

# AGRA HALL OF FAME

## Brett Lee

Black Dog

(Gun Law Osti x Sobbing Sal)

Whelped January 1999

Trainer: D.McDonald Owners: K.Johnstone & D.McDonald

Year of Induction 2002

39 Starts: 31 Wins 8 Placings

Career Prizemoney: \$405,106

### **Feature Career Wins Included:**

2001 Golden Easter Egg, 520m Wentworth Park, 2001 Adelaide Cup, 515m Angle Park

2001 Australian Cup, 525m The Meadows, 2001 The Maturity, 525m The Meadows

2001 Warrnambool Classic, 2001 SA Interstate Challenge

2001 Geelong Guineas

### **Career Track Records:**

Horsham 480m (26.94), Warragul 424m (23.68), Angle Park 515m (28.88), Shepparton 440m (24.22)

Geelong 457m (25.19), Ballarat 450m (24.95)



Brett Lee was rated as one of the quickest greyhounds of all time, and broke the first of many track records, at his second race start on the Horsham 480m track. From that point the black speed freak stormed into the annals of Australian greyhound racing folklore with a string of group wins and track records.

Brett Lee's first Group 1 success came with a record-breaking win in the Adelaide Cup and was followed by victories in the Australian Cup, Maturity Classic, while his crowning glory came with a devastating triumph in the Golden Easter Egg.

It has been said that Brett Lee was the greyhound, that greyhound racing needs every one or two seasons to keep the sport in the headlines, and he certainly delivered. Greyhound fans probably expected it would take some years to uncover a champion with all the attributes of a greyhound worthy of induction into the Hall Of Fame. Most of us thought it might be a long time, even maybe never, that we would witness a dog with such extraordinary abilities of those

displayed by the mighty Rapid Journey. The incredible performances packed into one calendar year seemed at the time to be a once only, could another greyhound ever reach those lofty heights.

Well we didn't have to wait long, with only enough time to take our breath, a little black dog emerged on the scene named after an Aussie fast bowler.

A speed machine that was to re-write the record books and provide excitement wherever he went he was none other than Brett Lee.

In contrast to the Rapid Journey story, the story behind Superstar Brett Lee has almost no parallels at all.

One a big brindle, unfashionable bred who came from behind in most of his major victories, Rapid Journey was raced by a family that became household names from almost obscurity.



While Brett Lee a blue blood, small and compact not even a good-looking individual, his sheer speed found the front almost every time he raced, he then quite simply broke the hearts of the opposition. He also changed hands twice, for record sums and was raced and trained by people in the sport with what would be considered a high profile.

The Brett Lee story begun with his dam Sobbing Sal raced by Stan and Rachel Bonsar, the brilliant black bitch competed at the highest level, and was a multi feature winner, Greyhound Of The Year nominee and Top Gun rep. She was bred in the purple from

Wee Sal probable the most influential dam line of the 90's.

Following Sobbing Sal's outstanding career Bonsar put her to leading sire Head Honcho. The resultant litter produced top class city performers Hotshow Sam and Hotshow Tom. That first litter rubber stamped what was always going to be the case, any pup from Sobbing Sal was going to be a very valuable commodity.

Bonsar chose the very quick New South Wales sprinter Gun Law Osti for her second litter. The black dog represented a link into the famous "Osti" line, though a sprinter who had recorded 16 wins from 36 starts. Winning in three states, he had a track record of 29.26 at Angle Park, and recorded fast times of 30.29 at Wentworth Park, 30.47 at Sandown Park and 30.01 at Olympic Park.

The litter whelped on the 5th of January 1999, consisted of three dogs and three bitches. Brett Lee's brothers and sisters were the smart race dog Trendy Leigh, plus Commander Ben, Supa Lee, Shotgun Sal and Supa San. Amazingly besides Trendy Leigh only Shotgun Sal raced, and she had one start at Shepparton.

Bonsar advertised the pups for \$6000 each and had a few takers, but one little black dog due to fact he had no testicles was left behind.

Richard Kurkowski had raced a number of dogs with limited success, some city winners, but like most of us was in search of that elusive champion. He was interested in a pup from the litter and had a look at them where they were being reared at Kelvin Iles' in Devon Meadows.

"I was wrapped in the breeding but couldn't afford the six grand. When they were nine months old and after another inquiry Stan offered me the little pup with no testacies for three thousand. I was very interested but a little worried, so I called Graeme Bate, he assured me he had trained dogs in a similar condition with no problems at all. I also checked with Peter Dapiran who gave me the go ahead as well. I knew he had successfully trained the very smart Fraud who also had the same condition. So, I bought the pup, and it turned out to be the best decision of my life" Kurkowski said.

Brett Lee completed his rearing at Iles' and Kurkowski transferred him to Kevin McNamara's at Majorca for breaking in.

“He was only there three weeks, he took to the caper straight away, Kevin reported he was a natural, and in his opinion had a lot of ability and was certainly going to be city class. My next task was to find him a trainer and I contacted a few who knocked him back for one reason or another. One notable was Allan Britton but I finished up giving him to Rocky Crisafi who I had met on a couple of occasions.” Kurkowski said.

That famous name Brett Lee was the result of an innocence mistake or was it? Named by NCA employee Paula Gray it was in May of 2000 that Richard Kurkowski had contacted Gray on a number of occasions in regard to the name.

Kurkowski being a fast bowler for many years with sub-district club Williamstown, and given that New South Wales cricketer and very fast blower Brett Lee was beginning to enjoy an ever-increasing profile at the time, Kurkowski was hoping he could secure the moniker.



The cricketer Lee had broken into the test team and taken five wickets on debut in the Boxing Day test against India in December 1999. The blonde, good looking tear-away seemed set for a star-studded career at the highest level.

Now Gray is the first to admit she is no great cricket fan but she had heard of Brett Lee, and also naming was not something she did all the time, she was only helping out the ANZGA who were short staffed at that time. The ANZGA's policy states; dogs can't be named after famous people.

Paula Gray didn't think at that particular stage of his career, that the brilliant young fast bowler could be considered famous and duly granted the name, much to the delight of Richard Kurkowski.

From a publicity point of view it could not have been a better name. Lee the cricketer was very pleased with the superstar dog bearing his name and during the Australian Cup Series flew to Melbourne to appear in a range of photos that were shown around the country. He proudly posed with his canine name sake, the dog that could run as fast as he could bowl.

Brett Lee raced for the first time in a maiden qualifying trial at Ballarat, he won by six and three quarters lengths in 25.76 from box six. At his next start he won the maiden final in 25.66 by 10 and half-lengths.

The champ followed up with a loss at Ballarat, he then went to Horsham for that stunning run of 26.94, a new track record for the 480 metres.

It was on to Shepparton, for a win then the heat and final of the Geelong Guineas. The speedster had stated odds on in each of his races.



Kurkowski has fond memories of his favourite dogs early starts. "It was very exciting for me, Rocky allowed me to handle him in every start he had for us and it was a big thrill particularly at Horsham and Geelong." Kurkowski said.

Next came the offers, South Australian owner-trainer Darrell Johnstone had been at Horsham the day Brett Lee broke the record and was so impressed he decided he would try and buy the youngster. Johnstone had been in the game over 30 years and raced Adelaide Cup winner, the brilliantly named Superstar.

"Darrell first offered me 50 thousand, then came back with 70 thousand. It was tempting but I knocked it back. Low and behold he then offered me 100 thousand. It wasn't a hard decision when we got to that amount. I had two young daughters under five and that sort of money can set you up, I had no choice in the end I had to consider my family first. It was tough to part with him. I followed the rest of his career with great passion and was absolutely wrapped with where he got too. I like a lot of fans got a heap of thrills watching him race." Kurkowski said.

Given the same circumstances nearly everyone would have made the same decision as Richard Kurkowski. To offset his original outlay Johnstone sold a share in Brett Lee to Darren McDonald who passed on a share to former AFL superstar and close friend Tony Lockett.

Brett Lee was transferred to the kennel of the astute McDonald who took over training duties and later put the polish on the brilliant black "rocket ship's" Group 1 victories.

After an injury set back suffered at the Meadows and a shock defeat in the Hobart 1000 final when he was run down by Top Shiraz, the champion put together a stunning sequence of 12 wins amassed five Group 1 victories all between January 11 and May 2nd 2001. He won the Interstate Challenge (Angle Park), Adelaide Cup, Australian Cup, Maturity Classic, Golden Easter Egg and the Warrnambool Classic.

During his brilliant career Brett Lee established seven track records: The Meadows (518m) - 29.43, Angle Park 28.88 (515), Horsham (480m) - 26.94, Shepparton (440m) - 24.22, Geelong (457m) - 25.19, Ballarat (450m) 24.95, and Warragul 424-metres - 23.68.

Brett Lee was crowned the 2001 Victorian Greyhound of the Year at a gala luncheon held at Parliament House on Sunday, March 10, 2002.

The champion received a total of 29 votes from the seven-member GOTY panel, to be declared a unanimous 28th winner of Victorian greyhound racing's ultimate accolade.



He defeated Bentley Babe (10 votes), Classic Capri (9), Suellen Bale (8) and Hotshow Vintage (7) for the coveted award.

Due to a suspension handed down to McDonald, Brett Lee's last few starts were under the guidance of Jason Thompson. The champ raced for the last time when he finished seventh in the 2001 Top Gun at the Meadows. Suffering a career ending injury he was retired to stud and commanded a record introductory service fee of \$2750. During his illustrious career,

he amassed 31 wins and five seconds from 39 starts, and a massive \$405,106 in stakes.

Jason Thompson made the following comments about the champion.

"His five Group 1 wins were a phenomenal feat. He was only defeated once during those five series when second in a heat of the Warrnambool Classic. I rated Highly Blessed the best greyhound I'd seen, until this bloke emerged... It's hard to separate them, and I don't particularly like comparing different eras, but he's the fastest dog I've ever laid eyes upon; the sectionals he could reel off were unbelievable.

There was an aura about him; he captured the imagination of people outside the greyhound racing industry." Thompson said.

After standing for Thompson at Meadow Vale stud for about six months, the champ again hit the headlines when he was the subject of another change of ownership. Prominent New South Wales owner-trainer-breeder Harry Sarkis purchased Brett Lee for a record un-disclosed sum of reportedly \$800,000. Acting on behalf of New South Wales couple Keith and Tracey Pedrana the dog was transferred to Sarkis' Londonderry property and has served a steady stream of bitches since his arrival. Owing to the fact his status was so well known overseas the transportation of frozen semen also made it's way to other countries where breeders were hoping Australia's fastest ever sprinter could produce a champion of somewhere near his uncanny ability.

After a period of time his stud career really got underway and he is firmly established as an outstanding producer of very fast dogs and regardless of the fact his stud fee has escalated to \$4400. He is in the most demand of any Stud dog in the country.

A story surfaced in October 2004 of the impending sale of Brett Lee to the United Kingdom for the astronomical sum of 3.7 million Australian dollars; at the time of writing it looked highly likely Brett Lee would change hands again.

Brett Lee was honoured in Adelaide in September 2003 during the National Championships with his worthy induction into the AGRA Australian Greyhound Hall of Fame.

By Neil Brown.