

Mick Contos, *Born to Ride: The in Langby Story* (Paddington: Lester-Townsend Publishing, 1988). Illus., pp. 157. \$24.95.

Kevin Langby was a jockey who adopted the outward appearance of the period which was his heyday. From the late 1960s

to the mid 1970s he wore his red hair long and followed the mod fashions of the era. For some racing officials and punters it was these features which made Langby stand out from the very traditional, very conservative racing crowd. For others, including those of us with similar hairstyles, he stood out because of his riding ability. When you had bet more than you should have it was always comforting to know that your horse would jump well from the barrier and that it was likely to kick clear of the field half-way down the straight.

Langby rates with only about half a dozen of his colleagues as a jockey to whom I offered silent thank-yous more often than less silent curses. He is also one of the few jockeys whom I have long wished to know more about and *Born to Ride* provided that opportunity.

The book does live up to its subtitle, *The Kkvin Langby Story*, although around one-third of it is more concerned with the prominent horses Langby rode to success. The other two-thirds is much more interesting reading even if it does follow a fairly standard format. Chapter one discusses the young Langby's introduction to horses and to racing, his apprenticeship and early years as a fully-fledged rider. Chapters two and three are devoted to Langby's time at the top, as number one rider for the Tommy Smith stable, until his replacement by Malcolm Johnston. Chapter four discusses Langby's subsequent two year sojourn in Hong Kong. Then follows the three chapters devoted to the horses, another which focuses on the gossip and innuendo which a successful jockey has to live with and a strange, almost polemical chapter, which attempts to demonstrate that Langby did not bet on the horses he rode or on any others. This was not because 'winning was its own reward' but, at least partly, because winning brought with it other rewards from grateful owners.

The final chapter is steeped in pathos. It is devoted to the events which led to Langby's premature retirement and to his determination to prolong the life of his son Jason, who eventually died in 1987 at the age of nine.

The best chapters are those which get closer to the man and the unusual world in which he lives. Langby's descriptions do provide some insight for the reader into the world of the jockeys such as their dependence upon the patronage of trainers or of owners who can be unforgiving about one poor ride, or their regular harassment by drunks and others, including journalists. He also provides good insights into the enjoyment of being a celebrity and into the lifestyle of Australian jockeys in Hong Kong. Less satisfactory are the incomplete insights into the less savoury world of the 'colourful racing identities'. Most CRIs of the era receive little attention (perhaps because Langby had no contact with them!). Pert Galea is a truthful, hard working generous friend. Drugs, 'jiggers' and other means of slowing down or speeding up horses were apparently unknown in the Langby era or at least they were features not worthy of discussion. Accordingly, the book is not the expose which some of its pre-publication publicity hinted at.

Born to Ride is a very well produced work with a good selection of illustrations. It is a readable book accredited to Mick Contos but written in the first person (perhaps Langby deserves at least equal credit). Although Contos has ordered the material well it does suffer from some of the usual problems inherent in reminiscences. There is an emphasis on 'firsts', 'highlights' and occasional 'lowlights' rather than on careful discussion of issues central to the lives of jockeys. A few stories even creep into the text more than once; such as the fact that Langby had to change his silent telephone number regularly to avoid the pests which plague his profession.

Another detail repeated in the book concerns Lang's riding record. It is worth repeating again in summary here. For seven years, between 1969-70 and 1975-76 he was either first or second on the Sydney jockey's premiership and for four years (from 1971-2 to 1974-5) he was a clear winner of the title. Nevertheless, unlike George Moore, Roy Higgins, Malcolm Johnston and some other riders of his time, Langby did not receive the recognition his riding record

demanded, especially in Melbourne. Langby's premierships coincided with his time as Tommy Smith's number one rider - but much the same could be said of Moore and Johnston.

Langby was a great horseman and a great judge of horses. His assessments of Imagele, as the best horse (and the only champion) he rode and of Gunsynd, as a great personality but not deserving of the tag champion, are perhaps controversial. But to me they are realistic assessments based on the horses performances rather than media hype. As a judge of business potential, Langby was also a good jockey. His assessment of Tommy Smith's decision to float Tulloch Lodge as a public company proved wrong before the printer's ink was dry.

Maybe this is just further proof of the adage that jockeys do not make good tipsters. Perhaps it is evidence of Langby's loyalty to his friends in the industry, even though they replaced him when another fresh-faced young champion rider came along. Qualities such as loyalty and integrity come through in this biographical story but the reader is still left wanting to know a lot more of the details about Kevin Langby, his life and times, his friends, associates and rivals. There is plenty of room for another volume.

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