12885664-JO36-26

Nick's competitive revival

By Peter Foley

Perseverance is a prerequisite for people working with horses and jockey-turned-trainer Nick Keal has it in spades. Racing is in his blood, so he keeps finding a way forward.

Nick was a rising star as an apprentice when a series of injuries derailed his progress.

"I was in a very good purple patch and everything was going right - what could go right, would go right - and then I had a fall at the trials," Nick recalled.

"I was lucky enough when I came back; I think I rode six out of the first seven.

"And then I got on the back of the right horses in town and I was going through my grades -until life happened.

"I did my collarbone and then came back one day and did it again, so I was out for nearly 12 months."I got going again, but it was never the same. It was always a struggle."

The long lay-off made it harder to manage his weight.

"After having a year off with my shoulder, and then all the setbacks with the suspensions, it never got easier to get the weight back off," he said.

In December 2019, he was suspended for a month after pleading guilty to intentionally steering his horse into Les Tilley's mount while pulling up after a race at Doomben. It was, he said, a "brain snap."

Looking back, he wishes he had recognised sooner that racing could offer him a career beyond the saddle.

"I guess if I knew I would be going this well as a trainer, I probably wouldn't have pushed myself so hard to ride," he said. "You live and learn, don't you."

He didn't want to stop riding, but the physical and mental toll had become too great.

"Actually, I left the industry completely. I walked away from it for probably a year - a year and a half," he said.

"I was upset about getting the opportunities I did, and I couldn't fulfil them."

Nick ran a lawnmowing business during his time away, but racing drew him back.

"Once you're in it, you're in it and there's no getting out of it. It's in your blood," he said.

Before accepting he could no longer keep riding, Nick made one last attempt to return to the saddle.

"I only had about 50 rides back, and then it was too hard for me again, so then I turned the tables, and I started training."

His last race ride came in January, 2023 at Warwick. He retired with 144 winners.

Bob Davis gave Nick his first horse to train, while his former master, Kevin Kemp, provided a box to house it.

"I've got 20 in work at the moment. I wouldn't mind having a little bit more. The problem at the moment is there's no boxes left in Toowoomba.

"And now my apprentice Kelsey Lenton had a race fall and broke a collarbone."

Kelsey, Nick's partner before she became his apprentice, had surgery in Brisbane last Friday.



Irama (centre), with jockey Ben Thompson giving him a peach of a ride, races clear of his rivals before winning the Barrier Reef Pools Class 5 Handicap (1200m). (Trackside Photography)

Since his first winner in July 2024, Nick has added another 55. Now he wants to build on that start.

"I just need that one owner to give me a bit of trust. Instead of sending them to Tony Gollan or Jack Bruce or someone like that, send them to me," he said.

Irama gave prospective owners a glimpse of what Nick can do with a promising win last Thursday at Ipswich.

The son of I Am Invincible didn't reach expectations with Chris Waller before passing through the stables of Stuart Kendrick, Mark Currie and Billy Healy.

Irama won three races before joining Nick's stable in May. Since then, he has won three of his seven starts.

Drawn the outside barrier for the Barrier Reef Pools Class 5 Handicap (1200m), Irama needed a good ride. Ben Thompson gave him one.

"From that gate, we didn't really know where we'd end up, so we just left it to Ben Thompson, and he delivered a peach," he said.

"Ben gave him a dig out of the gates and he ended up getting the run of the race and the horse delivered at the end. He pulled away from them on the line."



Nick Keal had some highs and lows as a jockey



12847894-KF08-26