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PRINCESS

The Miss Andretti Story



JOHN HUNT

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Preface

This is a story about hope. It is a true story. Horseracing is the canvas on which it is penned, yet hope is at its core.

It is a tale of innocuous beginnings and impossible odds, evolving into achievements so great that inspiration can be drawn and applied to any walk of life.

It is a story about the soul of racing: the triumph, the heartbreak, the tricks of fate, the passions, the sentiment, the humour, the hardship, the bravery, the patience, the frustration, the controversy – and the honour.

It is a story about normal, everyday people transported to a higher realm.

And it is the story of a horse called Miss Andretti, whom God blew breath into to bring something truly beautiful into the world.

Also, whilst others at various stages shared ownership in Miss Andretti during her career, this story is not about them.

Aside from the horse itself, this story is about the man who raised her.

John Hunt

PROLOGUE

England

Jesus Henry Christ.

For a man not steeped in eloquence, the expletive thought, a personal favourite, was all David Mueller's mind could muster to characterise the emotions he was feeling.

Jesus Henry Christ.

Before him, rippling behind a distant mirage, was the most nerve-wracking sight he'd experienced in a lifetime of horseracing. It was simply a field of thoroughbreds, fidgeting and circling behind the starting gates, but among them was a mare who'd changed his reason for being – and she was favourite for the event.

Not just any event. Not just any racecourse. This was the 2007 edition of the renowned King's Stand Stakes, one of the great sprint races in the world and the opening act at one of the world's great racing carnivals, Royal Ascot.

Jesus Henry Christ.

A couple of days earlier, that same use of the vernacular had been Mueller's first and immediate reaction to the apparition

staring back at him from the up-market London clothier's changing-room mirror. For some, an occasion affording the opportunity to dress in top hat and tails would be viewed as just that, an opportunity. For Mueller, it bordered on the ridiculous.

At fifty-one, he had long been only ever comfortable in jeans, t-shirt and either work-boots or sneakers and it would not have been so bad if the penguin suit had been donned for a fancy dress party – might have even been fun. This though was different, and the expected refinement of behaviour and subtleties of etiquette to match the suit and complete the farce were likewise a strain on his upbringing.

After paying for the hire suit, Mueller had walked outside into the blustery wind and chaos of sound, congratulating himself on wearing a jumper to go shopping and marvelling once again at what the English call summer.

'It's all worth it though, I s'pose, even the bloody suit,' he mumbled aloud, as his focus returned to the present and the race at hand and the gallopers now moving in to their allocated stalls. Mueller knew, of course, that his being dressed up like a lord was appropriate and swimming in a sea of similarly adorned buffoons was helping him feel a little less foolish.

But I'd like to see their faces back home if they could see me now. Jesus!

Home, however, was a world away and like the extremes in dress, was also in complete contrast to the antiquitous capital of England.

Home.

Where the century heat of summer turned the fields blonde and a man's skin brown and cracked and hard, like the baked earth it beat down on. Where the winter's rains turned that

same dirt into the lush loam of farmers' dreams. Where spring gave birth to a fantasy of blooms and autumn lingered long in a million shades of green, then gold, then red.

The West Australian south-west was something Mueller was missing already after only three days. It was not because of nostalgia or feeling like a fish out of water or even loneliness, but because now that he *was* here the enormity of the quest he'd come for had dawned on him.

And then there was the guilt. Guilt that now, at this unimagined flashpoint in an otherwise mediocre career, he had left behind his partner of twenty years – and he had left behind his daughter. His beloved daughter whose very life seemed to be fading away, ebbing slowly before her parents' eyes, and she not long a teenager.

And here I am in a tuxedo. He cringed at the irony.

Yet David Mueller knew that he was on the threshold of something phenomenal. Something that could not be ignored.

All around him the purple bloods of gentry had gathered and when their bets came in a winner they would toss their hats in glee, launching them like bubbles popping forth from yet another newly poured glass of overpriced champagne.

The purple bloods of racehorses had also assembled and had spilled into the barriers awaiting their release. Mueller held his breath and watched in anonymity as the seconds counted down to the moment of decision. And then they were racing and the crowd roared while Mueller's head grew light and he swayed in the moment's tension.

Jockey Craig Newitt was also well-acquainted with pressure, but unlike Mueller could not afford to let it affect him. He had his game face firmly in place and he felt the horse beneath him did as well. There was friskiness there and a lurking tempestuousness, but there was control as well,

born of the wisdom that comes with maturity.

Newitt sensed such things, as great horsemen do.

In a blink of adrenalin-fuelled rush that was the start, Newitt had instantly felt his charge power up onto the steel in her mouth and then was pleased that the precocious little mare allowed him to steady her.

The long, straight run of Royal Ascot stretched before them.

Suddenly, Newitt was reminded that the horses around him were no slouches. Despite his steed jumping and settling perfectly, she was almost mid-field. There was work to be done, but then it was never going to be easy.

‘Seventh early,’ muttered Mueller, watching and then wondering for the hundredth but final time if the scribes were right. Right that the mare from nowhere, raised and originally trained by a nobody, bred from nothing and who *cost* nothing, was indeed what he himself had come to believe: the greatest thoroughbred sprinter on earth.

The horse’s name was Miss Andretti.

The nobody was David Mueller.

PART ONE

Nowhere

Nobody

Nothing

CHAPTER 1

Cookernup

Years earlier, David Mueller was already set in his ways as a typical, rough-around-the-edges, country-boy Aussie: quick with a laugh, quicker to swear and with a hail-fellow-well-met handshake.

There are no frills about him, nor anything apparently remarkable – but horsemen, even the best of them, often seem that way. His appearance is pleasant enough, yet unremarkable: average height, average weight, fit from his work, regulation brown hair at regulation length. Unremarkable.

Until he is in the presence of a thoroughbred racehorse.

A fourth-generation trainer, Mueller's love for the animal is the passion that drives a genetic talent. He spots their nuances at a glance, not only being able to articulate on conformation or pedigree as is expected, but also having the eye to observe attitude and mood, and strength or weakness of spirit. These traits were born to him and he feels them in his blood.

Racing, though, is a subjective industry and opinions within it are based heavily on 'runs on the board'. There are many great and famous trainers and many more who could

be so, but whose abilities remain largely hidden through lack of opportunity. In a business where horses can cost hundreds of thousands and even millions of dollars, why, with so many top resumés to choose from, would someone risk such a massive investment on a small-time trainer – even though rumours may abound that he ‘knows his stuff’?

Throughout his career covering the last quarter of the twentieth century, David Mueller had recognised and even respected this. His reality as a second-tier trainer was that his clients, like his horses, had always been middle class. Within the parameters of that basic truth lay a living, but a hard one, and by necessity he also worked nights loading trucks for a beef company to supplement his income. The fact was, and Mueller knew it, no-one was *ever* going to give him a top galloper to train unless he first became a top trainer. The cart and the horse, the chicken and the egg: the classic conundrum.

Despite this hurdle, the acquisition of a champion nevertheless remains the dream and aim of every trainer and one of the few remaining avenues to this goal is at the yearling sales.

Racing is an empire speckled with both million-dollar duds and loose change giants. It is what makes the sport great, for while the richer the pedigree the more likely the progeny to be gifted, what keeps the game riveting is the fact that this does not *always* hold true and the nondescript bloodline can also produce the freakish champion. The yearling sales are where they are found, and where they are lost . . .

One cold, overcast morning in the midst of the West Australian winter of 2000, David Mueller was, for the umpteenth time, pondering this very thought about yearling sales. He was mulling on the fact that he could not even afford a cheapie, never mind the more expensive product. What he

needed was a horse at least capable of earning enough profit to give him a 'bank' for the annual sales. He didn't have one and, worse still, his current team of four was running at a loss.

He sat on the back porch of his home pulling on his boots, ruefully preparing for the day's muddy chores made more so by the heavy overnight rain. He glanced up at the sound of distant mooing, but only for a moment, immediately registering the familiar lowing of hundreds of cows. They were being walked from a nearby dairy farm down the road adjoining Mueller's property, on their way to the milking sheds. It was a soothing sound to Mueller, like the strange sense of safety that comes from hearing the lounge-room clock chime in the depth of night.

The trainer stood and with hands on hips, briefly cast an eye over his surroundings. Located in the famed dairy belt of the state's south-west, Mueller's home was one of a scattering of farms and residences in the backblocks town of Cookernup, which was ten minutes by car from his alternate job in the beef town of Harvey, and some two hours from the WA capital of Perth, the only major city in a state three times the size of Texas yet with a population of only two million people.

Mueller's property lay nestled among the standard Australian bush gums and pines and was basic but functional. It was a five-acre lot, cleared and fenced, with paddocks and a roll yard, four horse boxes, dam, work shed, tack room and a small three-by-two wood-cladding home with a galvanised iron roof overlooking the spread.

Largely from his night work and not his horse training, Mueller had recently purchased the property free and clear with his life savings. The afterhours employment had, in fact,

saved his career as a trainer – a career which had been hampered by disillusionment . . .

Born in 1956 and raised in racing, Mueller went straight from school in Perth – gleefully departing at sixteen – to immediate full-time employment at his father’s metropolitan-based stables. Typically for his age, however, Mueller wanted more before he was ready and before it was due.

Brian, his father, was not forthcoming. He had worked hard to become more successful than most in his profession and had no intention of lessening his role. They fell out and the teenager left to conquer the world, full of all the vinegar and bravado of youth.

But David Mueller was too young and financially bereft to go out on his own as a trainer. He took work in stockyards for several years, met a girl, got married and had two children. Then, having smoothed things over with his dad, went back to work for him, new family in tow.

Again the experience was short-lived, but Mueller had a better plan and better acumen when he left for the second time. Now in his mid-twenties, the young man first rented then purchased his own outer-suburban horse property. While there, he trained a galloper called Ace Rhythm to nineteen victories, albeit mostly on country tracks. Monetarily, the thoroughbred kept Mueller afloat and he named the property Ace Lodge in tribute.

That was in the early 1980s, but before the end of the decade both Mueller’s career and his marriage were on the rocks, leading the horseman to divorce himself from both.

Around this time, the performance enhancing drug etorphine, more commonly referred to as ‘elephant juice’ and rumoured to be a thousand times more potent than morphine, had cast a giant and insidious pall over the integrity of West

Australian racing. The drug's impact devastated the industry and small-time trainers like David Mueller had little hope of competing against the ensuing corruption of the sport. It would take several years and a revolution in swabbing technology before the demise of this dark period in racing history and a return to a more level playing field.

Meanwhile, Mueller sold up in disgust and headed to the eastern states. His father closed shop for the same reasons and travelled back to his birth state of South Australia to train. The younger Mueller tried his hand with some success in Tasmania and later agisted (fed and pastured) horses for a living in Victoria. He did not return west until the mid-1990s. By then, the WA industry was back on its feet and he decided to test the water again.

First, he secured the beef industry job in the evenings, giving him a guaranteed income. Then he rented a property in the south-west region of Myalup, during which time he purchased and developed the Cookernup land. The buildings and amenities took two years to complete and in 1997 he moved in.

Using the money he earned from the abattoir, his plan was to mainly train horses he owned or leased himself, rather than horses owned and raced by someone else. This way he did not have to take any orders and he could play with three or four thoroughbreds at a time, but no more.

It was not like he was turning away champions because of the decision.

Now, three years on, here he was, listening to the winter morning and taking in the view from his back porch. It was a simple existence and idyllic in that unique Australian way, with life enjoyed to a permanent symphony of birdsong and frequent encounters with kangaroos, rabbits and various other fauna.

Mueller shared this life, beautiful as it was, hard as it was, with Julie Rodgers, his wife in all but name (having both been married and divorced, they'd decided one visit to the registry was enough) and their young daughter Kelli. Mueller's two children from his first marriage, Craig and Kate, were now adults and while they remained close to their father, they had moved on with their own lives and were not involved with racing.

It was Julie who now joined Mueller on the porch with a coffee mug in each hand. Although in her middle years, she still carried much of the attractiveness of her youth. She was a curvaceous woman and, although the gold in her hair was no longer natural, Mueller was thinking, *You'll do me darlin'*, as she handed him his morning brew.

An ebullient, talkative woman, Julie loved a joke and tried to find the humour in life, but like her partner she saw the world as it was, without embellishment. This similarity also extended to the way the couple viewed horses: passionately, but with emotional clarity.

Julie too, had grown up around them . . .

Born in 1953, she was three years older than Mueller and had been raised on her parents' dairy farm in Tasmania, working hacks around the property, rounding up cattle and riding at the local pony club. But the farm could not hold her.

At twenty-one, she became a qualified hairdresser and left home. Then she left the state, following a group of friends to Perth where she worked in a salon and as a barmaid, until her marriage at age twenty-six. It was a volatile union and four years in, Julie miscarried her first pregnancy. That was the final straw for the relationship. After that, Julie was looking for an out and it came in the form of David Mueller, who was captain of a social cricket team her husband played for.

The oval was walking distance from Mueller's stables at that time (Ace Lodge), which was the main reason he'd joined the club. Julie would often be there tending bar in the clubhouse or helping out in other ways after the games. She and Mueller became friends, then they became lovers. It was more about physical chemistry than romance at first, but both were unhappily married and wanted a new start. They got their wish and quicker than they might have imagined.

Mueller kept picking Julie's husband to play in the A team with him so that Julie would be at the club when Mueller was. It was obvious to everyone else that Julie's husband was not good enough for the A team and soon the rest of the matter became apparent as well. Both spouses found out about the affair, resulting in Julie and David leaving their marriages at around the same time. When Mueller quit Ace Lodge and WA racing to go east, Julie went with him. And with him she stayed . . .

As the couple sipped their coffees, they stepped off the porch and walked slowly towards the stable area with Murphy, their black Labrador cross, sauntering along beside them.

'Fast work, Dave?'

'Fast work, Jules,' Mueller replied, and added 'Mind you, fast is hardly what you'd call these two old bludgers I'm taking to the track this morning.'

He smiled as he gestured to the horses in question, standing sleepily in their stables, but Julie and David both knew what the trainer was saying was true.

'Kiss Kelli for me, will you? I'll see her after school,' he added.

'Kiss her *before* school, she's up already.'

Sure enough, Mueller was still hitching his float to the car and loading aboard the two veteran geldings for their journey

to the Larkhill track work complex, about ninety minutes closer to Perth, when Kelli came bursting through the screen door. It had not yet slammed closed when the youngster became airborne into her father's arms.

'Heh! Careful kid! You'll break your ole man's ribs!' Mueller yelled, while worrying more about her safety than his. Any fall or semi-severe impact could have repercussions, but consequences are rarely at the forefront of a child's thinking.

'Sorry Dad, you poor old thing. How's the scar?' the lightly framed girl squawked in a high-pitched, standard drawl.

Mueller had recently had his gall bladder out. On that very same day, Kelli herself had undergone a major operation to replace her external colostomy bag with an internal one known as a j-pouch. The procedure had left her in hospital for three months.

Kelli, while still an infant, had been diagnosed with a condition called ulcerative colitis, an inflammatory bowel disease which inhibited her ability to process nutrients properly from food. This weakened her and stunted her growth development.

She was seven but looked younger; a pretty girl in that typically Australian, brown pony-tailed, toothy, freckle-faced kind of way, but almost elfin in stature. She had endured her first operation under general anaesthetic at age three, but her own struggles – as she inquired after her dad's scar – seemed to have slipped her mind.