a bit unlucky at Bendigo in the heat when she didn't find the front and she went a bit awkwardly

around the bend.

"So I did feel confident going into it, I also said to Chris (Svanosio) before the start that if I get the lead I'd be beating him home and he was on the favourite (Fear The Yankee) and it was his birthday.

"I was pretty fortunate, I have only ever driven the horse three times, either Chris or Michelle (Phillips) drives her, but she is out a the moment, so I was pretty happy when I got the call-up.

"Even driving her in the heat and getting her through to the final was a pretty big thrill."

French said thoughts of a milestone first Group race win had initially eluded her.

"I didn't really think about it when I went across the line, I was concentrating on ensuring my horse kept trotting across the line, so I had my mind elsewhere," she said.

"I didn't really think about the Group 3 success until I was getting interviewed after the race and then it sort of kicked in.

"When everyone started saying 'well done' and 'you've done so well at so young', it really sunk in."

French, who divides her



TEAM: The connections of Aldebaran Alissa, including owner Duncan McPherson (fourth from left) and winning driver Tayla French, savour a special win.

week between working for Svanosio at Romsey and at Heathcote Primary Health as a medical surgery receptionist, in addition to working her and father Terry's own team horses on the family property at Heathcote and fulfilling her race-day commitments, said she was equally rapt for all of Aldebaran Alissa's connections.

With much on her plate, the fast-emerging driver said she envisioned a day when harness racing would

evolve into a full-time career for her.

"Down the track that's something I'd like to do and I'd like to get into training also," she said.

"I've been pretty involved with a different variety of horses lately and behind the scenes at home with dad, so something I'd like to get a bit more serious with is one day training my own team."

Svanosio, who picked up a driving win of his own on Saturday night aboard President Roydon, to give

the stable a double on the night, said French was fully deserving of her Group 3 success.

"Tayla's really come of age, she's driving so well at present. Aldebaran Alissa is not an easy horse to drive, so she did a great job," he said.

"But it wasn't just Saturday night, she's been driving well a long time.

"She's been helping me for a while - I watched her have her first drive and she has just kept improving all the time."