

Podcast 155 – Phar Lap – Australia's Most Famous Racehorse

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with Rob McCormack

Podcast Number 155 – Phar Lap – Australia's Most Famous Racehorse

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(This podcast is 14 minutes and 42 seconds long.)

Hi,

Horse racing is very popular in Australia (see [Podcast 25 – The Race that Stops a Nation – The Melbourne Cup](#)). The greatest racehorses become household names. The prize money to be earned for winning horse races is large, so the big races, such as the Melbourne Cup, along with the winning horses, attract a lot of attention in the news. Probably the greatest racehorses ever to have raced in Australia are Winx, Black Caviar, Makybe Diva and Phar Lap. Of these, Phar Lap is probably the most famous, largely because his story is one not only of humble beginnings and great victories but also a tragic end. In this podcast, I would like to tell you a little about the short but amazing life of Phar Lap.



Phar Lap with jockey Jim Pike riding at Flemington race track c 1930

(Photo – Charles Daniel Pratt, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

Phar Lap was born in New Zealand on October the 4th, 1926. He was chestnut in colour, which is reddish-brown. He was offered for sale at auctions in New Zealand. Harry Telford, a Sydney-based horse trainer, had read about Phar Lap's blood line, which included the great Carbine, a very successful racehorse from the late 1800s. Carbine had won 30 major races in New Zealand and Australia, including the Melbourne Cup in 1890. Harry believed this blood line meant that Phar Lap could be a future winner. Harry's career as a trainer was not going well at the time, but he managed to convince one of his horse owners, Mr. David Davis, to pay the sale price of 168 pounds, which was a relatively cheap price at the time.

When the horse arrived by ship in Australia, he did not look like a champion at all. He had warts on his face and had an awkward gait. When David Davis saw the horse, he was not happy and told Harry to sell him straight away. Harry was desperate for a winning horse in his stable so he told Davis that he would train Phar Lap for free, in exchange for two thirds of Phar Lap's race winnings. Davis agreed and so Telford was given temporary ownership of Phar Lap (called a lease) for a 3-year period, after which Davis would get back full ownership of Phar Lap.

Phar Lap's career as a racehorse started as a two-year-old, but it was not a successful beginning. In his debut, in the 1928-29 season, he came last in his first race. In his next 3 races he was unplaced. He did manage to win his last race as a two-year-old so there was some encouragement for Telford there. During 1929, Telford employed a young strapper (i.e. horse carer) named Tommy Woodcock. It became Tommy's job to look after Phar Lap. As a strapper, Tommy rubbed Phar Lap down, exercised him, cleaned out his stable, fed him, travelled with him to race courses and generally looked after the horse at all times. Tommy used the nickname Bobby for Phar Lap and Tommy and Bobby became very close.

Phar Lap's career continued as a three-year-old in the 1929-30 season, but that didn't start well either, as he was unplaced in his first 4 races. However, it was following a change in race tactics that Phar Lap's career really took off. It was observed during training that Phar Lap liked to run a race starting from behind, rather than leading at the start. After this change in race tactics, Phar Lap's successes really started to come. From his 19 races as a three-year-old, Phar Lap had 13 wins, including a 3rd place in the 1929 Melbourne Cup, the most important horse race in Australia. Remarkably, he won all his last 9 races as a three-year-old. After a poor start to his career, it seemed that Harry Telford finally had a winner in his stable.

Phar Lap's season as a four-year-old in 1930-31 was amazing. He raced 16 times and won 14 of those races. Included in those wins was the 1930 Melbourne Cup, where he won easily by 3 horse lengths in front of the second placed horse. By this time, Phar Lap was recognized as one of the greatest racehorses ever to race in Australia. In fact, he was so unbeatable that there were criminals linked to the horseracing industry who wanted to end his career if they could. On the 1st November, just 4 days before the Melbourne Cup, as Tommy Woodcock was leading Phar Lap from the training track back to the stables, unknown men in a car drove by and fired shots at Phar Lap. Luckily, they missed and Phar Lap was unharmed. In fact, he went on to win a race later that afternoon. Police protection was organised for Phar Lap so that he could remain safe. The following Tuesday, he won the Melbourne Cup, his most famous win in Australia.

By now, Phar Lap was known and greatly admired throughout Australia and New Zealand. He was known as 'Australia's Wonder Horse', 'Big Red' and 'The Red Terror'. The race-going crowds loved him and cheered him at every opportunity.

His last year of racing was as a five-year-old in 1931-32. He raced 10 times during that season, winning all races except one – the 1931 Melbourne Cup on the 3rd November, which was controversial. The racing administrators tried to slow him down by adding extra weight to his saddle bags. His carried weight was 68 kg. This is more than any other horse has carried before or since. The Melbourne Cup is a long race at 2 miles in length. This high weight was a topic of much discussion leading up to the cup, as to whether any horse could carry such a weight over 2 miles and win. In the end, Phar Lap was only able to finish 8th. It was not the other horses which beat him, but rather the extra weight he had to carry. The winning horse on that day carried 43.5kg, almost 25 kg less than Phar Lap.

Phar Lap's last race, and his one and only overseas race, was in March of 1932, in Mexico. The race was the Agua Caliente Handicap. Phar Lap would race against some of the top racehorses from North America. Tommy Woodcock and other team members travelled with Phar Lap to Mexico. Despite having a damaged hoof, Phar Lap fought hard and won the race in track-record time.

After the race, Phar Lap was sent to a horse ranch in California, while his owner negotiated his next set of races.

On the 5th of April, Phar Lap developed severe pain and a high temperature. Within a few short hours, he was dead, with a heart-broken Tommy Woodcock by his side. The cause of death has never been confirmed, although there were many rumours at the time that he had been poisoned. News of his death made the front page in newspapers across Australia and New Zealand.

After an autopsy, some of Phar Lap's remains were sent back to Australia. His heart was found to be much larger than a normal racehorse. It was said that his huge heart allowed him to triumph over other horses. The heart is now on display in the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, Australia's capital. Today when Australians want to describe someone who is very brave or very generous, they say – 'he has a heart as big as Phar Lap'. His chestnut coat was used to make an excellent stuffed replica of Phar Lap, which is now on display at the Melbourne Museum.



The stuffed replica of Phar Lap, using his actual chestnut coat. Melbourne Museum.
Photo by Silvia McCormack

In 1978, Phar Lap was featured on a postage stamp issued by Australia Post. There are also two bronze statues of Phar Lap, one near his birth place in New Zealand, and the other at Flemington Racecourse in Melbourne.

In my opinion, the best tribute to Phar Lap is the 1983 film titled 'Phar Lap: Heart of a Nation'.

The film shows very well how Phar Lap's humble beginnings and his ability to win from behind endeared him greatly to the average Australian race goer, especially during the Great Depression, when many Australians were suffering. Cheering on their favourite horse Phar Lap gave them joy and hope for a better future. Perhaps that's why even today, Phar Lap remains our most famous champion racehorse.

If you have a question or comment to make, please leave it in the comments box at the bottom of this page. Or, you can send me an email at rob@slowenglish.info. I would love to hear from you. Tell me where you live, a little bit about yourself and what you think of my Slow English podcast. I will write back to you, in English of course. If you would like to take a short quiz to see if you have understood this podcast, you will also find it on my website. Goodbye until next time.

Rob

Podcast 155 Quiz - Did you understand the podcast?

You can take the quiz as many times as you like.

[Start quiz](#)

[Vocabulary](#)

- Play administrators = people who organise things
- Play amazing = when something is really, really good
- Play attention = (here) when many people are looking at something or talking about it
- Play attract = (here) receive
- Play autopsy = when a doctor cuts up a dead body, to find out why death occurred
- Play awkward = not smooth, unusual in some way
- Play blood line = the qualities which come from your parents, grandparents, etc
- Play champion = a winner of many races or competitions
- Play confirmed = agreed by all
- Play convince = to change someone else's mind about a topic or idea
- Play criminals = people who do bad things which are against the law
- Play damaged = broken, not working properly
- Play debut = the first time you do something
- Play desperate = to need something very badly
- Play despite = even though
- Play discussion = when many people talk about something
- Play display = when people can see it
- Play earned = received for doing work or something which people value
- Play encouragement = when something gives you hope, so that

you want to keep going

- Play endeared = become loved by others
- Play exchange = one thing is given in return for something different
- Play gait = the way an animal walks or runs
- Play generous = when you happily give something to others
- Play Great Depression = from 1929 to the mid-1930s, when the economy was very bad
- Play heart-broken = when you are very, very sad about something
- Play hoof = the foot of the horse
- Play household names = names known to ordinary families
- Play huge = large
- Play humble = when something is poor, or not special
- Play linked = connected to, joined with
- Play major = large
- Play managed = was able to
- Play negotiate = to talk and agree about what price you will pay, or what fee you will receive
- Play nickname = a different name, other than your normal name
- Play observed = saw
- Play opportunity = when you have a chance to do something which you can't do at another time
- Play overseas = in another land (over the sea)

- Play poisoned = when you eat or drink something which is very bad for your body
- Play popular = when something is liked by a lot of people
- Play protection = when you keep something safe
- Play relatively = compared to other similar things
- Play remains = (here) what is left of your body after you die
- Play remarkably = when something happens which is unexpected
- Play rubbed = pressed with your hands, up and down or across
- Play rumours = things which people say about a topic, which may not be true
- Play saddle = the seat put on a horse
- Play severe = bad
- Play stable = a building where horses are kept
- Play statues = a copy of a person or animal, usually made of metal (e.g. bronze)
- Play stuffed replica = the skin of an animal is stuffed and made to look like a statue
- Play Sydney-based = lives in Sydney and does most of his work there
- Play tactics = the way you do something
- Play temperature = how hot or cold something is (degrees)
- Play temporary ownership = to own something, but only for a period
- Play took off = (here) started to happen

- Play topic = an idea to talk about or write about
- Play tragic = very sad
- Play tribute = when good things are said about a person or animal
- Play triumph = (here) to beat other horses
- Play unbeatable = cannot be beaten
- Play unharmed = not hurt
- Play unplaced = did not get 1st, 2nd or 3rd
- Play victories = wins (when you win a competition or a fight or battle)
- Play warts = small bumps in the skin (growths, usually not good to look at)