

## A DAY AT THE RACES--C'MON DOWN UNDER

*[By Earle I. Mack](#)*

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Mark Twain said it best when he attended the Melbourne Cup Carnival in 1895. "Nowhere in the world have I encountered a festival of people that has such a magnificent appeal to the whole nation. The Cup astonishes me."

I was privileged to participate in "the race that stops the nation." My horse, Mad Rush (Lemon Drop Kid), was installed the 5-1 favorite, thanks largely to a stellar performance in the traditional lead-up race, the G1 Caulfield Cup, just three weeks prior.

Upon my arrival into Melbourne, following our Breeders' Cup on the 24th and 25th of October, I was greeted with a warm reception from the "Aussies." They are one of the nations in the world that truly love Americans.

The racing in Melbourne (a city of close to 3.5 million people) is special, and when the Melbourne Cup and its four-day carnival is staged, it's something which you have to see to believe. The Cup has certainly come of age, and, according to champion Irish Trainer Aidan O'Brien, "It's not the greatest race in the world without a reason--you don't win it that easily."

The attendance for the Melbourne Cup, which is run on the first Tuesday in November, was a staggering 107,000, plus another 12,500 staff. Over the four days of the carnival, more than 400,000 people walked through the turnstiles. To put that into perspective, the Breeders' Cup attendance was 82,000 over two days. The Cup's on-track attendance translates to more than 2% of the Australian population. In our country, that would be more than 6 million people on track.

The noise from the crowd was on the threshold of deafening; the nation held its breath as 21 of the world's best thoroughbreds thundered around this famous and hallowed turf for the most grueling two miles in racing.

The Melbourne Cup, which Australia has declared a public holiday, allows its 20 million-plus population to attend and capture the excitement of this amazing day. Case in point; I needed a prescription filled and every pharmacy in the city was closed--thus we had to drive 25 miles to find one open. My friend Laurie Hunter came from America and needed an important document notarized...alas, there wasn't one to be found.

Melbourne Cup day itself is truly beautiful--run in the spring, which produces incredible weather and the prettiest roses in full bloom. Parts of the track could be mistaken for a Botanical Garden, with as many species of spring flowers you are ever likely to see.

The enthusiasm for racing in Melbourne and in all of Australia was unbelievable and, at the

track, even more so. Flemington Race Track is very user-friendly, with lush green lawns, abundant flowers, four giant screens in the infield, ample seating and smartly dressed young people everywhere. The day lends itself to tremendous fashion, with the most beautiful collection of hats and women you are ever likely to see at any race day around the world, including our Kentucky Derby Day.

The lead-up to Melbourne Cup week is full of fabulous events, pageantry and lends itself to great hype.

The Cup parade is an event not to be missed on the Monday before, showcasing former greats of the race, including trainers, jockeys, horses and owners. I rode in the car at the top of the parade as the owner of the favorite, alongside Mad Rush's trainer Luca Cumani and his jockey Damien Oliver. To be able to witness these events first-hand was truly remarkable; it felt like riding in the lead car in a ticker-tape parade down Broadway. The parade is so popular that Melbourne city centre was closed as the parade wound its way through the streets in a country gripped with Cup fever!

The Aussie folk are known for two things--their love of a beer and their love of a wager--which is most evident on Cup day. On the way to the track, the TAB's (OTB) are overflowing with people having a wager. Again, to put this into perspective, more than \$A140 million was wagered by the population on the 10-race card, as compared to our \$164 million, wagered on our 12-race 2008 Derby card. What about the recession?

Luca Cumani is a brilliant horse strategist and is surrounded by a great support team with wife Sara and daughter Francesca. He placed Mad Rush to perfection and literally came within a hair of stealing the Cup from the Aussies with Mad Rush's stablemate, Bauer, a 20-1 outsider. Luca now has the dubious honor of finishing second two years in a row.

I was fortunate to have arguably Australia's best jockey, Damien Oliver, who has a record second to none in this great race. Despite Damien's best efforts, Mad Rush, well-supported as the favorite in the betting market at odds of 5-1, finished a creditable seventh, only five lengths from the winner.

Many experts say the Melbourne Cup, with its A\$5.56 million purse, is the toughest race to win in the world, and, after seeing it in person, I would concur with this theory. The track itself was well-watered, but fast and firm, and is sure to favor our own turf horses, but gives every horse an opportunity to win.

For the record, Viewed won the Melbourne Cup for Australia's legendary trainer Bart Cummings, who now has the won the race an unreal 12 times. He turned 81 last Friday. Bart Cummings is an Australian racing icon, so much so that the Flemington racecourse erected a bronze statue of this truly great man, who has lived and breathed this great sport.

Australia's greatest ever racehorse Phar Lap, who most Americans would know for his ill-fated trip to our country, won this prestigious race in 1930. Phar Lap means to Aussies what Seabiscuit and Secretariat mean to Americans.

So why not come Down Under and celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Cup in 2010? The purse is expected to be raised to A\$10 million, which will make it the richest handicap in the entire world. Surely, this is enough to entice the best horses, jockeys, trainers and owners.

The following advice is for anyone daring enough to participate in the Cup.

- You don't necessarily need a two-mile horse, but one that can run 1 1/2 miles and rate well with a good turn of foot.
- Don't think you're going to steal this race. There is no such thing as stealing the Cup.
- Highweights don't often win, so identify an underexposed horse on his way up, about to reach peak form and you can take advantage of the handicap weight scale.
- Your horse must be able to handle a firm track.
- Be on the grounds at least five weeks before the Cup in order to acclimatize and adapt.
- A prep race would be desirable, either in the Grade 3 Geelong Cup or the A\$2.5 million Grade 1 Caulfield Cup, which has been a good recipe for Melbourne Cup winners in the past.

I highly recommend going Down Under for anyone who loves horse racing or just loves a festival experience.

This Carnival has captured me and it's by far the most exciting and memorable experience of my 45 years in racing--one which I will never forget.

*With assistance from Brad Spicer in Melbourne.*

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