

The Cup, 149 years on, still innovates. One of the best changes to the VRC Melbourne Cup Carnival in recent years has been the inclusion of the Emirates Melbourne Cup Winners Media Conference at the Carnival Live Site at Crown Riverside on the first Wednesday of November.

Ostensibly, it was introduced to provide the television networks and daily papers with a quick and easy follow up story on the Cup winners without having to individually hound them all day.

But whether by design or good fortune, it now also provides the deepest insights into the race's magnetic appeal. For the media it is the perfect scenario: the Cup winners are still walking on clouds and can hardly say no to a press conference; they have had nearly 24 hours to think about what winning the race really means to them; and after a night of heavy celebration it would be fair to say their defences are down a little so they are inclined to open up more than they do in the heat of the moment in the mounting yard.

After Shocking's win in the 2009 Emirates Melbourne Cup, trainer Mark Kavanagh, owner Laurence Eales and jockey Corey Brown all related stories from their childhoods, revealing it was the Cup which first inspired them to chase racing careers. For Eales, Just A Dash gave him his first memory, winning in 1981, but he was really hooked three years later when Black Knight was the first winner he ever backed. For Brown, it was also Just A Dash, the opportunity to sit aboard the Cup winner when he was still a child being the start of a dream that took him to three Group 1 wins in Cup Week of 2009.

And Kavanagh's moment was way back in 1965 when Light Fingers won for his mum's boss. Up until that victory, eight-year-old Mark had despaired of ever getting a new bike because his mother kept listening to tips from stablehands as she cooked and served their meals at the Adelaide stables of Bart Cummings. She'd promised him the bike as soon as she could win enough but even then Kavanagh was capable of the old style philosophy which frequently punctuates his conversations. "Mum, the tips are losing," he said. "If you didn't take the tips of the guy riding the bike, I'd be able to get a new one."

"But then Light Fingers won. We were all right then."

Three months after his own Melbourne Cup win, Kavanagh is still like a kid with a new bike, although he can now afford to buy a lot more than that. He is immensely proud of his Cup win – not just because it's the biggest race in Australia but because of the way he planned and programmed Shocking's campaign with that three minutes 23.87 seconds over the Flemington 3200 metres in mind.

The program which worked to perfection in the relative short term of one preparation had in fact been a lifetime in the making. He makes no secret of his admiration for Bart Cummings, the man he studied at close quarters way back in his childhood, learning lessons about horse conditioning that he didn't even realise he was taking in. "You would see these scrawny, leggy horses turn up and six months later you wouldn't believe it was the same horse."

Before he was ten he'd been given the chance to sit on three Cup winners – Light Fingers, Galilee and Red Handed – and Kavanagh began to dream of his own name appearing in the form guides, just like Bart ... M.A. Kavanagh, Flemington.

Kavanagh would grow up to ride over jumps but unlike most jockeys who see riding as their life's career, for him it was always a means to an end – a pathway to his real career as a trainer.

Over the years he has taken big risks but they have always been calculated. He reckons he rode for two years too long before setting up stables in Mount Gambier in 1991 but once he did, his growth chart has produced a straight upward line.

He won the South East District Racing Association training premiership in his first season and soon set up a second stable in Adelaide while still operating the original place in Mt Gambier. He moved to Adelaide full time in 2000 and expanded to his current 39-horse stable at Morphettville in 2003, winning his first Group 1 with Hard To Get in the 2004 South Australian Derby.

By then he was regularly sending horses to Melbourne with hit and run success and in 2005 broke through for his first Victorian Group 1 win with Undoubtedly in the Blue Diamond Stakes at Caulfield. The Flemington dream was moving closer and in late 2006 he applied for a block of stables at the new Flemington development and waited hopefully to hear whether he had been accepted.

His cause was helped when Divine Madonna won the 2006 Emirates Stakes and in early 2007 he was approved and moved into his 26-horse stable with only one minor problem – 25 of the 26 boxes had no horse in them.

That was the only time in his training career that he ever had any concerns about how much he had put on the line but he quickly knuckled down and grew the team, four Group 1 wins that spring clinching his reputation as The Next Big Thing in training. The media and the public quickly came to love the way he celebrated his wins but an equally important factor was his reaction to the incident on the famous day Maldivian was scratched from the Caulfield Cup after gashing his neck at the barrier. Kavanagh was devastated but refrained from laying blame, his sportsmanship boosting his public image immeasurably.

It would be fair to say he has occasionally struggled to retain his good humor under the sheer weight of media demands since then, many an interviewer finding his straight bat defence impenetrable. But at all the important times he is free with his time and everyone still loves the way he celebrates.

He is now up to 13 Group 1 wins – the 2008 Cox Plate with Maldivian another giant step up the training ladder before, at age 52, the ultimate in Australian racing, the Emirates Melbourne Cup with Shocking.

While the Maldivian incident at Caulfield was a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, it seems that rollercoaster highs and lows are going to define Kavanagh's career. His spring of 2009 was almost its own soap opera – Maldivian's breakdown and retirement, an injury to dual Group 2 winning mare Cats Whisker, the flop of Cox Plate favourite Whobegotyou and the Derby morning scratching of star three-year-old Shamoline Warrior were powerful blows and he was understandably tense going into the Cup – and yet confident just the same.

Calling on his experience over the jumps, he reasoned a run of bad luck would eventually be followed by some good luck. Patience, he says, is an essential of racing. "It's not about how many times you get knocked down, but it's about how many times you get up."

Just as he had seen Bart Cummings do so many times, Kavanagh planned Shocking's Cup campaign with meticulous precision. A \$64,000 purchase at the 2007 Magic Millions Horses in Training Sale on the Gold Coast, Shocking is owned by Laurence Eales, who teamed up with Kavanagh soon after the trainer arrived in Melbourne.

Eales figured anyone with that many empty boxes was going to be hungry for success and how right he was.

Kavanagh set Shocking for the Cup after his second in the Queensland Derby and while the young stayer sailed under the radar as a second stringer behind Whobegotyou early in the spring, his progression was constant. Alcopop thrashed him at Caulfield on Guineas Day to earn Cup favouritism but Kavanagh was unfazed because he was planning for a race three weeks and three days away.

His win in The Lexus was perhaps the strongest Derby Day Cup trial in the last 40 years and still Kavanagh thought he had a bit of improvement in him. He was spot on, and on the Tuesday so was Shocking. Last year's winner Viewed may have had an unlucky run, but Shocking sat three wide throughout and was a comprehensive winner in the big one.

Now an international campaign beckons and with his sire Street Cry going from strength to strength, a feature win overseas would put Shocking into the big league as a stud prospect.

Can we add a par here in mid-January about Dubai, Royal Ascot and Cup 150? Can we add a par here in mid-January about Dubai, Royal Ascot and Cup 150? Can we add a par here in mid-January about Dubai, Royal Ascot and Cup 150? Should take about this much space.

In the meantime, Kavanagh is showing that he can not only manage the Group 1 careers of his top horses but he is a dab hand at winning with some average ones as well. Regardless of the Cup win and despite all the setbacks along the way, the current season has seen his career take another giant leap upwards.

It took him only the first six months of the season to surpass last season's personal best tally of 61 winners. At the halfway point he was leading the South Australian metropolitan training premiership and was running second in Melbourne. More importantly, his strike rate was better than 21% in Melbourne and, unbelievably, almost 40 per cent in Adelaide. Three of his Adelaide winners came on Melbourne Cup Day, an achievement that got somewhat pushed into the background when Shocking did his stuff.

Of course, this widespread success proves also that he has a great team behind him. Foreman Merv Harvey has been with him 15 years and is hugely respected both inside and outside the stable. And the rest of the key members of Team Kavanagh are Kavanaghs.

Family involvement is the aspect of his rise that Kavanagh has found most rewarding. Wife Isobel was actively involved down in the stable in the early years but as the business grew she found herself spending more time in the office and is now full time business manager. "She is the female strength behind the male rabble in the family," he says.

Significantly, Kavanagh waited until his two sons were adults before trying his dual-state operation and they haven't let him down. Levi, 25, has a commerce degree and after working overseas is now the stable's racing and bloodstock manager. Sam, 23, runs the Morphetville stable, having spent a year in England working for Peter Chapple-Hyam.

It could well be the start of a dynasty, a point reinforced as Kavanagh reflects on his early years. "It wasn't easy when we started. We are first generation trainers – we didn't take over dad's business or dad's farm or anything like that. I didn't get rich riding over jumps."

Maybe he didn't, but along the way he picked up a wealth of knowledge which he is now using with instinctive nous. And dynasties have to start somewhere. Over the years Cummings, Hayes and Smith became constants of racing – always there winning the big ones at the carnivals and passing their passion for horses down the generations. The Mark Kavanagh story is still moving too fast for him to be considered a constant. You get the feeling, though, the name will be here for decades to come.

MARK KAVANAGH

Born: 23 December 1956

Rode: 96 winners over jumps

Began training: Mt Gambier, 1991

First winner: Celestial Choice, Donald Maiden, June 1991

First Group 1 winner: Hard To Get, South Australian Derby, May 2004

Group 1 wins: 13

2009	Emirates Melbourne Cup 3200m Flemington	SHOCKING
2009	Yalumba Stakes 2000m Caulfield	WHOBEGOTYOU
2009	C.F. Orr Stakes 1400m Caulfield	MALDIVIAN
2008	W S Cox Plate 2040m Moonee Valley	MALDIVIAN
2008	The Age Caulfield Guineas 1600m Caulfield	WHOBEGOTYOU
2007	Myer Classic 1600m Flemington	DIVINE MADONNA
2007	Yalumba Stks 2000m Caulfield	MALDIVIAN
2007	Toorak Hcp 1600m Caulfield	DIVINE MADONNA
2007	Turnbull Stks 2000m Flemington	DEVIL MOON
2007	Queen of the Turf Stakes 1500m Rosehill	DIVINE MADONNA
2006	Emirates Stks 1610m Flemington	DIVINE MADONNA
2005	Blue Diamond Stks 2 1200m Caulfield	UNDOUBTEDLY
2004	South Australian Derby 2500m Morphetville	HARD TO GET