

# News

# Bright future on course

Sandown racecourse is about to get bigger. In one of the most significant developments in metropolitan racing for many years the Melbourne Racing Club has added another track to the popular south-east venue. In the first of a special series of stories, ROY ASPINALL looks at Sandown's history.

WITH the Melbourne Racing Club set to launch the new Hillside track at Sandown on Sunday, March 16, it is timely to reflect on the history of Melbourne's most modern metropolitan racecourse.

Cars and thoroughbreds go hand in hand at Sandown racecourse, with motor racing first recorded there in 1904 on a course used for pony races.

Thoroughbred racing was also conducted there until 1931 when the State Government reduced the number of metropolitan courses closing Sandown Park, Fitzroy, Richmond and Aspendale.

This culling continued through the 1930s and 1940s with the demise of Epsom (1938), Williamstown (1940) and Mentone (1948).

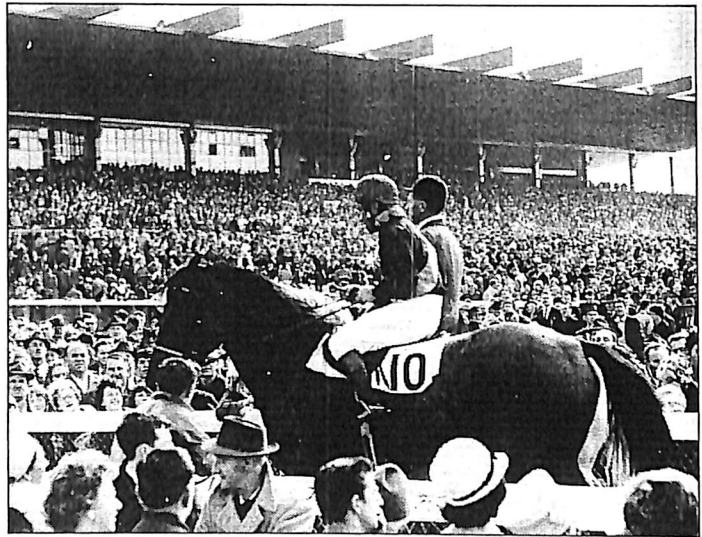
In the hope of being able to re-open, the Williamstown club's administration remained operational



but when their task proved lost they merged with the Victorian Turf Racing Association (VTRA) who raced at Mentone. The new club operated as the Melbourne Racing Club.

To this marriage Williamstown brought £200,000 and the VTRA a valuable site in Springvale. The Melbourne Racing Club raced on other metropolitan tracks while trying to raise the money to build a new course of their own.

In the early 1960s the MRC realised this was a hopeless dream



**First winner:** Peter Mohi rides Amphion back to scale after winning the first race at Sandown in 1965.

and on August 1, 1963 merged with the Victoria Amateur Turf Club (VATC). The financial strength of the VATC provided the financial impetus needed to make the Sandown development project a reality.

Controlled by the VATC, the new Sandown racecourse opened on June 19, 1965, before a crowd of 52,379, a record that has never been eclipsed at the venue.

Considered by many to be the nation's finest racing surface, Sandown's design was modelled on a combination of American race-tracks and the famed course at Epsom in the UK, with sweeping turns, cambered corners and a long uphill run in the home straight. Another feature is an undulating steeplechase track that makes jumping events at Sandown a spectacle.

In the 1990s the quarantine station was built at Sandown making it the 'Home of the Internationals' when they come to Melbourne for the feature carnivals.

Patron facilities at Sandown have been enhanced significantly in recent years. In November 1997, the course unveiled the first stage of a \$8m upgrade, while August 1999 saw the completion of the second stage of the refurbishment.

In October 2001 the VATC announced its five-year strategic vision which included pioneering plans for Caulfield and Sandown and a change of name to the Melbourne Racing Club to better reflect the activities of today's organisation, which conducts almost 50% of metropolitan racing in Melbourne.

A strategy was devised by the club to create improved and fairer racing conditions. Caulfield's annual fixtures were reduced from 31 to 20 from last August, to comprise solely feature days. In order to accommodate the additional meetings relocated from Caulfield, the club commissioned a major redevelopment project to create a second track at Sandown.

This was achieved principally through the construction of an additional home turn and widening of the main straight from 30 to 45m, making Sandown the first racecourse in Melbourne to operate as a dual-circuit venue.

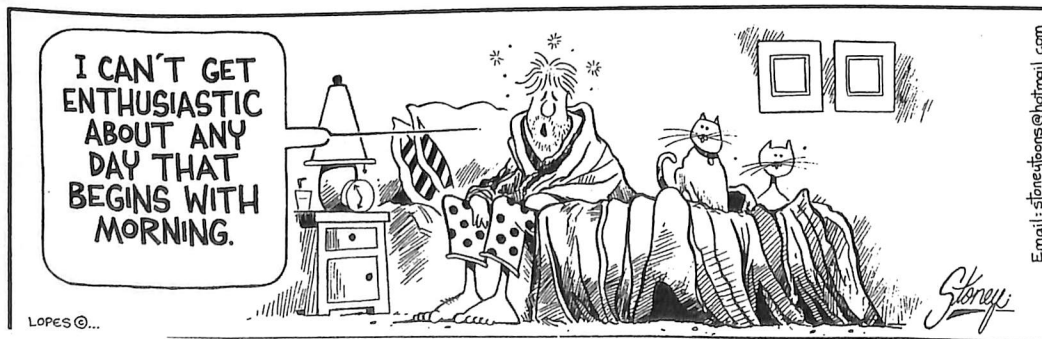
Now with the excitement of 43 meetings per season, Sandown fixtures will be equitably distributed across the new Hillside track and the Lakeside track, which is essentially a slightly modified version of the traditional circuit in place since 1965. Racing began on the Lakeside track on January 25, providing a prelude to the grand opening of the new Hillside track on March 16.



**Turning heads:** from the air the Hillside (outer) and Lakeside courses are clearly visible.

Picture: Bruce Postle

## INSANITY STREAK by TONY LOPES



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