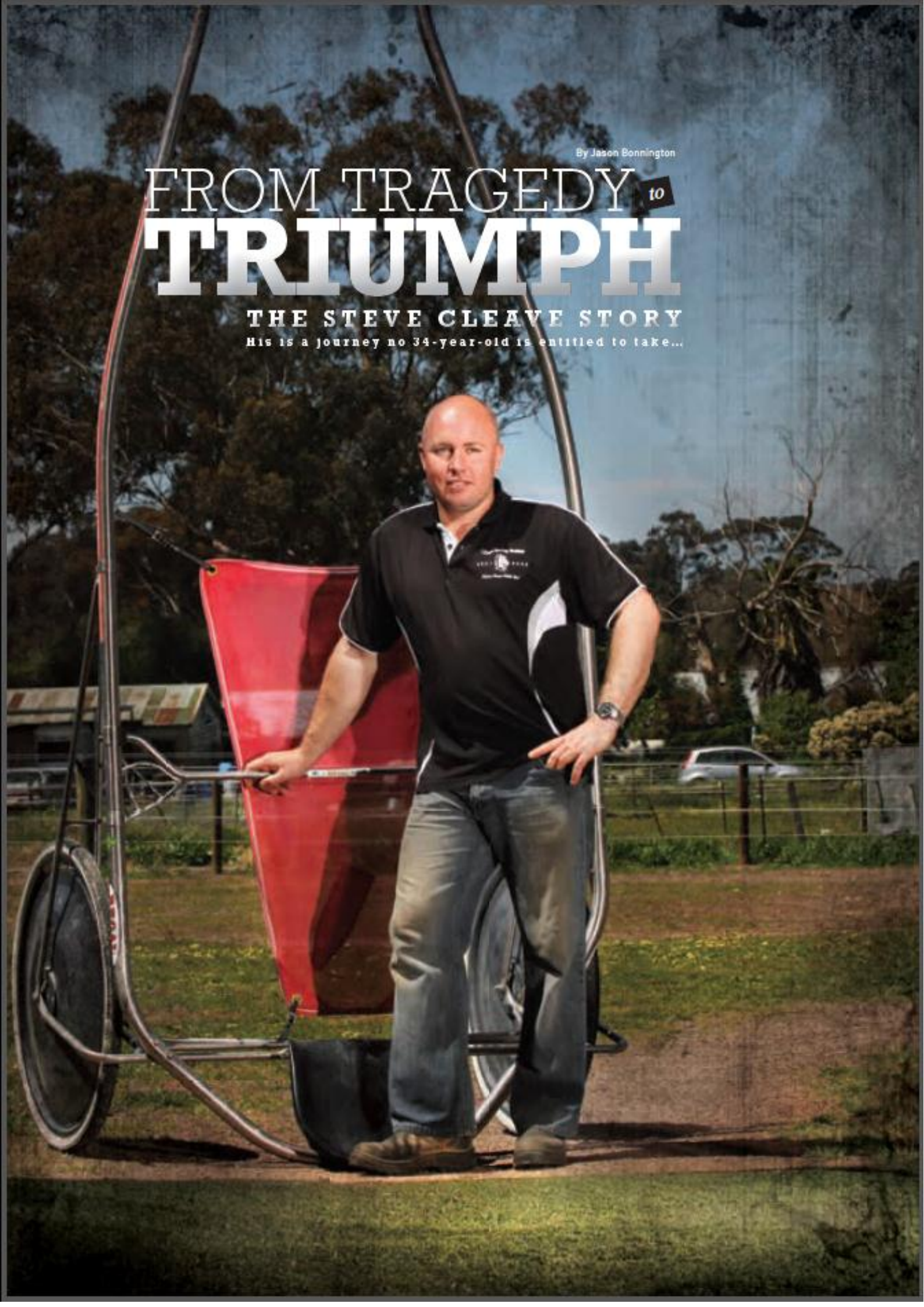


By Jason Bonnington

FROM TRAGEDY ^{to} **TRIUMPH**

THE STEVE CLEAVE STORY

His 18 is a journey no 34-year-old is entitled to take...



SURVEYING the scene of his recently secured *tabula rasa* in harness racing's heartland on the Macedon ranges, Bendigo based horseman and equine enthusiast Stephen Cleave could be forgiven for yielding to more than a passing moment of reflection.



PAT WARD & STEVE CLEAVE WITH MAXIMUM JOY



After six long years and more than a handful of tears, this was to be the moment of quiet redemption.

Invited to compete in Victoria's young drivers championship at the state's former home of harness racing, Moonee Valley, preternaturally talented teenage reinsman Stephen Cleave had made it.

Cleave left school at the tender age of 14 by virtue of a complete cognisance of his need to work with horses. This desire was kindled and cultivated in those formative years by following his uncle and fellow horseman, Ron Campbell like an obedient dog whenever time would permit.

Born to a father in Max, who was far from bereft of the capacity for love, but iron fisted at best in pursuit of the best for his sons, Cleave knew from the moment he pursued his passion the two men would be at loggerheads.

Harness racing was "a bum sport" and the young man was more than subtly encouraged to "get out of it and do something decent with his life".

Yet at the tender age of just 19 he had already achieved what Max had feared impossible and won his implicit support in the process.

Over the course of little more than

half a decade working for some of the industry's most respected names including Tony Peacock and John and Jack Caldow, the kid who "only ever wanted to be a trotting driver", had forged and fortified a reputation as a budding reinsman of rare quality and a rising star of the standardbred world.

But on the night preceding the piece de resistance of Cleave's emerging career in the cart, where he would perform to a captive audience of family, friends and the industry he had embraced, the phone call came.

AND THINGS WOULD NEVER BE THE SAME.

"It was on the Friday night that the accident happened, at about 4:30pm, and I got the call at about seven o'clock that night," Cleave explained.

On the way from Bendigo to the city, to see their son in his shining moment of glory, Max, along with Stephen's mother Joy, had been killed.

And in a decision that speaks to a passion for his profession that few of us will ever enjoy or understand, the 19-year-old opted to drive the following night.

"I was supposed to go to Benalla to drive a horse in their day meeting on

Saturday before going to Moonee Valley that night to drive in the final of the young drivers championship." Cleave revealed.

"My girlfriend at the time, her father said to me, 'Look, don't go to Benalla, I'll go and drive that horse for you, you just concentrate on Moonee Valley,' and I did".

After approaching Stewards to inform them of the tragedy and pleading for their support in allowing him to take his place in the sulky, all that was left was to act on the bravest instinct of his fledgling life.

"It was definitely the toughest drive of my life, but mentally, as hard as it was, I felt it was something I needed to do," Cleave said.

"It was very personal, the decision to drive that night. I never had a problem with my parents, but dad just wanted the best for his kids and he spent a long time resisting my decision to follow my heart into the sport.

"I'd been steadfast since I was 14 years old that this is all I wanted to do with my life and we had plenty of blues over it, but at the time that he died, he was my biggest supporter.

"Once he knew I wasn't going to change my mind he got right behind me, 110 percent, so I knew he'd come to terms with it. That was why I had to keep going I suppose.

"THIS WAS WHAT I HAD SET OUT TO DO WITH MY LIFE... I COULDN'T STOP NOW."

After finishing the race in a position neither he nor anyone at the track that night would remember, the grim, sombre, raw realisation of what had happened finally dawned upon him.

And quietly, inwardly and without tantare, a road to redemption was paved.

"The hardest part was coming back after the race and all my family were standing above the tunnel that you go back through leaving the track," the Junortoun native recalled.

"As soon as I spotted them, that was the end of it. While I was on the track I could put everything behind me and just focus on the job at hand but as soon as I came back and saw them all standing there I just fell to pieces.

"It's a life defining moment isn't it? It either makes you or it breaks you."

Fortunately, having been blessed with what most would consider an incredible capacity for humility, prescience and

positivity, Cleave was bowed but never, for a minute close to breaking.

Unlike so many in a similar situation, his dilemma was not whether to go on with the life that he had chosen, to persevere in hunting his harness racing dreams, but just how he would make that next crucial step.

Adrift, afraid and in many ways alone, Cleave needed a hero, someone willing to support and encourage a young man with more to offer than most, in his pursuit to live a productive and fulfilling life.

In Ken and Pat Ward he found two, and a relationship traversing the wildly disparate territory of family, friendship, business and passion was born.

"I met the Wards soon after the accident through my friendship with David Miles," Cleave remembered.

"Us junior drivers used to call in there a lot. It was a bit like drop-in house on the way home from the trots.

"I don't know what it was between us, but there was just a special connection and before I knew it I was completely enveloped and still am to this day.

"The Wards are what I would call my adopted family. Not adopted as in legally, but basically for the past 14 years, Pat and Ken and their family have taken me in as one of their own.

"They treat me like a son, but they're not like a mum and dad to me, if that makes sense. They offer unconditional support and we're just best friends.

"We own all the horses together and basically we've just bought 70-acres that we're setting up as a training establishment this very minute."

That still to be named Romsey property – the branchchild of two men, 10 years and more than a few quiet Sunday beers – has been a pipe dream, a reverie, a fireplace fantasy for two men with a boundless love of horses and a passion for harness racing.

And now that its sale nears completion – more than a year since an offer was first tendered – the new proprietor can barely disguise his delight.

"We put a deposit on this block back in May of last year," Cleave said.

"It took us 12 months to get through all our permits with the council, which



finally got approved in August (2010) and we're just finishing up the final bits of paperwork now."

"It's been a dream of mine for as long as I can remember. The Wards and I have had more conversations about our hopes for what we call, 'Cleave Racing' than I can possibly recall and it's just surreal to think that it's actually going ahead.

"We're on the cusp of setting up what we're hoping will be a life-changing scenario, so it's bloody exciting – of course it is."

But both Cleave and the Wards know that the faith to fashion their own horse heaven in the scenic surrounds of the Macedon ranges was nurtured not by blind hope, but the racetrack deeds of one of Victoria's finest five-year-olds; Indigo Bay.

"HE'S DEFINITELY THE BEST HORSE I'VE EVER TRAINED," CLEAVE ENTHUSED.

"We – that is Cleave Racing – leased him for a start, then we got an option to buy and he's been all ours since he was a late season three-year-old."

"I remember when we first saw him on the videos, he looked like he had ability, but he always galloped so you didn't really know what you were dealing with.

"Then, the first start we gave him at Kilmore he just bolted in the run. I've never in all my life had one that I couldn't hold in the run

until he came along, but when I let him go, he whipped around the field at a million miles an hour.

"He wilted on the run as you'd expect, but it was then I knew that this horse had his fair share of speed and we were going to have a fair bit of fun."

Seven wins, \$50,000 and six Group 1 finals later, Indigo Bay's stunning success has proven to be the catalyst for the greatest adventure of Cleave's life.

Now the quietest of his trinity of talented pacers, the sit-sprinting son of Presidential Ball will be the headline act of Cleave and Ward's new establishment, with a crack at some of the rich Country Cups in his immediate future following an unlucky run in last month's Melton Plate.

Accompanying him during those germinal days at Romsey will be classy four-year-old mare Maximum Joy – a horse so promising in its freshman preparation, Cleave named her in honour of his late parents – and a Faye McEwen bred Grinfromeartear baby with plenty of wraps called Cheshire Cat.

But with the right slice of serendipity and support, Cleave is hoping his team will soon number closer to a dozen.

"We're looking at 10 to 14 horses in the formative stages at the moment," the conditioner said.

"I want to keep it small enough that everything is hands-on. Hands-on work is the best work you can do. I want to be with the horses 24/7.

"It's the only way I reckon. I remember Indigo Bay put in a lame step one day and I picked it up out of the corner of my eye, simply because I know him back-to-front. Those little things are the difference between getting the best out of your horses or not.

"It's that attention to detail we'll be relying on to ensure this place is a success."

Having overcome the greatest adversity a young man can face with a wisdom and maturity he had no right to harbour, it's impossible not to believe that the disarmingly down to earth and gifted horseman will make Romsey work.

Perhaps no longer driven by the tragedy that catapulted him from carefree kid to philosophical young man, but always informed by it, Cleave is ready to fulfil the destiny he surrendered to so many years ago.

"I think about my parents every day of my life mate. When something like that happens to you it puts you on your arse pretty quick and it makes you grow up even quicker.

"But I've had so much support from the Wards – even their daughters are like sisters to me – and if you'd told me at 15 that I'd have my own training centre at 34, I wouldn't have slept in between.

"I'm always someone who's looking forward and there's so much on the horizon now I just want to get to work and get the winners and make my name.

"I love being the underdog, but now it's time to show the world what we can really do."

