

The Startbroke Cup

Darren Chalmers cuts a figure few his age can emulate
as he sits astride his gelding, muscles tense as they both wait.
Second race at Startbroke Station. Twenty horses lining up.
Only one will this day carry home the fabled Startbroke Cup.
Darren's father took the honours, as a lad, in sixty-four
and each year he took the cup home, 'til the day he rode no more.
Chasing cattle in the muster, his brown mare had failed to jump
a fence near Black Creek Gully and the rider hit a stump.
Robert Chalmers broke his pelvis and his riding days were done.
Now the honour of the family rides with old man Chalmers' son.
Unlike Flemington or Randwick, Startbroke has no starting gate.
Just a white chalk line behind which all the horses have to wait.
These are working nags and ponies, not a thoroughbred in sight,
but there isn't one amongst them could be accused of lacking fight.
Take for instance Darren's horse, he's used to running bloody fast
chasing cattle. There aren't many in the land he'd not outlast.
And his pedigree? Quite decent: out of 'Wedlock' by 'I Tried'.
Which is where he gets his nickname: "Carn ya Bastard" 's often cried.
As the starter gives the order, eleven horses break the line.
And the red-faced jockeys turn them to rejoin the other nine.
Once again the twenty horses prance and snort behind the chalk
as the ticket-waving punters hush their shouting and their talk.
Darren winks at Weedy Williams to his left on Orchid Spray
and then smiles at Andrew to his right on filly Save the Day.
Then he looks between the Bastard's ears along the two-mile track.
It's partly grass and mostly dust. Will he make it there and back?
At the far end stands a gum tree, like a lonely, bare-branched ghost.
Up they'll go and then around it and race back to winning post.
When the gun goes off, the nags all bolt, except for Darren's horse,
who looks ahead then at the rest, all heading up the course.
Daz whips his mount, digs in his heels and yells "Carn, stupid cow!"
But Bastard shakes his head and snorts. He's going nowhere now.
The starter's sweating – fifty quid he's got on Wedlock's son.
He'll lose the lot; it's all he's got. He fires off the gun.
As if a March fly bit his arse, the horse takes fright and goes,
but how he'll ever catch the rest, the Good Lord only knows.
Although he's fast and never lost, a miracle he'll need.
And, look at that, it seems the Lord the starter's prayers did heed.

A mongrel dog has left the crowd and joined the racing field.
His barking makes the horses shy and one by one they've peeled
to left or right, in panicked haste, to give the dog wide berth.
It's Darren's chance, he flicks the reins. Four hooves kick up the earth.
The crowd goes wild, some in despair, some egging Bastard on
and many in anticipation of their money gone.
Before the others turn their mounts to race towards the tree,
Darren Chalmers urges Bastard on. Already he can see
that glory will be his again, that he will beat the lot.
He pleads with Bastard every stride to give it all he's got.
As Darren Chalmers looks ahead, three horses are in front.
It's Orchid Spray and Save the Day and some unlikely runt.
The Bastard's in his proper stride as round the tree they turn
and head for home, all neck and neck. The dust and grass they churn.
A mile to go, it's just the three are matching stride for stride.
The jockeys glance to right and left as for the post they ride.
The crowd goes wild, there's much at stake and fortunes will be lost,
but for the riders on the track a chalk-line must be crossed.
Save the Day a nose ahead, then Bastard, Orchid Spray.
Then Orchid Spray by half a length, then Bastard, Save the Day.
The last few hundred yards they race, first one a neck ahead,
then changing order, and again. It seems they'll finish dead.
Just twenty yards to go now and the Bastard nudges out
a nose in front, then half a head. He wins! But there's a shout:
"The bloody Bastard cheated! Chalmers' dog upset the field!"
Weedy Williams and young Andrew knew they should have now appealed,
but they know the starter's friendship with the stewards. They would lose.
Many in the crowd feel cheated with the racing. But the booze
will quickly quench their anger. They'll forget they didn't win.
After all, out back, a little cheating never was a sin.
They'll be back next year, their spirits high – their fortunes could be up,
as they all come back from far and wide to see the Startbroke Cup.

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