

Still the biggest highlight 44 years later! (written by Paul Courts and published on National Trotguide on March 4, 2022)

“I DON’T care if I never win another race now I’ve won the Inter Dominion.”

That was Brian Gath’s statement after his success with Markovina in the 1978 edition of the Championship at Moonee Valley.

More than four decades later and Gath has obviously won a lot more races, but stands by his 44-year-old declaration.

“Winning the Inter Dominion is the pinnacle and was all I ever wanted after attending the Harold Park Inter Dominion in 1960 when Caduceus won,” Gath said.

“They had 52,000 people there that night and I’d never seen anything like it, and after that, I knew I had to be in it.

“I still say if I had never won another race I would’ve been happy.

“The Inter Dominion tops them all and there is nothing like it.

“To have won that particular race is still my happiest memory in harness racing.”

Gath’s reflection of his ultimate success has been sparked by another feature – tomorrow night’s Markovina Free-For-All at Tabcorp Park Melton.

The event is run as part of the Melbourne-based, Victorian-trained Inter Dominion winners’ circuit.

Although he will not take part in the action, Gath admits sitting in his lounge watching the race while reliving Markovina’s magical moment will be extremely satisfying.

“I would love to have a runner in the field, and even better, win a race in his honour, but just to have a race named after him is lovely,” Gath declared.

“He was just a wonderful horse, which took me to the top and I still think the world of him.

“Having the race on this week brings back a lot of memories, with the Inter Dominion win topping them all.

“He wasn’t a big horse, but was a long barrelled, powerhouse.

“It was more than his racing ability though as he was just a beautiful horse all round.”

The series first to be run at the Valley and the first to boast a six-figure Final – worth \$105,000 – it was also the first to be run under mobile conditions.

As amazing as it seems now, the switch from a standing start handicap to a mobile free-for-all was widely criticised and touted as the ‘beginning of the end’ for the Inter Dominion!

Controversy aside, the year belonged to Gath and Markovina, with the pair signalling their intentions early by capturing the opening heat.

In front of a spectacular crowd of 22,376 people, the pair settled midfield early in the 2400-metre qualifier before sprinting to a soft win from Gallagher and Nixon Adios.

Second favourite at 4/1, Markovina rated 2:05, the slowest of the three heats. Sole Command and Hermosa Star also annexed their heats in 2:02.

“He just had an amazing sprint,” Gath said. “To this day, I haven’t driven many with a quicker burst of speed.

“He could come from last at the top of the home straight and win, he didn’t have to be right up there with the leader.

“I remember the opening night like it was yesterday and was just so thrilled to win an Inter Dominion heat.

“At that point it was still just a dream that I might win the Final.”

Coming from the back row on the second night, Markovina finished fifth behind Royal Gaze, which covered the mile in 1:59.4.

The other heats were won by Don’t Retreat in 1:59.9 and Sole Command in 1:59.6.

“He just had no luck on the second night,” Gath recalled. “He came from the second row and never really got into it over the sprint, but still got to the line well.”

The son of Mark Lobell bounced back to win his third heat, beating Koala King and Velvet Prince after racing in the one-one.

Once again Markovina’s rate – 2:05.7 for the 3300 metres – was the slowest of the night, with Paleface Adios rating 2:03.3 and Dimante Hanover returning 2:04.1.

“We got a lovely trail that night and he was good enough to make the most of it,” Gath said. “At that stage I began to think we had a real top shot at the Final and was just hoping for the right draw.”

Second favourite at 3/1 behind Sole Command at 5/2, Markovina began well from barrier four to settle midfield as Tan Heel surprised all onlookers by leading from two.

With Gath making his move at the 600- metre mark, Markovina quickly joined the leaders before Hermosa Star issued his challenge.

Proving too slick during the run to the line, the six-year-old completed a two-metre win from Hermosa Star, with Velvet Prince two metres away third.

Gath’s joy soon turned to anxiety as Peter Norrgard, who drove the runner-up, lodged a protest alleging interference.

After deliberating for 20 minutes, stewards dismissed the protest.

Some still believe the placings should have been reversed, claiming Markovina “took Hermosa Star’s racing room”.

“I knew at the time there was nothing in it and was never really worried,” Gath said.

Rating 2:05.2 for the 2900 metres, Markovina was actually booed by some sections of the crowd for reasons still unknown.

It has been suggested it was Markovina’s mixed form heading into the series that had patrons disappointed with the turnaround!

“Nothing was going to spoil the moment, even those who weren’t happy that he won,” Gath declared.

The stallion’s victory took his record to 30 wins and 15 placings from 73 starts for earnings of \$197,988.

While he went on to win another five of his next 24 starts, Markovina’s most iconic moment had nothing to do with racing according to Gath.

“The moment that truly defined the kind of horse he was happened one night on the way home from Adelaide,” Gath said.

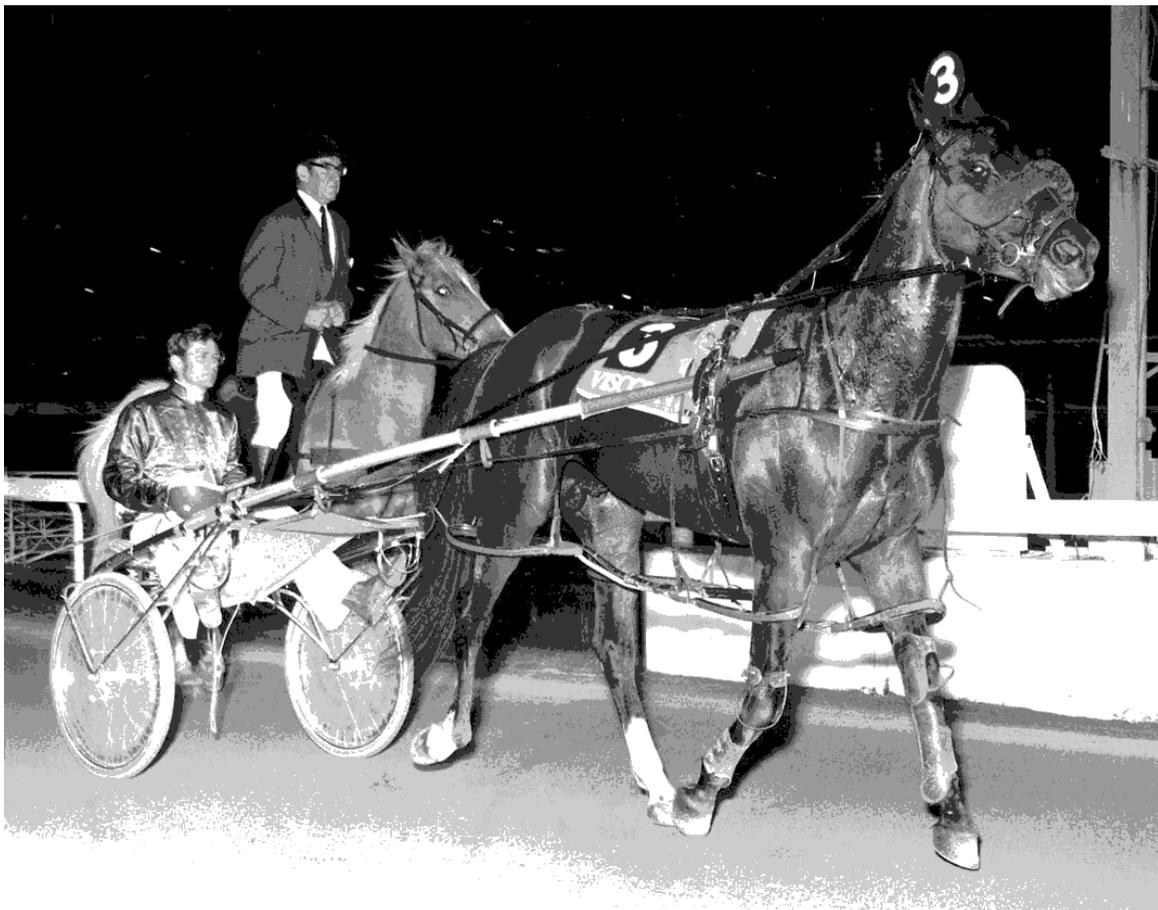
“We got sideswiped by a semi, which ran onto the wrong side of the road and not only flipped the float, but tore half of it off.

“At first I thought he was dead for sure, but then I could hear him whining, and even then I didn’t know if he had a broken back or was trying to let us know he was there.

“We got him out of the wreck, then I rode him for 10 miles to the nearest town.

“It was the first time I’d ever been on his back and he just went along with it.

“Six weeks later he won at Harold Park....he was one of those horses of a lifetime.”



BRIAN GATH and Markovina