

Thanks for the memories, Muz

Calling time on the career of a stable favorite is never easy – so it's hard to imagine being in the shoes of harness racing co-trainers Bec Bartley and Steve O'Donoghue last week.

The pair made the tough decision to retire their "once in a lifetime" stable star San Carlo after 67 starts, 30 wins and more than \$500,000 in stakes – and a seven-year ride that's included contesting InterDominions, a NZ Cup, and Hunter and Victoria Cups.

"It's been in the back of our minds for a little while and we knew, at his age, that it would be just around the corner, but it still feels surreal," Bartley said.

"He's still here at the stables in his box, because we're not quite ready for him to go yet, and the owners (the Eichhorn family) are still deciding what his retirement will be. But I think the toughest day will be when he actually leaves the farm," she said.

"We always said that 'Murray' would let us know when it was time to retire. While he was happy and enjoying his work, we would keep him going, but we just knew that the time was right."

Bartley is the only race driver San Carlo has had in his career. He debuted at age four and the pair went on a race-winning blitz -- 20 in San Carlo's first 24 starts, including a two Vicbred finals.

"When I go back and watch the replays it pulls you up because you forget just how good he was, the races he won and the horses he beat," Bartley said.

"He won against the best of the best of his time, except for Lazarus. But horses like Tiger Tara, Soho Tribecca, Lenny the Shark – all of those he was able to beat.

"They're good memories because he was such a big part of all our lives – I've probably spent more time with him over the past few years than with my family and friends. Steve and Anne's kids, Jono, Corey, Paddy and Ella would come to watch him race at every place he went to – they made little holidays of his trips away."

Despite the string of early victories, Bartley said it was when the pair ran a luckless sixth in the 4yo Breeders Crown Final at Tabcorp Park that she and O'Donoghue understood his potential.

"You're never really sure how horses will measure up. You think they've got some ability, but how much you're not sure," she said.

"We'd never felt the bottom to him at home – and that's a good sign, but that Breeders Crown final told us he was special, even though it was the first start he got beaten at. He had drawn barrier 12 and had no luck at all but finished off just so strong."

Bartley and San Carlo travelled around the country and to New Zealand contesting some of Australasia's biggest races during the pacer's career, but, as is always the case in racing, the highlights are sometimes not what you would expect.

"He was amazing to drive, because you would feel at some points in some races that he might be reaching his limit. You would ask him for an effort, and he would give you a bit more and he'd just keep digging. I would think he was gone, and he would find another gear. He made you so proud," she said.

"The Mildura Pacing Cup win I will always remember, because it was a special time with my (late) Pa.

“Racewise, the time that is clearest in my memory is definitely the InterDominion heat win in Perth in 2018.

“It was really our first big trip away and when we got over there, Murray got sick. Other times when I’d taken him to Sydney, Steve was really only six hours away if I needed him, but that wasn’t possible in Perth. I was in full panic mode, but we just had to do our best.

“No one really knew how sick he had been. Then after the first heat (San Carlo ran third) there was a lot of criticism around my drive.

“So to have him come out and win the second heat like he did, and be able to beat Soho Tribecca and Lenny the Shark, I was just so proud of him. I went from probably the lowest I have ever been after the first heat, to the biggest high ever after the second heat. It was very character-building!

“That series just showed how tough he was. To be as sick as he was, then to back up and run three races in a week and perform like he did, it made all the stress worth it.

“New Zealand Cup if we had our time again, we probably would have planned the logistics a bit better. We went over just a couple of days before the race and we had two sleepless nights because of the flights both being overnight ones to Auckland, and then from Auckland to Christchurch.

“But the crowd and the experience – you don’t see anything like it in Australia unless you go to the Melbourne Cup and I wouldn’t have missed it for anything.”

Bartley said in such an extended career, there were a lot of people who would feel a sense of sadness that San Carlo’s racing days were over.

“He’s a character...he’s jogged on the same track for so many years, but suddenly he’ll notice a tree that’s been there for 20 years, and he’s only just noticed it! All of us, of course, myself, Steve and Anne, and all the staff will miss him terribly. He’s everybody’s favorite.

“But there’s others along the journey, like (horse chiropractor) Shane Williams, who has looked at him once a month for probably five years, and who got him back on track at one stage when we didn’t know what was wrong with him.

“Anne’s father, Eric Wilson, who broke him in and always told us he knew he would be a good horse. Ellen Davis, who isn’t with us anymore, but who did all of the work with him when we were bringing him along early. All those people have played a part and will be sad it’s come to an end.

“We’ve always joked that we live in Murray’s world. What Murray wants, Murray gets! For a good six or seven years, all of our focus has been on him – everything, work, races and lives, were planned around him. It’ll be a funny feeling not stressing over him anymore!”

Pictured:

San Carlo contested three InterDominions (2017 heat winner) as well as two Victoria Cups and two Hunter Cups. He also won the Cranbourne, Kilmore, Maryborough, Mildura, Yarra Valley, Bendigo and Warragul Cups and was named 2019 Victorian Aged Entire/Gelding of the year

Rebecca Bartley after San Carlo’s win in the Mildura Pacing Cup

Co-trainer Steve O’Donoghue with San Carlo and driver and co-trainer Rebecca Bartley

San Carlo and driver Bec Bartley with the horse’s owners Iggy, Maureen, John and the late Jack Eicchorn

